Re-envisioning the Pentecostal Understanding of the Eucharist: An Ecumenical Proposal

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Introduction

When we come to consider the idea of a distinctively Pentecostal sacramentology, it would be legitimate to begin by asking, “Is there any such thing?” My own initial answer is yes: it is still largely undeveloped, but the resources latent in Pentecostal spirituality hold much potential for developing a conscious theological appreciation of the sacramental character of worship in general, and of those ecclesial rituals that have historically been explicitly recognized as “sacraments” in particular. My goal in this essay is to investigate that potential so as to demonstrate how, if shaped in a certain way, this area of Pentecostal theology can aid doctrinal rapprochement between Pentecostals and other groups of Christians in the face of some existing divisions. I intend to direct my focus to the Eucharist, but first I must clear a space for talking about sacraments generally from a Pentecostal perspective. That will consume the first part of the essay, and in the second part I will proceed to engage some theologians of other traditions to determine where Pentecostalism might be able to appropriate some of their ideas.

Pentecostalism and the Idea of a Sacrament

The Council of Trent defined a sacrament as “a symbol of something sacred, a visible form of invisible grace, having the power of sanctifying.” Despite the fact that the sacramental teaching—particularly regarding the Eucharist—articulated by the Council was clearly shaped by polemical concerns, I presume that most Protestant Christians could interpret this definition in a way that would render it acceptable to them (the proper meaning of the phrase “having the power of sanctifying” would probably be the most disputed point). At any rate, I find it valuable as a place to start, if nothing else. I also value Paul Tillich’s way of differentiating between a sign and a symbol, both of which are important terms in any discussion of sacraments. According to Tillich, a sign “bears no necessary relation to that to which it points,” while a symbol...
participates in the reality of that for which it stands. The sign can be changed arbitrarily according to the demands of expediency, but the symbol grows and dies according to the correlation between that which is symbolized and the persons who receive it as a symbol. Therefore, the religious symbol, the symbol which points to the divine, can be a true symbol only if it participates in the power of the divine to which it points.\footnote{1}

Although the terms will often appear interchangeably in this paper, an example will illustrate how this distinction can be useful.

It seems fair to suppose that Pentecostals, generally speaking, tend to think of practices like baptism, celebrating the Lord’s Supper, and foot washing more as signs than as symbols of grace, usually treating them as an outward response to an inward grace that \textit{has already been received}. It is understood that we undertake these \textit{particular} actions simply because they are ordinances of dominical institution: Jesus instructed us to carry them out, and so we do, but our obedience in that regard does not create the occasion for a dispensation of grace; the grace—which, in a usage not uncommon to post-Reformation thought, refers almost strictly to the forgiveness of sins—has already come to us before our responsive action, and does not come thereafter or therein.

However, Frank D. Macchia, a Pentecostal, has argued that the common Pentecostal understanding of glossolalia shares much with the ways in which older, “mainstream” denominations conceive of how God works among us in the sacraments.\footnote{2} In both cases, alongside the symbolic human action, there is an outward sign of something that God is doing for a person or group that humans cannot genuinely do for themselves, though the genuineness of its occurring is known only by faith.\footnote{3} Likewise, whether in a Pentecostal “altar service” or at a communion table, those who encounter the living Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit leave believing that they have been granted a blessing that will sustain them as they re-enter the world on the pilgrimage of Christian life. The example demonstrates that Pentecostals have theological resources for exploring two key ideas in sacramentology: (1) that divine-human encounters take

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\item \footnote{3} After all, there is no way to prove that one who speaks in tongues is not simply babbling nonsense on his or her own impetus, or, say, that the bread and wine undergo a change by Christ’s becoming present in the Eucharist.
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