Editorial

Dominus Iesus: A Pentecostal Perspective

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Last September, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released Dominus Iesus, a statement supporting the “Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.” The Declaration supports the belief that Christ and the church are utterly decisive and unique in mediating salvation to the world. Many welcome support of the unicity (or uniqueness) and salvific universality of Christ. It is the “and the church” that occasions the moment of hesitation for many of us. Assuming that talk of salvific universality for the church nests more naturally within a medieval worldview than in the contemporary context of cultural and religious diversity, Hans Künz referred to Dominus Iesus as representing a case of “medieval backwardness” and Vatican “megalomania.” But before we over-react, we need to listen carefully to the nuanced way in which Dominus Iesus, consistent with Vatican II and other doctrinal statements, develops the Roman Catholic understanding of the church. We also need to note carefully the witness from which this Declaration lives and draws its strength.

Before we take a closer look, however, I want to explain briefly the particular Pentecostal vantage point from which I approach a declaration like Dominus Iesus. From the beginning of the Pentecostal Movement, Pentecostals claimed to establish no church or creed but to unite all Christians within a missionary force fired by flames of revival to reach the world for Christ. Of course, Pentecostalism did not remain simply a “missionary fellowship” in its identity but came to found churches and church denominations. But like certain other Pietistic Movements (e.g., Zinzendorf’s Moravian
Movement), many Pentecostals have historically been hesitant to refer to themselves as a “church.” It is not coincidental, for example, that E. S. Williams’s three-volume *Systematic Theology*, for decades the major theological textbook of my Pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God, does not have a chapter on the church.

Though it is high time that Pentecostals develop a doctrine of the church, especially one that highlights its charismatic structure and missionary goal, our historic hesitance to lay claim to the designation “church” reveals a certain *Kingdom* orientation that is critical of any hint of ecclesiocentrism. Perhaps this orientation explains in part my attraction as a graduate student to the German Pietists, Johann Blumhardt and his son, Christoph. I was especially struck in my research by the younger Blumhardt’s sharp rejection of the church and his corresponding desire to serve the Kingdom of God from the context of secular movements of liberation. Though a part of me was falling in love with the church and with “Catholic tradition,” a different part was seeking to understand the significance of those like Blumhardt who swam against the ecclesiastical stream and who were *for* the church precisely by being *against* it. When, for example, the elder Blumhardt said that the *Landeskirche* of which he was a part was as lifeless as a tree frozen in the dead of winter, he was one-sided but in a way that tends to characterize prophetic speech. This prophetic message was sharpened by the younger Blumhardt, who took his “turn to the world” and left the pastorate for work as a socialist politician. He wrote that the sacraments of the church lost their redemptive power because the churches had stripped them of their function as signs of the coming Kingdom of God and had turned them instead into boundary markers that tell us who is “inside” and who is “outside” of God’s grace. I knew that he was terribly one-sided in his judgment, but, as a Pentecostal, I felt moved by the power of his protest. There is no question but that some of the most influ-