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Introductory Matters

AIMS

THIS BOOK AIMS TO offer an account of the Trinity from a Pentecostal viewpoint. My theological perspective as a classical Pentecostal, in line with other expressions of charismatic and wider renewal Christianity, pays particular attention to the Holy Spirit. That is, it is pneumatologically orientated. Thus I seek to offer an account of the Trinity that is pneumatologically driven, and more specifically, that takes full account, in church history and in believers' personal histories, of "Pentecost," which term I will consider later in this chapter. I agree with Amos Yong that "theology is only fully trinitarian when due attention is given to pneumatology."¹ Such attention I will seek to provide.

In doing this, I do not claim to be proposing an understanding of the Trinity that differs markedly from those that have preceded it. There are certain fresh emphases and insights but overall the picture of the Trinity that emerges is fairly traditional. What is new is its method.² It is not new to start trinitarian explorations "from below," in other words from the history of Jesus of Nazareth and the thinking of his first followers, as opposed to "from above," in the sense of beginning with mysterious abstractions about

1. Yong, *Spirit Poured Out*, 225; cf. 146 n. 4.

2. If in fact a different method of research leads to the same results as previous methods, this is a cause not for disappointment but for reassurance. Modern science is committed to testing the replicability of results. If new experiments, using different methods, confirm existing results, the conclusions can be regarded, naturally enough, as confirmed: "triangulation" has been achieved.

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being, person, and process that bear no observable relation to human experience of God. What is less explored, however, is detailed thinking about the Trinity that starts with Pentecost. This I attempt here.

As with my previous book, I also have a more general aim. I will simply repeat here what I stated then:

I trust that this book will help to bridge the divide that exists between academic theological study and current Pentecostal church practice and mission. In my own context, this divide is still wide and deep: it needs all the long, strong bridges that can be mustered! I hope to show that academic theological study does have its uses, and that those uses are relevant to Pentecostals who for whatever reason do not intend to or do not have the opportunity to engage in such study themselves. With this in mind, I try to write in a way that is reasonably accessible for people who may not be used to scholarly language.³

Aims do not arise in a vacuum. My own aim arises from three particular challenges that I perceive facing Pentecostal trinitarianism and from the potential I see for Pentecostal insights to contribute significantly to trinitarian thinking in general. In other words, I think Pentecostal trinitarianism needs to be robust so that it can provide an answer to those who regard trinitarianism as misguided or unnecessary, and beyond that I think that general trinitarian thinking can perhaps be enhanced through the application of Pentecostal thinking.

CHALLENGES

Trinitarian Pentecostalism faces three challenges that make it especially important for a rigorous Pentecostal trinitarianism to be advanced. The first and second of these arise from within Pentecostalism itself; the third lies further afield.

From within Pentecostalism, I see two problems. First, Pentecostals who are trinitarian ignore the Trinity *in practice* if not in theory. Secondly, the “unitarian” voices of Oneness Pentecostalism raise a challenge. If one can be Pentecostal without being trinitarian, what if any is the significance of our trinitarianism? From the wider theological realm comes another

3. Atkinson, *Baptism in the Spirit*, 2. Not all technical terminology can be avoided; also, in trinitarian discussion some common terms such as “person” take on technical use.

more diffuse and less definable challenge: a form of trinitarianism that in reality is not far removed from “binitarianism.” I will introduce these challenges a little more fully before proceeding to consider how this book will go about mounting its advance of a Pentecostal trinitarianism.

The “Trinitarian” Challenge

The first challenge we face is that the Trinity has largely been ignored by Pentecostals. Academic Pentecostal theology has come on in leaps and bounds in the generation since Clark Pinnock wrote, “Watch out you evangelicals—the young Pentecostal scholars are coming!”⁴ While a wealth of subjects has been tackled by the new generation of Pentecostal scholars, it is unsurprising that much of this focus has been on pneumatology. Thus the chapter in Keith Warrington’s *Pentecostal Theology* titled “God,” which is 113 pages in length, devotes no fewer than eighty-seven of these pages to a section titled “The Holy Spirit.”⁵ What is perhaps more surprising is that this interest in the Holy Spirit has not been translated into more interest in the Trinity. Indeed, Warrington’s chapter on “God,” just mentioned, has a section titled “Trinity” that is a mere four pages long. Warrington is no exception here. While whole books—and many of them, at that—have been written by Pentecostals on the Spirit and the Spirit’s activities, little serious scholarly work has been offered from a Pentecostal perspective on the nature of the Trinity.⁶

