

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_cjpc 01.php

Doing Double Duty: David Reed as Apologist and Critic of Oneness Pentecostalism

Thomas A. Robinson
University of Lethbridge

Introduction

The label 'heresy' is a horrible and a handy thing. As distasteful as the label can be, it is a normal and, dare I say, inevitable label in the process of marking boundaries, drawing lines of exclusion, and defining group identity. The term marks the most important boundaries of a group, beyond which a group understands its own identity to be profoundly harmed or compromised. As such, it is a key flag for the scholar in trying to determine how a group perceives its fundamental essence. The term is generally applied by the primary group to a 'deviant'¹ group that once had been part of it or has been identified with it, but which has come to be perceived to have rejected or to have corrupted an essential element of the tradition.

¹ Although labels such as 'heresy' or 'deviant' are negative, that is no reason to set them aside. All groups, religious or not, have boundaries. Indeed, without boundaries of some kind it would be impossible to have a sense of group identity. Granted, religious boundaries often make claims to truth, but these are hardly more exceptional than claims made by ethnic groups or political parties. Religions, when speaking of heresy, are simply doing what groups do generally.

To the outsider, the label merely identifies boundaries and group consciousness. To the insider, the label provokes a no-holds-barred fight over “truth.” In many ways, it is only from the insiders’ perspective that “heresy” becomes something important enough to clench one’s fists over.

Few individuals move with ease across the boundaries that mark off heresy from orthodoxy and even fewer are welcomed by both sides after the move has been made. If the move was from the main group to the ‘deviant’ group, the one who has moved is tagged with the ‘heretic’ label. If the move was made from the deviant group to the primary group, the label ‘traitor’ or worse is likely to be applied by former friends.

One of the largest and most recent Christian groups to earn the heresy label from the larger Christian community—or at least from the part of the Christian community still active in the upkeep of such boundaries—is Oneness Pentecostalism. The principal defect detected in Oneness Pentecostalism relates to its understanding of divinity—or, in the jargon of the group—the Godhead. Most bluntly, Oneness Pentecostals deny the Trinity. They reflect the struggle that Christians have had in maintaining two primary beliefs: first, monotheism, and second, a sense that Jesus was associated with God in a way that no other being was. Oneness Pentecostalism in many ways is a rebirth of Sabellianism (an early debate that most Chris-

tians thought was settled long ago), though direct roots would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish.²

Few scholars have addressed the issue of Oneness Pentecostalism with first-hand knowledge, and even fewer have experience on both sides of the fence. Although this article focuses on David Reed, whose most recent book offers the definitive scholarly analysis of Oneness Pentecostalism,³ it is necessary to speak about others who have addressed the matter of Oneness Pentecostalism so that Reed's contribution can be more clearly seen and understood.⁴

Insiders' Criticism of Oneness Pentecostalism

Gregory Boyd's *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* was one of the first books to deal with Oneness Pentecostalism.⁵ It is largely a defence of Trinitarianism and a cri-

² In determining roots, we must be careful to distinguish between what appears to be parallels after the fact and what constituted real and substantial influences in the establishment and growth of an idea in a modern context. Oneness Pentecostalism is not Sabellianism, though that became a label applied to it and a label Oneness Pentecostals often claimed for themselves.

³ David Reed, *"In Jesus' Name": The History and Beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals*, Journal of Pentecostal Studies Supplement Series 31 (Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2008).

⁴ For a brief history of Oneness Pentecostalism in Canada, see Thomas A. Robinson, "Oneness Pentecostalism," in *Canadian Pentecostalism: Transition and Transformation*, ed. Michael Wilkinson (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009), 39-57.

⁵ Gregory A. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992). Boyd moved beyond that to engage in a wide range of issues, from historical Jesus questions to a critique of evangelicalism's quest for political power.

tique of the weaknesses in the Oneness alternative. Its primary foil is the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI). Boyd had a brief association with the UPCI, joining the movement when he was seventeen, and after he left the movement a few years later, he sensed it was his mission to prevent Trinitarian Pentecostals from joining the Oneness movement and to help Oneness Pentecostals on the pathway toward more orthodox Christianity.

Two other scholars, Thomas Fudge and David Reed, have recently addressed Oneness Pentecostalism in substantial works. Their writings provide nuanced insights that come from being raised in the movement from their first breath. Not only did both Fudge and Reed grow up in Oneness Pentecostalism, they grew up in one of the few hotbeds of Oneness Pentecostalism anywhere in the world, the province of New Brunswick on Canada's east coast. The three most influential early leaders there, Susie and Caro Davis (The Davis Sisters as they were fondly known) and Sam Steeves were Oneness. Although these individuals were generous and remarkably tolerant to diversity on the matter of the Trinitarian-Oneness controversy, many of their followers became much more exclusivist, moving much of New Brunswick Pentecostalism into the extremist Oneness camp of the UPCI, as Fudge's book recounts. Steeped in this environment, both Fudge and Reed can provide a detailed and somewhat first-hand history of the Oneness movement, as well as a nuanced analysis of Oneness theology and its diversity.

