

Article

Documentary Research in Theology: A Review of the Current State of the Art

La investigación documental en Teología: construcción de un estado del arte



Amaury Antonio Mestra Duarte*
Waldecir Gonzaga*

Abstract

The growing interest in understanding the action of the Holy Spirit in the sacramental economy has generated significant scholarly work in the fields of biblical exegesis, sacramentology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. However, this body of work remains, to a large extent, fragmented, which hinders an integrated understanding of Christian regeneration from a biblical-theological-systematic perspective. The purpose of this article is to provide a state-of-the-art overview of the regenerative action of the Holy Spirit based on Titus 3:4–7, through qualitative documentary research grounded in the critical analysis of specialized primary and secondary sources. The literature review was conducted using publications found in international academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, EBSCO Theology Collection, SciELO, Redalyc, and Dialnet, supplemented by classic and contemporary reference works in biblical theology, sacramentology, and pneumatology. The results identify three major thematic areas present in the literature: the biblical understanding of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, the historical evolution of sacramental theology, and the contributions of contemporary

Doctor of Theology. Pontifical Bolivarian University, Medellín (Colombia).
Postdoctoral Researcher.
Graduate Program in Theology.
Email: mestraamaury16@gmail.com

Ph.D. in Biblical Theology. Associate Professor: Graduate Program in Theology.
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio).
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
Email: waldecir@hotmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5929-382X>

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pneumatological reflection. Furthermore, significant doctrinal convergences and research gaps related to the systematic articulation between the action of the Holy Spirit and the unity of the sacramental economy are evident. It is concluded that the literature review provides a solid foundation for the development of new theological research aimed at deepening the understanding of Christian regeneration and its significance within the Church's sacramental tradition.

Keywords: regenerative action; Holy Spirit; Titus 3:4–7; sacramental economy; literature review; state of the art; systematic theology.

Resumen

El creciente interés por comprender la acción del Espíritu Santo en la economía sacramental ha generado una producción científica significativa en los campos de la exégesis bíblica, la sacramentología, la pneumatología y la eclesiología. Sin embargo, dicha producción permanece, en gran medida, fragmentada, lo que dificulta una comprensión integrada de la regeneración cristiana desde una perspectiva bíblico-teológico-sistemática. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo construir un estado del arte sobre la acción regeneradora del Espíritu Santo a partir de Tito 3,4-7, mediante una investigación documental de carácter cualitativo sustentada en el análisis crítico de fuentes primarias y secundarias especializadas. La revisión bibliográfica se desarrolló a partir de publicaciones localizadas en bases de datos académicas internacionales como Scopus, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, EBSCO Theology Collection, SciELO, Redalyc y Dialnet, complementadas con obras clásicas y contemporáneas de referencia en teología bíblica, sacramentología y pneumatología. Los resultados permiten identificar tres grandes núcleos temáticos presentes en la literatura: la comprensión bíblica de la regeneración y la renovación por el Espíritu Santo, la evolución histórica de la teología sacramental y las aportaciones de la reflexión pneumatológica contemporánea. Asimismo, se evidencian importantes convergencias doctrinales y vacíos investigativos relacionados con la articulación sistemática entre la acción del Espíritu Santo y la unidad de la economía sacramental. Se concluye que el análisis documental ofrece una base sólida para el desarrollo de nuevas investigaciones teológicas orientadas a profundizar en la comprensión de la regeneración cristiana y su significado dentro de la tradición sacramental de la Iglesia.

Palabras clave: acción regeneradora; Espíritu Santo; Tito 3,4-7; economía sacramental; revisión documental; estado del arte; teología sistemática.

Introduction

Theological reflection on the action of the Holy Spirit constitutes one of the most actively developed fields within the Christian tradition, particularly in its relationship to the economy of salvation, sacramentology, and the life of the Church. From patristic writings to contemporary theology, numerous authors have recognized that the regeneration of the human person constitutes one of the most significant expressions of the work of the Holy Spirit, especially in the context of Christian initiation and the communication of sacramental grace. However, the diversity of disciplinary approaches has fostered the development of specialized research that, while enriching our understanding of the phenomenon, has also contributed to a certain fragmentation of theological reflection.