This gap is to be found not only in academic writing but also in Pentecostal church practice. Mark Cartledge’s observations of a typical British Pentecostal church in its worship identify that there is focus on the person of Jesus but that this focus is only placed in “a general theistic context” rather than being placed in “an explicitly Trinitarian framework.”⁷ Anybody with a reasonable acquaintance of what Cartledge calls “ordinary Pentecostal theology”⁸ will, I imagine, readily recognize that his findings could be multiply replicated. Pentecostals “in the pew” are not encouraged to think

4. Pinnock, “Foreword,” vii.

5. Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 44–130.

6. Examples that do exist include Yong, *Spirit Poured Out* and *Spirit-Word-Community*; and Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*.

7. Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, 47.

8. Cartledge’s *Testimony in the Spirit* is subtitled *Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*.

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about the Trinity, either by the church year with its Trinity Sunday, or by the wording of prayers led extempore in public worship, or by the wording of many contemporary worship songs.⁹ I do not mean to suggest that this weakness is unique to Pentecostalism. I was recently in a Methodist church in which the preaching on the Trinity was by no means profound. But at least the fact that it was Trinity Sunday that day led to a choice of hymns and a sermon topic that acknowledged and celebrated trinitarian doctrine.

One is justified in wondering whether ignoring the Trinity matters. After all, even Pentecostalism's pneumatological distinctives are pragmatic rather than ontological—we concern ourselves more with what the Spirit *does* than with who or what exactly the Spirit *is*. And when it comes to the Father and the Son, trinitarian Pentecostalism does not generally offer distinctive viewpoints. Thus, one might argue, it is sufficient for Pentecostals to rely on the theologizing of previous generations on the one hand and contemporaries from other ecclesial and theological streams on the other.

I am not convinced, however, that such a policy is the best way forward. Jürgen Moltmann has criticized the church for being, in recent times, too pragmatic.¹⁰ This criticism is especially true of us Pentecostals. To those of my tribe who argue that theological study of the Trinity can play no useful part in the God-given mission of the church, I point out, with Moltmann,¹¹ that part of that mission is worship. Pentecostals can find themselves in the position of loving God dearly but taking too little notice of what God is like. However, it is appropriate to get to know the one we love. Furthermore, and turning from worship to works, it is surely the case that “the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits” (Dan 11:32, KJV). If one tries to determine what was the key to Jesus' success in ministry, as depicted in the Gospels, one might highlight, among other factors, his clear and close knowledge of his divine Father's heart and mind. I believe that meditation on the nature of the Trinity can in fact enhance one's mission to the church and the world, through being encouraged, challenged, and informed.

That this claim may be true is attested by the ways in which the revival of interest in trinitarianism that has occurred in the last couple of generations is not only theoretical. It has been matched by a concern to *apply* trinitarian thinking to Christian *practice*—and no doubt to consider

9. Note the concerns expressed by Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*, e.g., 1–3.

10. Moltmann, *Trinity and Kingdom*, 5–7.

11. *Ibid.*, 7–9.

ways in which Christian experience and practice might illumine trinitarian doctrine, for gone are the days when the flow of thought between theory and practice has been regarded as all moving in one direction.¹² In all this, I trust that the book will be informative and useful for Pentecostals, but I do not see why it might not also be just as useful to anyone who has not thought through trinitarianism to any serious extent or considered ways in which relating to God and people impacts and is impacted by how we understand God as Trinity.