But there the similarity ends, for the authors treat the split within Oneness Pentecostalism quite differently. Fudge's book has a provocatively sharp tone, which sometimes crashes like waves of an angry sea. The title of Fudge's book is intentionally uncompromising: *Christianity without the Cross: A History of Salvation in Oneness Pentecostalism*.⁶ The cover of Fudge's book is particularly striking and its point unmistakable. It is a reproduction of the 1538 *Calvary* painting of Lucas Cranach, a scene in which Jesus on the cross dominates the setting. But Fudge alters the painting, removing the image of Jesus and the cross and leaving only the two crucified thieves and the crowd of bystanders. The scene, thus, ceases to be a Christian scene, and certainly ceases to be a redemptive scene—which is Fudge's point in his attack on the UPCI. To label anything in Christianity as lacking the cross is to dismiss it as profoundly inadequate, and that is exactly what Fudge does and intends.

Yet, Fudge does not dismiss all of Oneness Pentecostalism but rather only one branch: the UPCI, the best known of the Oneness groups. It is important to note here that what causes non-Oneness Christians to label the Oneness movement as heretical (its anti-Trinitarian stance) is quite different from what causes dispute and division within Oneness Pentecostalism itself. From an insider critic's view, the fundamental dividing line within Oneness Pentecostalism is whether the experience of

⁶ Thomas A. Fudge, *Christianity without the Cross: A History of Salvation in Oneness Pentecostalism* (Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2003).

glossolalia and water baptism in the name of Jesus are essential conditions of salvation.

Reed, like Fudge, sees the understanding of salvation as the primary dividing line in the split within Oneness Pentecostals,⁷ though Reed is considerably less compelled to draw a sharp line in the sand than Fudge seems to be. Reed's latest book offers the definitive description of the history of Oneness Pentecostalism, with relatively easy-to-follow arguments in defence, if not of its theology, of what its theology would be if Oneness Pentecostals had more mature theologians, which Reed believes will be the case sometime in the future.

To some degree, Reed and Fudge present different approaches because they are addressing different audiences and have different goals. Further, although both were raised in devout Oneness homes in the province of New Brunswick, and both, by different routes, became academics, they view the world of Oneness Pentecostalism and their experience within it differently. Reed, who is now trinitarian, is trying to explain Oneness Pentecostalism to non-Oneness Christians, whether Pentecostal or otherwise, and he is particularly concerned to gain a fair hearing for Oneness Pentecostalism in an environment that had quickly dismissed the Oneness movement as heretical because of its sharp anti-trinitarian stance. Fudge primarily is addressing a Oneness audience, and he writes as one who sees himself and others within Oneness Pentecostal-

⁷ David Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities for Pentecostal Theology," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997): 90.

ism as victims of a less-than-honest takeover of the Oneness movement by extremists. Further, Fudge thinks the radical position of the UPCI has isolated the Oneness movement from the larger Christian world, and worse, from Christianity itself, for Fudge sees in the UPCI emphasis on glossolalia and water baptism in the name of Jesus as conditions for salvation a troubling denial of the redemptive power of the cross—and Fudge will have none of that.

Both Fudge and Reed say that, with Oneness Pentecostalism, what you see is not what you get. What you get, for Fudge, is much worse; for Reed, it's not so unpleasantly bad as one might have expected.

It is to Reed that I now turn—a competent and willing apologist and a quite quiet, but exacting, critic. Reed's latest book, *"In Jesus' Name": The History and Beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals*, is a revision of his 1978 PhD dissertation from Boston University.⁸ During the thirty intervening years, Reed has contributed articles on Oneness Pentecostals from time to time.⁹ In fact, one might call

⁸ David Reed, "Origins and Development of the Theology of Oneness Pentecostalism in the United States" Unpublished PhD dissertation, Boston University, 1978.

⁹ David Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities for Pentecostal Theology," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997): 73-93; "Aspects of the Origins of Oneness Pentecostalism," in Synan, ed., *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1975), 143-68; "Oneness Pentecostalism," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988): 644-5. Reed has also contributed a chapter, "Oneness Seed on Canadian Soil: Early developments in Oneness Pentecostalism," edited by Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse in *Winds from the North: Cana-*

him the “go-to-man” for anyone with a query about Oneness Pentecostals. He knows the tradition “inside out”—and in Reed’s case, the “inside out” idiom can be taken more literally, for he has experienced Oneness Pentecostalism both as an insider and an outsider. Of course, there is no small circle of people who could claim that, yet few, if any, could claim such an intimate and nuanced understanding of this movement.

Reed’s writings make the most compelling case (indeed, one might say the only case) for a more tolerant treatment of Oneness Pentecostals by the larger Pentecostal and Christian community. No one is more qualified to argue that case.