Within this landscape, the passage in Titus 3:4–7 occupies a privileged place because it presents one of the most comprehensive New Testament formulations regarding the regeneration and renewal of the believer through the action of the Holy Spirit. The biblical-theological richness of the text has inspired numerous exegetical, historical, and systematic studies that highlight the close relationship between God's saving initiative, Christ's mediation, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the new Christian life. However, scholarly literature shows that such studies are often conducted from particular perspectives, prioritizing biblical analysis, pneumatological reflection, or sacramental understanding, without sufficiently establishing the connections between these areas.

In this context, documentary research takes on particular relevance as a methodological strategy for critically interpreting the accumulated knowledge on a specific subject of study. As Boff (2015) asserts, the theological method requires a rigorous process of source analysis that allows for an understanding of the historical development of doctrinal categories before formulating new theological syntheses. Along the same lines, Lonergan (2006) argues that theological research advances through successive intellectual operations of compilation, interpretation, history, dialectic, and systematization, which enable a progressive understanding of the object under investigation.

From the perspective of qualitative research, the state of the art is not merely a bibliographic compilation but an exercise in critical interpretation aimed at identifying trends, convergences, debates, gaps, and possibilities for future development. Authors such as Creswell (2013) and Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize that a literature review is an analytical process that allows for the construction of knowledge through the systematic comparison of different theoretical and methodological approaches.

In the field of hermeneutics, Gadamer (1977) and Ricoeur (2002) have shown that all interpretation involves an ongoing dialogue between the text, tradition, and the interpreter's horizon. This perspective is particularly significant for theological research, insofar as it allows for an understanding of the historical evolution of doctrinal categories and their ongoing adaptation in the face of contemporary challenges.

Based on these considerations, this article aims to provide a state-of-the-art overview of the regenerative action of the Holy Spirit as presented in Titus 3:4–7, through a literature review of scholarly works specializing in biblical exegesis, sacramentology, pneumatology, and systematic theology. The purpose is not to formulate a new doctrinal proposal, but rather to identify the main developments achieved by contemporary research, recognize the existing convergences among the different schools of thought, and point out the gaps that justify the continuation of future research on this topic.

Materials and methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically through a documentary study or literature review—understood as a systematic process of locating, selecting, analyzing, interpreting, and critically synthesizing the available scholarly literature on a specific subject of study. This approach reflects the very nature of theological research, the development of which depends fundamentally on the rigorous study of biblical, patristic, and magisterial sources, as well as specialized scholarly literature.

From a methodological standpoint, this study adopts the approach of Boff (2015), who argues that the theological method requires a critical articulation between the sources of revelation, ecclesial tradition, and systematic reflection, avoiding both documentary positivism and mere speculation.⁵ Likewise, the study draws on the

proposal by Lonergan (2006), for whom theological research constitutes an organized intellectual process that integrates the operations of research, interpretation, history, dialectic, justification, and systematization as complementary stages in the production of theological knowledge.

The methodological strategy followed the generally accepted criteria for conducting state-of-the-art reviews in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), adapted to the specific characteristics of theological research. Consequently, the literature review was structured into four successive stages: identification of sources, selection based on criteria of relevance and scientific quality, thematic analysis, and interpretive synthesis.

The literature search was conducted in international academic databases recognized for their coverage of the humanities and theology, including Scopus, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, EBSCO Theology Collection, SciELO, Redalyc, and Dialnet. The search was supplemented with specialized monographs, biblical commentaries, documents of the Church's Magisterium, and classic works from the patristic, scholastic, and contemporary traditions.

The inclusion criteria prioritized research related to four thematic areas: the exegesis of Titus 3:4–7; regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit; the theology of the sacraments; and contemporary pneumatology. Priority was given to publications with academic recognition, peer review, and relevance to the subject of study.

