Oneness and the Trinity: The Theological and Ecumenical Implications of Creation Ex Nihilo for an Intra-Pentecostal Dispute

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"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Modern science tells us that empirical investigation is limited by this beginning, that it is not possible to penetrate beyond it. Theology, however, has never acknowledged the authority of this rule but has asserted that whatever else may lie in this beyond, God does, and it is by virtue of God's being that there is even a beginning at all. Some Christian theology has taken this license to its utmost limits, beginning with the Scriptures about the triune revelation of God relative to the economy of the world and its salvation (ad extra) and proceeding to speculate about the essence of the immanent triune life (ad intra). Because God is not deceptive, the revelation of God's triune being in the economy of salvation is taken to be an accurate portrayal of the inner divine life. Although stated variously in the course of Christian history, in contemporary times this principle has become theologically axiomatic in Karl Rahner's insistence that "the Trinity of the economy of salvation is the immanent Trinity and vice versa."2

Rahner's Axiom is being revisited again in, of all places, the almost century-long feud between Oneness and trinitarian Pentecostals. The "New Issue" raised by Oneness Pentecostals early on in the modern Pentecostal revival questioned the traditional trinitarian view of the Godhead and resulted in both groups being diametrically opposed to and historically suspicious of each other. In a recent call for dialogue between these sundered bodies of classical Pentecostalism, Ralph Del Colle, a charismatic Catholic theologian, proffered eight irenic theological theses aimed at securing ecclesial unity between Oneness and trinitarian Pentecostals on the issue of the Godhead. The formal response by David K. Bernard, J.D., pastor and theologian of the Oneness denomination, the United Pentecostal Church, revealed a

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

sympathy toward these proposals but also demonstrated that the stumbling block to unitive Pentecostalism is centered in divergent views of the Godhead ad intra. Bernard points out that insofar as trinitarian Pentecostals focus on “the necessity of the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation . . . , this is precisely what Oneness theology affirms and even emphasizes.” On the economic side, God is triune as revealed by the Scriptures. Trinitarians are concerned, however, that “this economic ‘Trinity’ does not translate into an ontological Trinity” for their Oneness siblings. The latter, however, respond that “this is a philosophical argument, not a scriptural one,” and insist on the oneness of God.4

One of the purposes of this article is to raise the question regarding the centrality of Rahner’s Axiom for the Christian faith. Does biblical faith depend on maintaining this equation? Ironically, the answer to this question is of crucial ecumenical importance for modern Pentecostalism. I will argue in this article that the distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity is an artificial one in light of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, and that the equation is therefore meaningless. Here, I need to be precise. I am not arguing against the speculative moment in philosophical or dogmatic theology; central to my own argument is a speculative metaphysical hypothesis. What I am suggesting is that theological extrapolations regarding the Godhead ad intra are extraneous with regard to Christian theology, and that modern Pentecostalism, at least, will be better off recognizing their “New Issue” as a non-issue.

This essay should therefore be read as a response to the call for discussion initiated by Del Colle. I will proceed as follows: The first section will provide a brief summary of trinitarian Pentecostal views of the Godhead along with Oneness responses and reformulations of the same. The heart of the argument will be in the second section, where I will bring to bear on Rahner’s Axiom the doctrine of creation ex nihilo as extensively developed by Robert Neville. This move will then be defended using general theological argumentation in section three. In the fourth and final section, I will formulate a Pentecostal response in anticipation of objections to the argument proposed here, followed by a preliminary sketch of a unitive Pentecostal theology of the Godhead. Throughout, I speak as a trinitarian, and yet I am proposing that

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3Unitive Pentecostalism in this paper refers to the hoped-for convergence between Oneness and trinitarian theologies. It should not to be confused with the United Pentecostal Church, the largest Oneness denomination.