Reed as Apologist

Reed’s task is to rehabilitate a group that has three strikes against them from the start. One, the central doctrine of Oneness Pentecostalism is associated with a belief that had been condemned as heresy by orthodox Christianity from the third century onward. Two, Oneness Pentecostals were ejected by their fellow Pentecostal friends as heretics almost from the start of the modern Pentecostal movement. Three, Oneness Pentecostalism frequently made the cult lists of zealously active and over-energized heresy hunters. And if one needs a fourth strike, Oneness Pentecostals, particularly those of the UPCI mentality, tend to dismiss the entire Christian Church throughout much of history, and even their fellow Pentecostals of a

Trinitarian stripe, as outside the true Church,¹⁰ which hardly endears Oneness Pentecostals to the larger Christian world. Reed's task, clearly, is not an easy one.

The Heresy Label

Reed doesn't like the 'heresy' label, though he does believe that heresies are "real" and that they can be "destructive to the life of the church." Reed declares that he does not wish "to deny the reality of heresy, but to affirm caution."¹¹ But it is clear that Reed has trouble with how the concept of heresy is constructed in specific cases, even if he is prepared to retain the general concept.

It is possible that Reed has developed a growing dislike for the concept itself. The tone in his latest book (2008) compared to an article about ten years earlier (1997) is more dismissive of the heresy label. In this latest work, Reed describes the use of the 'heresy' label as "assassination by taxonomy"¹² and the label itself is a "weasel word."¹³ The word 'cult' is equally offensive.¹⁴ Reed

¹⁰ Reed sees this as a significant problem of Oneness belief (*"In Jesus' Name"*, 326-31). Oneness Pentecostalism has a variety of scenarios for non-Oneness Christians, from viewing them as equally as "unsaved" as the far-off "heathen" to a second-rate status in the circle of the saved. I have even heard a UPCI preacher address the matter at a camp meeting. He believed that Trinitarian Pentecostals would be admitted to heaven, but only because Oneness Pentecostals would need someone to serve them. Non-Pentecostals didn't have a chance even at that diminished status.

¹¹ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 75.

¹² Reed, *"In Jesus' Name"*, 338.

¹³ Reed, *"In Jesus' Name"*, 341.

¹⁴ Reed, *"In Jesus' Name"*, 339-40.

can score points here because over the past few decades, such words have become increasingly avoided in large sectors of the Christian community as both too aggressive and too arrogant.

But is the word ‘heresy’ really so problematic? It is, at its core, simply one of the boundary terms which religious groups have used to help define their identity against another group that might be identified or associated in some way with it to the detriment of the fundamental beliefs of the group. Thus the real question is not whether the label should be used, for that is simply asking whether boundaries should be drawn to mark off group identity, to which most would answer in the affirmative. The real question of concern is whether boundaries should be drawn where they have been. Reed, in his approach, clearly recognizes this important distinction, for after dismissing the offensive ‘heresy’ label he turns to the task of challenging the grounds upon which the boundaries were drawn.

Reed does this, in part, by excusing early Oneness leaders who identified their beliefs with the third-century belief that came to be called Sabellianism. These Oneness leaders, according to Reed, were simply “popular theologians” who were “not fully cognizant of the theological implications,” and they would have themselves rejected these, had they understood the ramifications of Sabellianism.¹⁵ In so excusing the careless and crude self-identification of Oneness Pentecostals with Sabellianism, Reed is attempting to remove the first objection to Oneness Pentecostalism—its identification with an ancient

¹⁵ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 343.

heresy. But in so doing, Reed seems to be admitting some validity to the ancient boundaries, assuring his readers that Oneness Pentecostals are not really like *those guys*, the Sabellianists.

So, Oneness Pentecostals do not belong to Sabellianism, but do they belong, then, to orthodoxy? Reed understands that they do not, but he seeks an exemption for Oneness Pentecostals even where they fail to meet the conditions of the ancient boundaries set by the early councils. One might call Oneness Pentecostals “heterodox,” according to Reed, but they should not be called “heretics.”¹⁶ In not lining up with the creeds, Oneness Pentecostals are merely doing what restorationist movements of the last two centuries have done: it is the Bible rather than the creeds that determine their belief system, or at least that is what the restorationists assert.¹⁷ Thus Oneness Pentecostals are not like those detestable ancient Sabellianists; they are really much more like various modern restorationist movements, many of whom find a welcome home within the evangelical and larger Christian communion.

Reed’s next approach is to neutralize the label ‘heresy,’ at least in its use in early Holiness and Pentecostal circles, which is the context in which Oneness Pentecostals were first tagged as heretics. Reed argues that in that context the term “functioned more as a polemical term of derision for any doctrine that challenged the “orthodoxy” of a particular group, not a core doctrine of the Christian

¹⁶ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 346.