Subsequently, the document corpus was organized using the Mendeley bibliographic manager, which facilitated thematic classification, conceptual comparison, and the analysis of convergences and divergences among the different authors. The texts were interpreted from a hermeneutical perspective inspired by Gadamer (1977) and Ricoeur (2002), understanding the reading of the sources as a process of dialogue between theological tradition, the historical context, and the research questions.

Finally, the information was systematized through thematic analysis. Gómez Erazo et al. (2024) argue that identifying the main areas of development in the specialized literature allows the results to be structured, based on systematic analysis, around three fundamental axes: the biblical-theological understanding of the regenerative action of the Holy Spirit, the historical evolution of sacramental theology, and the contributions of contemporary pneumatology to

interpreting Christian regeneration within the framework of the sacramental economy.

Results

The literature review identified a broad and diverse body of research conducted over the past few decades on the regenerative action of the Holy Spirit, the sacramental economy, and the interpretation of Titus 3:4–7. Analysis of the sources revealed that, although scholarly output is abundant, it is distributed across different areas of specialization—biblical exegesis, sacramentology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology—without a sufficiently developed systematic integration among them. Based on a thematic analysis of the bibliographic corpus, three major areas of research were identified that structure the current state of knowledge.

Regeneration and Renewal by the Holy Spirit in the Exegesis of Titus 3:4–7

The first cluster brings together research dedicated to the exegetical study of Titus 3:4–7, considered one of the most significant New Testament texts for understanding the regeneration of the believer through the action of the Holy Spirit. Leading commentators agree that this passage constitutes a synthesis of God’s salvific initiative manifested in Jesus Christ and actualized by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Scholarly literature emphasizes that the expressions *loutron palingenesias* (bath of regeneration) and *anakainosis pneumatos hagiou* (renewal by the Holy Spirit) represent fundamental categories for understanding the new creation inaugurated by divine grace. As can be seen in the following table:

Greek text of Titus 3:4–7	English Translation
⁴ ὅτε δὲ ἡ χρηστότης καὶ ἡ φιλανθρωπία ἐπεφάνη τοῦ σωτήρος ἡμῶν θεοῦ,	⁴ But when the goodness of God, our Savior, and his love for people were revealed,
⁵ Not because of any righteous deeds we have done, but according to	⁵ He saved us, not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but according to

his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,	his mercy, through the bath of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit,
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⁶ which He poured out abundantly upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior,	⁶ who has poured out his grace abundantly upon us through Jesus Christ, our Savior,
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⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.	⁷ so that, justified by that grace, we may become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.
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Source: Greek text from Nestle-Aland 28 (2012); table and translation by the authors.

Authors such as Quinn (1990), Collins (2002), Towner (2006), Johnson (2001), and Witherington III (2006) analyze the historical, linguistic, and theological background of the text, emphasizing the close relationship between baptism, regeneration, and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Their research shows that salvation should not be understood solely as a legal event, but as a dynamic reality that introduces the believer to a new life characterized by participation in communion with God.

Likewise, the review of the literature revealed broad agreement regarding the Trinitarian dimension of the passage. The saving action of the Father, the redemptive mediation of the Son, and the communication of the Holy Spirit appear inseparably united in the economy of salvation, forming a theological structure that transcends an exclusively sacramental or exclusively pneumatological interpretation of the text.

Historical Development of the Sacramental Understanding

The second core area identified corresponds to research on the historical evolution of Christian sacramentology. The bibliographic

review shows that the patristic tradition laid the foundations for understanding the sacraments as effective signs of grace and as actions inseparable from the saving work of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

In this context, the contributions of Lyon (A.D. 180), Nyssa (1993), and Hippo (2006) stand out; they developed a profoundly pneumatological understanding of the sacramental life by linking the action of the Spirit with the deification, sanctification, and ecclesial incorporation of the believer.

