

Pentecostals and the Doctrine of the Trinity

Pentecostals and the Doctrine of the Trinity:

Some Hermeneutical Considerations

By

Marius Nel

Foreword by Chris de Wet

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RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION

This book is meant for academics in the fields of theology, especially Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal theology, and philosophy, especially philosophical theology; for pastors teaching fellow believers; and for Christian believers faced with the challenges that the church doctrine of the Trinity may pose. The book is written against the background of a nearly universal acceptance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, accepted widely by Christians in the fourth century and explicated in the post-Constantine creeds, that states a belief in God as one Being (monotheism) and three Beings, found in the Father, Son, and Spirit. It reflects on the logical problems posed by the doctrine and highlighted by philosophy for centuries and contemporary New Atheism recently. The trinitarian doctrine has the potential to test religious faith due to the logical challenges of combining the clear monotheist stance found in the biblical view of God with the accepted doctrine that defines the one God in terms of three persons. It proposes an attempt to reconsider the doctrine from an articulated (*contra* unarticulated) Pentecostal hermeneutical perspective, proposing that God's monotheism should not be seen in terms of one God revealing the divine self to humans in different forms, which biblical authors perceived as personifications of God, in the Father, Son, and Spirit. In other words, it proposes that the church rethink the Trinity in terms of modalities instead of persons. The study is based on various resources, including qualitative research among Pentecostal theological students, a comparative literature study to ascertain the extent of historical and contemporary developments of the trinitarian doctrine and Pentecostal responses to it, exegesis of Scriptures to describe the different responses in biblical traditions to the issue, consideration of Pentecostal hermeneutics, and personal reflections about the doctrine. It aims to stimulate discourse among Pentecostal scholars, philosophers, and experts in related disciplines, along with pastors and believers. The book suggests strategies for redressing the current lack of responsible responses about the Trinity from an articulated Pentecostal hermeneutical perspective among Pentecostals. The author shares the Pentecostal theological premises that God reveals the divine self

to human beings as God did in biblical times and that it is possible to explain in human terms God's economy in personal encounters with God in the Bible and contemporary charismatic experiences. However, it is not possible to contain God's essence in clear statements because of the incomprehensibility of eternity, holiness, and glory that define the divine essence. This book roots theological research and reflection about the doctrine from a specific hermeneutical perspective. The book will stimulate ongoing transdisciplinary research among theologians and philosophers. It will also encourage pastors and believers in God to engage with the existential realities of believing in God. The research outcomes are relevant to Pentecostal theology and philosophy.

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FOREWORD

A study about the Trinity is inevitably an exploration into the depth and breadth of human social interactions. In some of the earliest Christian writings, long before a formal “doctrine” of the Trinity had been proposed, Christian authors imagined those in their perceived Godhead as being in conversation with one another. The author of Hebrews, quoting Psalm 40:6 (39:7 LXX), has Christ say to the Father:

*Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said, ‘See, I have come to do your will, O God’
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).¹*

Early Christian authors attempted to bridge the ineffability of the divine nature by imagining what the Godhead may have uttered to Itself, or among Each Other. Here, the drama of incarnation and salvation is reflected in a script of appropriate acknowledgements and annunciations, negotiated by means of transforming scripture into voice, canon into conversation. This relational enterprise became part of early Christian exegesis and hermeneutics, and the way Christians thought about God influenced how they wrestled to make sense about themselves, their bodies, souls, and spirits, the world they lived in, and the people around them. A history about the Trinity is therefore inextricably part of writing a history about human self-reflection and social relationality.

This is also the trajectory from which Marius Nel, in this book, makes his various propositions. It is not merely another study on the Trinity, but an *invitation to discourse*. While the focus is on Pentecostals and the doctrine of the Trinity, as the title suggests, the book showcases a hermeneutical dialogue between Pentecostals and various and diverse articulations of the

¹ Heb. 10:5–7; NRSV.