¹⁷ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 346-47.

faith.”¹⁸ In other words, although early Oneness Pentecostals were called ‘heretics’ by those within Holiness and Trinitarian Pentecostal circles, these groups did not really mean what they said. The heresy label as applied to early Oneness Pentecostals, according to Reed’s analysis, was a much milder and less worrisome kind of judgment.

Reed’s description of the use of the label ‘heresy’ among these groups may be technically true, but the reality is that any of these groups who used this label would not have made the kind of distinction that Reed makes. To them, “orthodoxy” and “core doctrines of the Christian faith” would have been the same thing. Nonetheless, if Reed’s observation stands, he has challenged the second strike against Oneness Pentecostals—that they had been written off as substantial heretics by their closest associates at the very beginning of their movement.

The third strike, the ‘cult’ charge, has currency in an increasingly limited circle of Christians, and if Reed can make his case against the first two strikes, the third strike would simply evaporate for most observers.

What Oneness Says and What It Means

Once Reed gets rid of the offensive ‘heresy’ label, he can then ask that Oneness views be at least examined rather than being summarily dismissed. Reed attempts to show that the theology of Oneness Pentecostalism is considerably less offensive and abnormal than often perceived. Reed’s primary defence of Oneness theology is that it should not be taken at face value—the implications of

¹⁸ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 345.

what Oneness Pentecostals *mean* are far less problematic and offensive than what they *say*. Reed offers several points to make Oneness theology much more acceptable.

One, he points out that Oneness theology is Jesus or Christ centered (which is a good thing), and this, in itself, separates Oneness Pentecostalism from other non-trinitarian groups who offer a more diminished view of Jesus. Here Reed would have in mind groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. In making that kind of distinction, Reed is retaining boundary markers that separate some groups off as heretics. Reed's rescue is only of Oneness Pentecostals, not of Christian heretics generally.

Two, Reed points out that Oneness theology is yet immature: it is still in its "infancy," and it "has yet to address a number of lacunae in its doctrinal system."¹⁹ Reed notes that because Oneness Pentecostalism is "less than a century old, born among the masses, it cannot make its presentation with the sophistication of a doctrine that has had centuries of linguistic refinement."²⁰ At a more technical level, Reed contends that primary statements of the Oneness movement are really "second-order doctrine" that "carry no ontological freight."²¹ Reed is asking that Oneness theology, being in its infancy, be less harshly judged. Although Reed does not say it quite this way, for

¹⁹ Reed, "*In Jesus' Name*", 350.

²⁰ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 76.

²¹ Reed has to admit that the Oneness movement "still views its teachings as 'apostolic truth' or first order doctrine," which makes theological dialogue with Oneness Pentecostal difficult.

Reed the theology of Oneness Pentecostals is yet ‘baby talk’; it is not the polished intellectual argument of a seasoned theological community. Baby talk should be seen as natural and inoffensive at this stage in the development of the Oneness movement.

Three, Reed contends that Oneness theology as lived is less offensive than the theology as proclaimed.²² Reed points, for example, to the contribution that Oneness Pentecostal song writers have made to the larger evangelical stock of music,²³ and to the Jesus-centred worship of the movement.

Modern Theologians and Historians

Reed hopes to strengthen his case by calling attention to some of the parallels between Oneness theology and that of some well-respected non-Oneness and even non-Pentecostal theologians and historians who have written about Christian initiation and Spirit baptism. In particular, Reed looks at the work of James Dunn and Emil Brunner.²⁴ But Reed is much more successful in showing the positive side of Oneness theology than in finding useful, contemporary parallels for Oneness theology beyond Oneness circles, and Reed himself admits that the Dunn/Brunner connections are somewhat problematic.²⁵

²² Reed has a number of arguments. Most seem to fall somewhere within the general descriptions I have given above.

²³ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 341.

²⁴ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God. Dogmatics I*, trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1950).

²⁵ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 312-13.

Reed refers also to the work of other scholars, such as Larry Hurtado,²⁶ a former Pentecostal and now Anglican (like Reed himself), whose various works have demonstrated links in Judaism for some of the early Christian views of Jesus, thus aiding Reed's efforts to show that Oneness views can claim roots in early Christianity. Reed finds other theologians, such as the neo-orthodox Karl Barth, sharing at least some of the particulars of Oneness Pentecostals, such as the appeal to scripture rather than to the creeds.

Finally, Reed notes a general softening of attitudes towards Oneness Pentecostals, quoting highly positive comments by scholars such as Blumhofer, an Assemblies of God historian.²⁷

Reed's attempt to link Oneness Pentecostal beliefs in some way—often loosely—to noted and respected scholars from a variety of Christian traditions works to reduce the fear some Christians would have had in considering beliefs, even if only in conversation, that did not fit the definitions of orthodoxy.

²⁶ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 83, uses Hurtado's work, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Reed points to others, as well, who emphasize aspects of Jewish Christianity, such as Richard Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1970); and Jean Danielou, *The Development of Christian Doctrine Before the Council to Nicea. I. The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, ed. and trans. J. A. Baker (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964).