During the scholastic tradition, Aquinas (2001) delved into sacramental causality, demonstrating that the sacraments participate instrumentally in Christ's efficacy and communicate grace by divine disposition. Subsequently, authors such as Casel (2002), Guardini (1956), Rahner (1964), Schillebeeckx (1963), and Chauvet (1991) renewed the understanding of the sacraments through categories such as mystery, symbol, celebration, and salvific encounter, broadening the horizon of contemporary sacramental theology.

An analysis of this research reveals a progressive evolution from a predominantly legal or causal understanding of the sacraments toward more dynamic, relational, and ecclesial perspectives, in which the action of the Holy Spirit takes on an increasingly significant role.

Contemporary Pneumatology and the Sacramental Economy

The third section brings together studies specifically dedicated to the action of the Holy Spirit within the sacramental economy. The reviewed literature shows a significant development of pneumatology during the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly based on the contributions of Congar (1983), Mühlen (1974), Moltmann, (1998), Cantalamessa (1998), Codina (2005), Libânio (2000), Bingemer (2013), Kasper (2012), Lubac (2000), Balthasar (1988), and Tillard (1999).

These authors agree in recognizing the Holy Spirit as the source of communion, sanctification, and the ongoing renewal of the Church. The Spirit's action is not limited to the celebratory moment of the sacraments, but rather constitutes the internal dynamism through which grace communicates divine life, strengthens ecclesial communion, and directs the Christian life toward its eschatological fulfillment.

However, the literature review also revealed a common feature of contemporary scholarly work: although there has been extensive

development of pneumatology and sacramentology as independent disciplines, there is a scarcity of research that integrates both perspectives through an organic understanding of the sacramental economy. This finding represents one of the main gaps identified during the state-of-the-art analysis.

Discussion

The results obtained allow us to affirm that contemporary research offers a solid development of each of the fundamental components related to the regenerative action of the Holy Spirit, but at the same time reveals a significant thematic dispersion. Biblical exegesis has delved deeply into the interpretation of Titus 3:4–7; sacramentology has developed multiple historical and systematic approaches to the nature and efficacy of the sacraments; while pneumatology has enriched the understanding of the Spirit's sanctifying action within ecclesial life. However, these lines of research have often evolved in parallel, without achieving a sufficiently consolidated systematic integration.

This situation confirms one of the observations made by Boff (2015) when he noted that theological research requires moving beyond the mere accumulation of specialized knowledge to advance toward a synthesis capable of articulating the various dimensions of the Christian mystery. Similarly, Lonergan (2006) argues that theology reaches maturity when the various functional specializations converge into a systematic understanding of the whole of revelation.

From this perspective, the review of the literature reveals that the regenerative action of the Holy Spirit constitutes a meeting point between biblical exegesis, sacramentology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. Titus 3:4–7 emerges as a key text for establishing this interdisciplinary dialogue, as it integrates into a single formulation the Father's salvific initiative, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the believer's regeneration.

The reviewed literature also reveals a significant evolution in the understanding of the sacramental economy. While patristic and scholastic studies focused their attention on the nature and efficacy of the sacraments, contemporary theology has progressively emphasized the relational, ecclesial, and pneumatological dimensions of sacramental action. This methodological shift has made it possible to understand the sacraments not only as means of

communicating grace, but as living events through which the Holy Spirit continually actualizes Christ's redemptive work in the history of salvation.

Nevertheless, critical analysis also reveals the persistence of a research gap. Most research continues to address the sacraments individually or to study the action of the Spirit from partial perspectives, without sufficiently developing an integrated vision of the sacramental economy. This absence of a systematic articulation presents an opportunity for future research aimed at deepening our understanding of the internal unity of sacramental action from the perspective of Christian regeneration. Consequently, the state of the art not only allows for the systematization of available knowledge but also identifies lines of development that remain open within contemporary theological research. The convergence between the exegesis of Titus 3:4–7, the sacramental tradition, and pneumatology offers a fruitful horizon for new reflections capable of integrating the various dimensions of the economy of grace more organically, while respecting the specificity of each theological discipline.

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