The “Unitarian” Challenge

I place the word “unitarian” in inverted commas because Oneness Pentecostalism is far removed from versions of unitarianism that deny the deity of Christ.¹³ In fact, in terms of its view of Jesus it could not be further removed. Nonetheless, I use the term to indicate that Oneness Pentecostalism firmly upholds what its observer David Reed calls on its behalf “the singular nature of God’s being.”¹⁴ As Oneness exponents declare, “God is absolutely one (Isa. 44:6, 8, 24)—that is, one without distinctions of persons. There are no distinctions in God’s eternal being.”¹⁵ Oneness Pentecostalism thus has an avowedly “unitarian” theology centered on the deity of Jesus Christ.

In my experience, many trinitarian Pentecostals are simply unaware of Oneness Pentecostalism, though a few will have heard of the term “Jesus-only” and will perhaps be aware that there is some controversy in Pentecostal circles over whether water-baptism should be performed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (following Matt 28:19) or in the name of Jesus Christ (following Acts 2:38). I do not recall being taught

12. For instance, Lartey writes of contextual theology in general and pastoral theology in particular that it “is a ‘praxeological’ discipline—one in which practical action and theory are held in creative tension. Here, theory critiques action and action critiques theory. . . . Theory provides rationale and method for practice. Practice shapes, informs and offers critical tools for theory” (*Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 24–25). For comment on this two-way traffic in relation to trinitarianism, see Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*, 11; Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 194.

13. See Lederle, *Theology with Spirit*, 80; Yong, *Spirit Poured Out*, 205–6, 227.

14. Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” 248. Reed observes that some Oneness Pentecostals, in order to distance themselves from trinitarianism, refer to themselves as “Christian monotheists” (“*In Jesus’ Name*,” 253).

15. Society for Pentecostal Studies, “Oneness-Trinitarian Pentecostal Final Report,” 214.

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about the Oneness version of Pentecostalism when I was a student at a Pentecostal Bible college, and my first exposure to such teaching occurred when it emerged that its adherents were standing outside the building of the London church where I was serving at the time, apparently seeking to persuade our own dear Pentecostal congregants to convert to their view, on the basis that, as our people were baptized in the name of the Trinity rather than Jesus, they were not yet saved. This “evangelism” caused some consternation in our church, as can easily be imagined!

This widespread ignorance of Oneness Pentecostalism is despite the facts that it is nearly as old as trinitarian Pentecostalism and that it comprises many organizational groups and several millions of individuals. In 1992, Gregory Boyd estimated that there were at the time over five million Oneness Pentecostals worldwide.¹⁶ Reed refers to a 1999 work that puts the figure at fourteen to twenty million.¹⁷ Although this is a small percentage¹⁸ of the roughly half billion Pentecostals, charismatics, and renewal Christians estimated to have inhabited this globe in 2000,¹⁹ it is still a high figure, representing a force to be reckoned with.

Oneness Pentecostalism can be traced back to 1914, in the United States. A superficial reading of Reed’s history would suggest that the “New Issue,” as it was called at the time, split the Assemblies of God in the US just three days after the denomination was formed! This would in fact be a simplistic reading, for Oneness advocates were not expelled until 1916, but it is clear that the Oneness controversy was a thorn in the side of the Assemblies from their very earliest days.²⁰ In fact, the statement of beliefs that the US Assemblies of God formed in 1916 was created “mainly to counter the threat posed by the ‘New Issue.’”²¹

16. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals*, 227.

17. Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” 339.

18. Anderson’s estimate that Oneness adherents may make up a quarter of the world’s classical Pentecostals seems stretched (Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism*, 49).

19. Barrett’s figure, though presumably something of a “guesstimate,” is widely quoted. See, e.g., Warrington, *Pentecostal Theology*, 12; Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, 2. Lederle offers the estimate of 600 million for 2006 (Lederle, *Theology with Spirit*, 2).

20. Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” e.g., 362, 351.

21. Yong, *Spirit Poured Out*, 205. The British Assemblies of God did not form or develop its statement of beliefs until 1924. Its statement of beliefs was altered in 2004 in a way that highlighted its commitment to trinitarianism, “probably reflecting a greater awareness of the dispute with the oneness Pentecostal tradition, especially from the USA” (Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, 4–5, 191, quotation from 5).