²⁷ Reed, "In Jesus' Name", 340.

The Primitive Jewish-Christian Argument

Reed's most sustained and perhaps potentially strongest argument is that Oneness Pentecostals are connecting with ancient Jewish-Christian reflection found in parts of the New Testament itself.²⁸ Contending that neither Jewish or Jewish-Christian theology was uniform, Reed suggests that "diversity of thought, even christological thought, is not necessarily heretical."²⁹ For Reed, Oneness Pentecostalism has adequate parallel with beliefs in early Jewish-Christian theology—indeed, even within the New Testament itself.

But the path that Reed lays out taking Oneness Pentecostalism back to the early Jewish Christianity is a fairly rocky road. For one thing, the diversity in early Jewish-Christian thought would allow for almost any christological view. Indeed, the dominant Jewish-Christian view (as illustrated primarily in the Ebionites) would seem to promote a christology diametrically opposed to that proposed by Oneness Pentecostals. Since christologies such as Arianism provide a 'higher' christology than that of the Ebionites, for example, the puzzle would be what kind of christology would be still deserving of the heresy label under these new standards.

Here, then, is the problem. Simply finding parallels with ancient Christian belief, even that contained in the New Testament itself, seems to complicate rather than clarify the appropriate use of boundary terms such as

²⁸ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 83-85.

²⁹ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 84.

'heresy,' for almost any system of belief that shows some degree of respect for Jesus would seem to make the cut. Reed believes that his appeal to early Jewish-Christian theology can make "valid" theological space for Oneness theology, though he does concede that this space would be "limited."³⁰ I think the concession is not necessary. The valid theological space would be wide open. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing I leave to theologians, not to historians, to sort out.

On somewhat of a side issue, I would challenge any fine distinction between Jewish and hellenistic belief, and I would certainly question putting a premium of so-called "Jewish" views, as Reed sometimes seems to do.³¹ Reed contends that Oneness Pentecostals are closest to early Hebrew or Jewish Christians, whose influence died out (apparently unfortunately) under the pressures from Hellenism that became prominent in Christianity.³² Reed, when speaking of the "baggage" of creedal formulations, charges that classical theology has been more influenced by Athens and Berlin than by Jerusalem.³³ But the reality is that by the first century, Jewish thinking itself is heav-

³⁰ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostals: Problems and Possibilities," 92.

³¹ For example, Reed refers extensively to Longenecker's work, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity*. Reed speaks of "views considered contaminated by later Hellenistic philosophy" ("Oneness Pentecostals: Problems and Possibilities," 88, but Longenecker does not use the word "contaminated" in his text. See, too, Reed, "*In Jesus' Name*," 69.

³² Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 76-77.

³³ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 76-81.

ily influenced by Hellenistic thought, and ideas are much more fluid and intermingled.³⁴ To speak of the hellenization of Christianity or the gentilization of Christianity³⁵ assumes the existence of a Christianity with non-hellenized Jewish sensibilities. Such a Christianity never existed. Everything is somewhat hellenized in the world of the first century.

Closely connected to the appeal to early Jewish-Christian ideas is Reed's examination of the Oneness Pentecostal emphasis on "the Name."³⁶ Reed finds in this another early slice of Christian theology about God that gets forgotten over the long span of Christian history. Reed does recognize that the treatment of the Name by Oneness Pentecostals has problems,³⁷ and that this kind of reflection had only a short life in early Christian theology.³⁸ I will not examine the theme of the Name here, since I feel

³⁴ Reed distinguishes Greek, Latin and Hebrew theological traditions ("Oneness Pentecostals: Problems and Possibilities," 77). Boundaries were, actually, never that neat, and Jews, even in Palestine, could not help but be somewhat hellenized after nearly two centuries of Greek control, and even after Jews of Palestine won their independence under the Maccabees, strong hellenizing tendencies continued. And, of course, Jews of the diaspora knew no other world but a hellenized one, at least in the eastern Mediterranean, where most of the diaspora Jews resided.

³⁵ Reed, "*In Jesus' Name*", 69.

³⁶ Many of the chapters in Reed's "*In Jesus' Name*" deal in some way with the Name: chs. 3, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, and at various points in other chapters.

³⁷ Reed, "*In Jesus' Name*", 306; Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 88.

³⁸ Reed, "*In Jesus' Name*", 357.

that it shares the weakness of the more general appeal to early Jewish Christianity, which I have just addressed.

*Restorationist Claims and the Biblical View*³⁹

Oneness Pentecostals, like many of their restorationist counterparts, believe that they have the full apostolic truth—the original gospel as taught by Jesus and transmitted and preserved by the apostles. Reed does not really challenge them on that claim; in fact, as we have seen, Reed seeks to find in early Christianity a home for Oneness Pentecostals.