Godhead. The keystone in the critical study of Christianity—be it historical, theological, sociological, and so on—is an acknowledgement of its *diversity*. Robyn Faith Walsh’s innovative and provocative study on the Synoptic Gospels has recently shown that conventional approaches to these writings, arguing that the authors represent spokespersons for a specific religious community “behind” the passage, are probably less a reflection of ancient realities and more a product of nineteenth-century German Romanticism. In this paradigm, Gospel writers were reconstructed like Romantic poets speaking on behalf of their *Volk*. Walsh argues that we should view such early Christian authors rather as elite cultural producers of discourse and practice, who may have functioned in a dynamic network of literate specialists—some of whom may not even have been professing Christians.² This approach cautions us against what Willi Braun calls an “addiction” to Christian origins,³ and rather proposes that we analyze early Christian articulations of their thought, practice — and themselves — as discursive constructions that are relational yet self-reflexive.

Walsh and Braun were concerned with redescribing approaches to early Christian origins. Whilst Nel takes a similar stance towards the reception of the concept of the Trinity and its Pentecostal hermeneutical negotiations, his book challenges its readers to lend an ear to other, often suppressed, voices and to reconsider what many believed their “spokespersons” said about God and human relations. While the reader will find a rich historiographical study of the Trinity in these pages, it more prominently represents what Michel Foucault termed a “history of the present.”⁴ In this sense, Nel writes a history with contemporary questions and crises of ordinary believers in mind — especially those of Pentecostals. Upon reading this book, one is challenged to rethink how notions of personhood, gender, volition, being, and indeed, God, might be perceived. In a world of

² Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³ Willi Braun, *Jesus and Addiction to Origins: Towards an Anthropocentric Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, NAASR Working Papers (Sheffield: Equinox, 2020).

⁴ Michael S. Roth, “Foucault’s ‘History of the Present,’” *History and Theory* 20.1 (1981): 32–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504643>.

social media, where one “person” may construct several Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook accounts, where there is a constant suspicion about “fake” persons or profiles, human cultures in the Fourth Industrial Revolution have already begun to rethink what is meant by personhood, modality, and being, especially their constructed-ness.

For Pentecostal hermeneutics and theology, this book will hopefully function as a watershed in the discourse. The central question Nel asks Pentecostals—and any reader, in fact—to consider, is: should a traditional trinitarian structure always be the foundation for the way we think about God? Is this the only and the best way to conceptualize the divine? These are challenges the early Christian expositors of scripture and doctrine also faced. In fact, when Augustine started to write his monumental magisterial treatise, *De Trinitate*, he began not only by acknowledging the limits of reason and speech when speaking about the topic, but he actively opposed those who thought of God in inappropriate terms: “those who conceive of God in bodily terms, those who do so in terms of created spirit such as soul, and those who think of him neither as body nor as created spirit, but still have false ideas about him.”⁵ But how else are we able to think about God if not by relating Him to ourselves, our bodies and emotions, or the world in which we live? Augustine may have felt compelled to refute such approaches exactly because this seems to be the natural point of departure when it comes to human thought and speech about God.

In the spirit of Eastern Christian thought, Nel invites Pentecostals, here, to start at a position of silence. In the second century this debate was already in progress. Despite their differences, so-called “Gnostic” Christian groups and Ignatius of Antioch were both thinking of God in terms of silence. Ignatius writes: “There is one God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ, his Son, who is his Word, coming forth from silence, who in all things was pleasing to the one who sent him.”⁶ Ignatius may have even considered God to be Silence itself, from whence a Word, a Discourse, is

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.1.1; trans. John Rotelle, *Saint Augustine: The Trinity* (The Works of Saint Augustine 1.5; New York: New City, 1991), 150.

⁶ Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 45.

produced. The paradox, the tension, between God as Silence and God as Word is a constructive and relational tension, a creative dialectic that Nel allows us to consider and use when speaking about God.