Oneness beliefs about God commence with two basic premises: there is only one God; and this God is Jesus Christ. Concerning the first premise, the unity of God, Oneness belief regards this unity as indivisible. It is a simple, rigorous monotheism. Concerning the second premise, the deity of Christ, this must be allowed, from a Oneness perspective, its full force: there must be no hint that Jesus was only a “part” of God. A key text in this regard is Colossians 2:9. Logical deductions are then drawn from this pair of premises. God can be called Father to express divine transcendence. This Father—God—became incarnate—Jesus—and the humanity thus “formed” can be called the Son. “Son” thereby refers to humanity, and “Father” to divinity. God’s Spirit is not a separable “person” but is another way of speaking about God, who is spirit. In summary, Oneness Pentecostalism can be regarded as a modern form of modalism, although it is clearly distinct from ancient Sabellian modalism.²² Its view of trinitarianism is that the latter fails fully to honor Jesus, who is only somehow a part of God rather than fully God in entirety, and that it is a mild form of tritheism.²³

While unbending polemics like that of Boyd have been aimed at Oneness beliefs,²⁴ there is a current trend towards more sympathetic portrayals of the system by trinitarians and towards dialogue between unitarian and trinitarian Pentecostals. Reed’s detailed analysis aims for understanding and dialogue.²⁵ Yong especially calls for rapprochement.²⁶ The Society for Pentecostal Studies has been at the forefront of spurring fruitful discussions.²⁷ Indeed, Oneness Pentecostalism is not without its trinitarian sympathizers. Yong suggests three strengths of Oneness doctrine, which are worth quoting verbatim:

First, Oneness Pentecostalism reminds trinitarians that Christianity is a monotheistic faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is not about

22. “Oneness theology does not fit neatly into the mold of classical modalism on two counts: its radical christocentric orientation, and its theology of the Name which particularizes and personalizes the revelation of God in the name of Jesus as God’s ‘proper’ name for this dispensation” (Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” 272).

23. For further details of Oneness doctrine see Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” part III; and more briefly Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals*, chapter 1.

24. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals*.

25. Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” e.g., 260.

26. Yong, *Spirit Poured Out*, 224–34.

27. See, e.g., Society for Pentecostal Studies, “Oneness-Trinitarian Pentecostal Final Report.”

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three gods but, rather, about the God who transcends merely numerical oneness or threeness.

Second, the Oneness means of articulating the divine unity . . . includes a robust incarnational christology that defends the divinity of the historical Jesus Christ.

Third [we find an] . . . unexpected but important contribution of Oneness Pentecostalism for Christian theology in the world context: the bridges it affords to the Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim encounters . . . the potential Oneness pentecostal contribution toward the interreligious conversation should not be underestimated.²⁸

Despite such sympathy and respect, criticism is offered. Reed voices several concerns. Among these is his comment that the three manifestations of the one God, as Oneness theology presents the matter, lack “permanence and personality.” Furthermore, since God’s threefold revelation is not a precise reflection of God’s radical unity, there is “the possibility that God is not just more than but is explicitly *other* than what he is in his self-revelation.” Also, “the identity and role of the humanity of Jesus is underdeveloped”: “It is in the life and ministry of Jesus that the Oneness view of the dual nature of Christ begins to show its inherent weakness . . . the relationship appears more like a loose affiliation than a union.”²⁹

It is not my intention to offer a detailed analysis and critique of Oneness beliefs. My point here is rather that the very existence of Oneness Pentecostalism, let alone its size, spread, or influence, presents a challenge to trinitarian Pentecostalism: can the latter articulate its trinitarianism in a cogent and convincing way? Can it do so in a way that listens carefully to the history of Christian thought on the subject but which is faithful to Pentecostalism’s general attitude to Scripture? In other words, can a Pentecostal trinitarianism be developed that listens first and foremost to the Christian Scriptures? Also, can this be done in a way that takes account of Pentecostalism’s corporate experience of the Spirit and its sense that this experience mirrors those of many in the New Testament?

28. Yong, *Spirit Poured Out*, 227–8.

29. Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*,” 268, 271, 280, 296; italics original. Some disagreement between Yong and Reed concerning the robustness of Oneness’ incarnational christology is of course detectable here. Reed seems on firmer ground.