Similarly, Reed argues that the view of Oneness Pentecostals appears to be more based on the Bible than are of the creeds themselves.⁴⁰ Oneness Pentecostals, like many restorationist movements, reject the creeds as a product of an apostate church, according to Reed. Reed seems to put a premium on “the biblical view”—the authority of Scripture—which he believes is the driving motivation of Oneness Pentecostals,⁴¹ and probably most evangelicals would promote a similar fondness for “the biblical view.”

³⁹ I am somewhat baffled by restorationist movements (of which Pentecostalism is a shining example), who are eager to restore past apostolic belief and practice, and who assert that God is the Lord of history—from Adam, through Noah, through Abraham and Israel and into the present—except, of course, for the hundreds of years between the death of the apostles and some date in the 1800s or 1900s when truth was finally again restored.

⁴⁰ Reed, “Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities,” 76-81.

⁴¹ Reed, “Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities,” 82-83. Reed notes that this is the position of Trinitarian Pentecostals too.

But can we really speak of a ‘biblical view’ or promote the authority of Scripture, “with its non-philosophical basis,” as Reed⁴² seems to say, and which the whole evangelical community would probably affirm? I contend that to speak of a ‘biblical view’ or to say that the Bible is the “sole authority” is to deny three realities: (1) the diversity within the biblical perspective; (2) the historical nature of both the Bible and the creeds as products of the church, complete with “philosophical underpinnings” and layers of real historical dust and grime; and (3) the influence of the environment (cultural, historical, and theological) on the modern reader’s understanding, making our world and our perspective different from the ancient one—no matter how sincere our efforts to rebuilt the past on the soil of the present.

But should the claim to restoration of the biblical view not be challenged? Although it is the never-questioned assumption within Pentecostalism that apostolic doctrine should be sought and can be ‘restored,’ we must ask whether we are closing our eyes to the historical realities in which early Christianity was established and in which it developed. Are we not falling for a historical naïveté? The present is not the past, and, perhaps we need to remind ourselves, we can’t get there from here.

Reed is not unaware of these problems, though sometimes his distinction between creed and canon seems to be at the expense of the creeds.⁴³ At other times, however,

⁴² Reed, “Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities,” 83.

⁴³ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 349.

Reed is without ambiguity. In the final criticisms of Oneness Pentecostalism, he addresses the matter bluntly.

...while there is some indication of a tradition of the name of Jesus in the earliest Jewish Christian materials in the New Testament, this tradition apparently gave way to other christological expressions, or was at least limited to certain Christian communities. For our purposes, it is significant that any waning or localization was evident within the canonical text itself. This is a problem for oneness exegetes who are committed to the authoritative biblical text and dismiss only post-canonical sources. In other words, what authority does a biblical perspective carry, if there is evidence that it was not universally believed or practiced within the apostolic church? Even if we can identify a christological strand of the name of Jesus, it is undoubtedly not the dominant tradition, and the apostolic church did not consider it to be so, otherwise it would have been universalized. Our critique of oneness Pentecostalism is that it has taken a legitimate but provisional theme from Apostolic Christianity and made it the non-negotiable center.⁴⁴

Reed as Critic

Reed is considerably less a critic of Oneness Pentecostalism than he is an apologist. In part, I think, that is because of Reed's audience and purpose. If one is trying to make a group appear more acceptable and normal theologically than it often has been made out to be, then it hardly helps the case to emphasize aspects of the group's theology that cannot so easily be brought into line, or aspects of the group's conduct and attitude that would make the group seem less attractive.

Like Fudge, Reed draws a line between Oneness Pentecostals who make glossolalia and water baptism in the name of Jesus essential conditions of salvation ("water-

⁴⁴ Reed, "In Jesus' Name", 357.

spirit”) and those Oneness Pentecostals, who like the majority of evangelicals, make repentance the essential condition (“the blood”). And both Fudge and Reed find the former more problematic. Fudge clearly was hurt by the division as it was worked out in a very bitter conflict among the Oneness Pentecostal churches in Saint John, New Brunswick when Fudge was a youth. This conflict was largely over by this time in most other churches in the province, and Reed appears to have missed that kind of excitement that Fudge experienced because in the group with which Reed’s family had identified, the fight was over early—though not the rhetoric.

A Critic in Action

The simple fact is, in spite of a very credible defence of Oneness Pentecostalism—even of the most extreme form of it found in the UPCI—Reed’s path early led into Anglicanism (or Episcopalianism, in its American version), and he has continued in that path both as a priest and an academic, giving the first two decades of his career to pastoral ministry in the United States and the latter two decades to academics, serving as a Professor of the Anglican seminary Wycliffe College in Toronto. Reed’s path has also led into trinitarianism, and that, in itself, is a strong statement against Oneness belief. Reed describes himself in this way:

I am trinitarian. I do not view the pre-Nicene Fathers as proto-Oneness believers. I disagree with much of the Oneness exegesis in its positivistic approach.⁴⁵

Reed's path, then, in itself, is a criticism of Oneness Pentecostalism. It reflects a conscious and careful assessment of Oneness Pentecostalism, and a finding from that assessment of defects within the Oneness movement.

