The Oneness-Trinitarian Pentecostal Doctrine: Introductory Musings of an Editor

Frank D. Macchia

I was only nineteen when I accompanied two friends into a local Apostolic Pentecostal Church for worship. We had noticed the sign outside advertising a Pentecostal revival meeting featuring a visiting evangelist. I was aware that there was a doctrinal difference over the Godhead between my Assemblies of God church (pastored by my father) and the one I was visiting that night, but my friends convinced me that our hunger for a revival meeting warranted attending the service anyway.

The preacher that night was riveting. The fact that the sound system was much too loud and the microphone held too close to the evangelist’s mouth did not stop me from appreciating his message (of course, I was naturally accustomed in the Pentecostal churches of my own upbringing to such assaults on my hearing). I still remember that his sermon lifted up Jesus as the Savior and Healer in a broken world hungry for God. I was moved to tears. I was made to want more of Jesus in my own life. That sermon and the songs and prayers offered to God in that service could have graced any Assemblies of God church and been welcomed with outstretched arms.

I joined the group of worshippers at the altar after the conclusion of the message. The fact that I was a stranger to the congregation brought a few altar workers around me to see if I had accepted Jesus. I told them that I had but that I wanted to pray for a deeper walk with God. We prayed together for a while and I was touched by their love for me. Out of concern for me they asked me whether I had accepted baptism in Jesus’ name. “Why was that important?” I asked. Acts 2:38 was the immediate answer, quoted to me in perfect King James English. The answer made perfectly good sense to them. If Jesus as the Savior is the focal point of the Gospel, if one gains entry to God through him, why not baptize in his name? After some discussion, they were not able to convince me to be rebaptized. I simply told them that I had to discuss such matters with my father. Upon discussing the matter with my dad
later, however, he reminded me that I had indeed been baptized in Jesus’ name. To be sensitive to persons from a Oneness background (and to take no chances at being in any way less than thoroughly biblical), my father baptized all converts (including me) in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I think I was destined from that moment on to be involved in Oneness/Trinitarian Pentecostal conversations!

I walked away from that Oneness church that night impressed by their devotion to Christ and the power of the Spirit. Yet, their views of baptism and God were different from my own church’s views. I was made to consider at a relatively young age both the importance and limits of doctrinal formulations for regulating the language of faith and other forms of devotion within a given church. In an effort to be faithful to Scripture, doctrinal formulations exist in continuity with, and in service to, our worship, adoration, and mission. They play an enormously important role in guiding and enhancing our devotion and faithfulness to God. Yet, no language can adequately capture God or adequately express our worship and adoration. It may even be possible to appreciate to some extent doctrinal formulations with which one’s own church has disagreed. As George Lindbeck has shown us in his classic, The Nature of Doctrine, the regulatory function of doctrine can help us in certain instances to understand and even to find some value in doctrinal formulations that might sound strange or problematic from the vantage point of our own traditions, because of the way in which these formulations might have functioned to guide a community of faith in its effort to appropriately respond to various internal and contextual realities. Because of doctrine’s regulatory function, doctrine may be called the “grammar of faith.”

The Oneness-Trinitarian Pentecostal dialogue raises an interesting question in the light of Lindbeck’s ecumenical understanding of the regulatory function of doctrine: How wide or diverse is the spectrum of this realm of ecumenical appreciation within the Christian family? For example, if doctrine is the grammar of faith, how much diversity is allowable within the Christian tradition for regulating the use of the terms, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” To press the grammar metaphor further, all Pentecostals agree that these terms function in some sense as adverbs, describing God’s involvement in history (God functions or is manifested in a fatherly way, or in filial manner, or as a spiritual presence). But can we stop there as the Oneness Pentecostal Movement has done? Or, must we go further as do Trinitarians to insist that these terms also function in a specialized sense as adjectives, describing who God is eternally?

Oneness and Trinitarian Pentecostal grammars differ on this point. We would consider each other’s grammars defective to some extent and not prop-