In sum, *Pentecostals and the Doctrine of the Trinity* is stimulus for Pentecostals to, for a moment, turn their ears away from traditional spokespersons in their *Volk*, and to become creative participants in a transformational yet highly diverse dialogue about God, being, and who we, as humans, are in relation to all this. It begins from a position of silence, an acknowledgement that anything said about God will always fall short, because God is incomprehensibly ineffable. The first appropriate reaction to an awareness of the divine can only be silence. God has spoken first through His Word and, thus, there is also a divine call to us to respond and reflect. Rather than following the now common “addiction” to divine *ousia* (or substance) when speaking about God and the Trinity, it is more prudent to begin with divine and human relationality. Relationality moves us to consider God in relation to ourselves and our world. Finally, following Karl Barth’s idea of divine “modes of being” rather than conventional obsessions with “persons” and “personhood”, this book opens up numerous possibilities for rethinking our experience of God not only as a Father, but as a Mother; not only as Lord, but as Lover; as a Creator that allows itself to be recreated in the human spiritual imagination, where God inevitably meets us. In a world of Twitter and TikTok, virtual reality and artificial intelligence, robotics and quantum mechanics, where “users” (whatever their substance) are often themselves in different modes of being, such a proposition might not be so alien as it once was. From a pastoral perspective, this approach brings us to a more inclusive pastoral and systematic theology, in which we acknowledge the diversity of human experiences to divine relationality. In this way, we may enter the conversation with God and each other *as we are*, acknowledging and celebrating our differences in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, religious confession, sexual orientation, and all other points of how we substantiate (or not) our identities and relate to the divine.

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BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

I worship God in line with the paradigm established by the classical Pentecostal tradition and belong to a South African Pentecostal denomination. The most prominent reason I joined this tradition was that I experienced Spirit baptism more than five decades ago, in line with their expectations. I had the opportunity to study various theological subjects at diverse institutions, bringing those subjects in line with the Pentecostal paradigm. For the past decade, I focused on hermeneutics that attempts to explain what happens in the interpretation process of the Bible that distinguishes Pentecostal readers from others. A vital part of the academic enterprise is critically deconstructing traditional ways of thinking to gain further and other perspectives. I learned to ask questions that sometimes may appear awkward and embarrassing to others as a means to understand better.

This study also asks questions, at times provocative ones that may stir up some controversy. The questions are deliberately provocative and may be disconcerting, inviting readers to think about a subject they may have accepted as evident. In some cases, the questions are defined in terms of published results of recent Jesus research that most Pentecostals do not accept, but that requires believers to defend their traditional views. However, it does not seek to provide final answers. Its subject matter prevents it from giving final answers. Instead, it asks questions about two separate but interrelated issues. The first is concerned with God and our views as believers of Jesus. Is Jesus divine? If Jesus is divine, what is his relationship with the Father? And where does the Spirit fit into this perspective of the divine?

The second issue, related to the first, is why Jesus had to die on a cross. Was it an atonement for our sins? How is it possible that God would require one part of the divine to die to appease another part of the divine? Why did God not forgive humans their sins in the way that Jesus taught believers to forgive, like the lord of the enslaved person in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant? The lord released the enslaved person and forgave him

his debt out of pity for him. Jesus clearly intended the parable to reference the way the Father forgives (Matt 18:27). Third, and related to the prior issue, what is our relationship to God? How can our severed relationship be restored?

To answer these questions, we traditionally use the Bible. Therefore, a prominent element in the following discussion is how Pentecostals read the Bible when they formulate their God-talk (or theology).

This publication intends to propose that Pentecostal (and all other) believers should reconsider the traditional way they think about God. The Church established the “traditional” view in the fourth century CE. In the process, the Church chose between different perspectives. The Catholic Church, including both the Eastern or Greek and Western or Latin traditions, decided that a trinitarian view of one God existing in the three persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit was the best way to view God. However, the early Church differed in some of its perspectives from what the consensus of believers later decided was the orthodox way to view God.

However, the Eastern Orthodox (Greek) Church’s views of God differ from that of the Western (Latin) Church. Ultimately, they defined their views differently because the angle they used to think about God differed. Therefore, the study looks at the Eastern Church’s God-talk and considers some of their perspectives worthy of further consideration.