A Critic in Word

Reed's purpose is to rehabilitate Oneness Pentecostals in the eyes of fellow evangelicals. Although he does not emphasize the negatives, he does indicate what these are. One might describe Reed's work as 90% defence and 10% criticism, though much of the defence is simply a matter of providing a detailed analysis of the roots and motivations of the Oneness movement in order to neutralize some of the criticism brought against Oneness theology. Although Reed is less a critic than an apologist, when he turns his critical eye on Oneness belief, his criticism is clear, thorough, and decisive. It is also respectful, a rare exception to the criticism that Oneness Pentecostals have encountered.

A primary problem of Oneness Pentecostalism, for Reed, is the relative immaturity of its theology. That point is used by Reed both in defence of Oneness Pentecostalism and in criticism of it. For example, in regard to the theology of the Name, Reed believes that Oneness Pentecostals have captured an aspect of primitive theology that

⁴⁵ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 74.

is missing from much of traditional theology in the history of the church. But Reed is not convinced that Oneness Pentecostalism's treatment of this and related themes has been handled "in the most theologically responsible way,"⁴⁶ and he points to a number of specific problems with this major tenet of Oneness theology.⁴⁷

Further, Reed points to the consequences of Oneness Pentecostals "hermetically sealing its doctrine from review and critique," which has damaged its ability to develop and amend its inherited beliefs and has impeded its theological development.⁴⁸ This has left Oneness theology isolated and lacking in "theological acuity."⁴⁹ Reed also points to Oneness Pentecostalism's narrowness and exclusion of fellow Christians.⁵⁰

The Missing Criticism

Behaviour

There is much to criticize about Oneness Pentecostalism, at least from the perspective of contemporary evangelicalism and even of the somewhat more tolerant larger Christian communion. And much of what can be criticized in

⁴⁶ Reed, "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 87.

⁴⁷ Reed, "In Jesus' Name", 306, 353-54.

⁴⁸ Reed, "In Jesus' Name", 273, 307

⁴⁹ Reed, "In Jesus' Name", 331, 353, 354, 357.

⁵⁰ Reed, "In Jesus' Name", 326-31; "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities," 91. Even here, however, Reed is generous, citing K. D. Gill [*Towards a Contextualized Theology for the Third World: The Emergence and Development of Jesus' Name Pentecostalism in Mexico*, Studies in Intercultural History in Christianity, 90 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 182], who points out that such an attitude is not uncharacteristic of many evangelicals.

Oneness Pentecostalism comes in its starkest and best known form, in the UPCI. Oneness pastors are often autocratic. Fellow Christians—even fellow Pentecostals and sometimes even fellow Oneness Pentecostals, and, as Fudge bears witness, even fellow UPCIs—are routinely and often nastily dismissed.⁵¹ Members are isolated from the larger society and often from their own families. A stark legalism guides moral conduct and social behaviour.⁵²

Reed could have written an equally long book on the *practices* and *lifestyle* of Oneness Pentecostals, and this, I think, would have made Oneness Pentecostals (or at least the UPCI extreme) a much less attractive group and a considerably harder sell to the wider Christian community. That is not to say, of course, that there are no groups within Christian orthodoxy that demonstrate an equally isolationist mentality and tightly controlled and closed fellowship.

Reed sets aside the matters of behaviour and attitude. It is the theology of Oneness Pentecostals that is Reed's concern, and in that regard Reed does as effective a job as is likely to be done for long years to come.

'The Name'

Although Reed spends much time explaining the importance of 'the Name' in Christian theology and finding

⁵¹ Reed, "*In Jesus' Name*", 311-12.

⁵² Reed tries to defend Oneness Pentecostalism's "moralistic strain" by associating it with aspects of holiness theology ("*In Jesus' Name*", 314).

numerous groups or eras where ‘the Name’ was a prominent and defining consciousness, one must ask whether the parallels with Oneness Pentecostalism are substantial.⁵³ In at least some segments of Oneness Pentecostalism, ‘the Name’ is treated almost as a magical formula, an incantation that has an abracadabra character to it, the special word that controls and manipulates the supernatural world. At least, I suspect a religious studies scholar would see at least a quasi-magical aspect to Oneness use of ‘the Name’ after observing the use of the term and comparing that use to the use of incantations in other religions.

If one is going to emphasize the positive aspects of Oneness Pentecostalism’s devotion to ‘the Name,’ perhaps one should note aspects of that devotion that would be taken as problematic by the wider Christian circle. Although Reed does indicate points of weakness in the Oneness theology of the Name, he treats the devotional aspects of this theology as positive.⁵⁴ There are devotional aspects of that theology that need criticism too—or at least aspects that would be criticized by evangelicals if the same practice was observed in the devotion of non-Christian religions.

