CHAPTER SIX

THE ECUMENICAL-PENTECOSTAL HERMENEUTIC

Theology and the work of doing theology belongs to the whole Church. It cannot be done without dialogue. It must be done in relation to the whole Church in the whole world...It is time for Pentecostals and Charismatic Christians of all kinds to look at the masses around them and ask what kind of theology the whole Church needs. Only when we come to that point will it ever become possible for us together to “attain to the unity of the faith (Ephesians 4:13)” [sic]. Sectarianism is only as good as its ability to lose itself once again in the whole Church while it raises to our consciousness a long overlooked truth of the Gospel. To dwell too long in the land of sectarianism is to move toward the horizon of heresy.

– Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Doing Theology in Isolation” (1990)

The last major hermeneutic in the typology I have been developing is the ecumenical-Pentecostal hermeneutic. While the tendency to articulate the faith with an eye toward Christian unity has deep roots in the Classical Pentecostal tradition, this emerging hermeneutic adds tradition itself as well as other Christian traditions and their theologies as resources for Pentecostal theology. These Pentecostal theologians have hence sought to interpret God, themselves and their world in relation to other theologies coming from the wider Christian oikumene, yet still as Pentecostals. They have thus also sought to unify Pentecostals with other Christians and to theologically contribute a Pentecostal voice to the broader world of Christian theology.

A key element of this approach has then been the affirmation of tradition and prior theological reflection themselves as sources for theological truth in the face of their marginalization, even denial, in the original Classical Pentecostal hermeneutic and their very limited roles in the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic. The role for tradition that is affirmed in this hermeneutic includes the process of transmission of the faith in its various contexts, and thus the rise of various Christian traditions, as well as the content of the faith itself as it has been passed down. This has included an

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increased recognition of the context for theology that tradition provides plus its usefulness and, even necessity, as a source for theological understanding.

This hermeneutical approach stands in both continuity and discontinuity with the origins and development of Pentecostalism and its theology. On the one hand, it stands in continuity with the original unifying and non-sectarian vision of early Pentecostalism. This original unifying impulse, seen above (in Chapter Two) in the theological hermeneutics of William Seymour and even beforehand in Charles Parham, envisioned God’s new outpouring as a Pentecost and was unconcerned with previous ecclesial boundaries as it sought for the simple, unified and true Christian faith. This impetus, though, actually led to the anti-creedalism of most early Pentecostals since creeds were seen as a source of the divisions of Christian faith rather than as points of unity, though such claims made sense in the situation of early-twentieth century American Protestantism. On the other hand, as seen earlier with Daniel Kerr (in Chapter Three), early Pentecostals were, themselves, quickly compelled to form doctrinal boundaries as they followed common American Evangelical notions of the role of theology. Of early Pentecostal theologians’ role in sectarianism and the emergence of new Pentecostal denominations in the 1910s and 1920s, Douglas Jacobsen recounts their self-understanding as “champions of truth locked in battle with other theologians (some pentecostal, some non-pentecostal) who were spreading erroneous views among the faithful.”

Against this element of the sufficiency of the Pentecostal’s own theological understanding found in many representatives of the original Classical Pentecostal hermeneutic, as well as the Evangelical-Pentecostal hermeneutic, the advocates of the ecumenical-Pentecostal hermeneutic have assumed the value of the theology of other Christian traditions so that Pentecostals might both benefit from and contribute to a dialogue with them. On this matter, then, it ratifies and applies the conviction found in the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic that multiple approaches from different contexts are not only legitimate but beneficial. The ecumenical-Pentecostal hermeneutic can thus be understood as one way of working out some of the core convictions of the contextual-Pentecostal hermeneutic. As a result, it is

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