Of course, one might argue that other Pentecostals and Christians generally use the Name in much the same way. Indeed, a case might be made that such was the way that the name “Jesus” was used in early Christianity, or at least could be used by those who chose to morph the term

⁵³ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 227-273.

⁵⁴ Reed, “*In Jesus’ Name*”, 332.

into that ancient world of power and magic. Even so, it does seem that at some level Oneness Pentecostals' use of the Name is discordant with the general use of the Name within Christianity broadly.

Does It Matter?

The Question of Heresy

If Oneness Pentecostalism had not been dismissed as heretical by the larger Christian community, it is doubtful that Reed would have given the movement much attention after the completion of his PhD. What seems to have kept Reed addressing the issue is the rejection of Oneness Pentecostals as heretics by the wider church. One can get a glimpse of this motivation behind Reed's writings by observing how quickly Reed gets to the point of challenging the usefulness or hasty application of the 'heresy' label, and how diligently and thoroughly he tries to make a case for detaching the 'heresy' label from Oneness Pentecostals.

The matter would be resolved if one simply threw out the category of heresy altogether, but, given the centrality of Jesus to the very definition of the Christian movement, that is an unlikely scenario. My sense is that, given the recent rapid spread of Christianity in Asia and Africa often without much western control, new theologies regarding the nature of the divine and the association of Jesus with that will develop, and it will be difficult for western Christendom to use the ancient creeds as effectively in marking the boundaries of Christianity, and Oneness Pentecostals will benefit.

One should not expect that Oneness Pentecostals will

simply drop their anti-Trinitarian views and join the ranks of Christian orthodoxy, as happened a few years back with the Worldwide Church of God, for example.⁵⁵ For Oneness Pentecostals, the Trinitarian-Oneness issue is the defining debate in a way that it is not for other groups that have questioned the orthodox trinitarian view.

Peace Making

Reed is a most irenic peace maker. Reed does not want the larger church to unfairly label Oneness Pentecostalism as heretics, and he makes a more compelling case than ever has been made for understanding the theology of Oneness Pentecostals in a more generous and congenial way. Oneness Pentecostals should not be treated as hated heretics but as young and still theologically immature family members.

Reed's work is less clearly directed towards Oneness Pentecostals themselves, though no doubt Reed's generous defence and restrained criticism of Oneness Pentecostals will make some within that community see that barriers to communion with trinitarian Pentecostals and the wider circle of evangelicals might be overcome. Whether the more extreme sectors of Oneness Pentecostals will be interested in such accommodation is less certain, particu-

⁵⁵ The anti-Trinitarian Worldwide Church of God was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong. After his death in 1986, the church underwent a painful decade-long reevaluation of its beliefs, rejecting many of Armstrong's teachings and even reversing its anti-Trinitarian stance. In 2009, it changed its name to Grace Communion International. <http://www.wcg.org/lit/AboutUs/history.htm> (accessed January 8, 2010).

larly when their identity is profoundly shaped by a dismissal of the remainder of Christendom—indeed, in some cases, even of fellow Oneness believers.

Reed's detailed work on Oneness Pentecostalism will stand as the definitive work on the subject for years to come. My review here hardly begins to mine the full nuances and insights of Reed's meticulous and comprehensive presentation. As an apologist, Reed is as thorough and as effective an advocate as one can find. That is not to say that every point he makes is compelling, but he is trying to save his client from the chair, and, given that reality, he can hardly be faulted for holding nothing back. As a critic, Reed is considerably more restrained, but, then, why would he not be? He believes that he is dealing with a theological orphan whose language is still mere baby-talk and whose ideas are quite understandably yet immature and largely undeveloped—an orphan who has been cast out, but an orphan with sufficient ancestry and genetic makeup to have a valid claim for membership in the family.

Whether Reed will be successful in his efforts will depend on the players on both sides. If he fails, it will not be from any shortcoming in his work.

Bibliography of David Reed's Scholarship on Oneness Pentecostalism

David Reed, "Oneness Seed on Canadian Soil: Early developments in Oneness Pentecostalism," in *Winds from the North: Canadian Contributions to the Pentecostal Move-*

ment, ed. Michael Wilkinson and Peter Althouse. Leiden/Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010.

_____. "In Jesus' Name": *The History and Beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals*. Journal of Pentecostal Studies Supplement Series 31. Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2008.

_____. "Oneness Pentecostalism: Problems and Possibilities for Pentecostal Theology," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11 (1997): 73-93.

_____. "Oneness Pentecostalism." In *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, edited by Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, 644-5. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988.

_____. "Origins and Development of the Theology of Oneness Pentecostalism in the United States" Unpublished PhD dissertation, Boston University, 1978.

_____. "Aspects of the Origins of Oneness Pentecostalism." In *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins*, edited by Vinson Synan, 143-68. Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1975.