In attempting to provide tentative suggestions about alternative ways to view God, the study brings the different perspectives of the early and Eastern believers to the table. At the same time, we consider these perspectives, along with the church’s orthodox view, in the light of how Pentecostals read and interpret the Bible. Their hermeneutical angle differs from how Protestants, Reformed believers, and Roman Catholics interpret the Bible. Some of the Pentecostals’ hermeneutical perspectives connect, instead, with those which Eastern Orthodox believers utilize when interpreting the Bible.

We do not use insights and comments only of mainstream scholars, like Karl Barth and John Zizioulas, but also of theologians that Pentecostals usually do not read, assuming they are “liberal” in their perspectives. On the

contrary, we read them purposefully to render a comprehensive perspective of views in order to think outside the box. Pentecostals may view some of their theological views as controversial. Still, they provide a viewpoint to look more objectively at the Pentecostal paradigm with a view to rethink the Pentecostal restorationist purpose and reconnect with the early Church's views.

The final challenge in thinking about God consists of the incomprehensibility of the divine essence and the human inability to say anything more about God than what God revealed to humans. God falls outside of our frame of reference - and even outside of the universe (which could be considered our final frame of reference). How can we dare to speak confidently about who and what God is if we, the creation of the divine mind, are limited to our reality and our attempts at defining our reality by way of words and concepts that can only describe, but not contain, reality?

Readers can then consider their own views in light of the views of others. Our purpose is to assist contemporary Pentecostals in revisiting, rethinking, and reworking their perspectives about God. Perhaps it will assist you in grounding your belief in the traditional way of the fourth-century Church more tangibly and solidly. It may cause minor changes in how you view God, and may lead to a deepening of your worship of the God who revealed the divine self in Jesus and the Spirit.

For more than three decades, I was responsible for teaching the subject of Church history at the theological college of the Church to which I belong, the Auckland Park Theological Seminary in Johannesburg, South Africa. The first-year module concerned with the teachings of the early church referred to the doctrine of the Trinity. I always introduced the subject with the statement that this doctrine presents the solution of the early church to cover their embarrassment because they could not find the words to describe the divine self-revelation. Where does Jesus fit into the concept of one God? And the Spirit? To enable them to say anything, the Church invented a no-word to describe a no-go subject (Subject), because to talk about God is to stammer.

tri.unity

a face from three sides
man, god, spirit

three voices and costumes and masks
one actor

all questions
explanations
for hiding embarrassment

to say what
is not visible

because *god-talk* is, by definition, stuttering

Lastly, thanks to Prof. Chris de Wet, Associate Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Studies at the University of South Africa, for writing a generous foreword, and to Dr. Amos Yong, a Malaysian American Pentecostal theologian and dean of the School of Theology and Intercultural Studies at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, for the kind invitation to do research at the David Alan Hubbard Library at Fuller Theological Seminary for three months to complete this project. Thanks also to Ms. Hester Lombard, librarian at the Theological Library at North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, for her assistance in acquiring resources. She is the most excellent and helpful librarian I have ever met!

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHY IS THE TRINITY A CHALLENGE TO PENTECOSTALS?

Why Another Study on the Trinity?

Most Christians accept the widely held traditional trinitarian view of God as a Trinity, so how can another study on the subject be justified? First, this study focuses on Pentecostals' mostly uncritical perspective of the Trinity, implying that they actually practice faith in a trinity of Gods, rather than one God existing as a Trinity.

The study is born from observations of the liturgical practices, prayers, and testimonies of classical Pentecostals that amount to their worship of three Persons in the Divinity. Some of their songs and prayers they direct to the different Persons in the Trinity. They distinguish between them in such a distinct way that it becomes clear that they clearly differentiate between the Persons.

This study intends to serve as a kind of devil's advocate, attempting to ask questions related to such practices. It does not try to break down believers' faith in God, but rather to show the implications of a skewed perspective on the Trinity that leads to tritheism and nullifies the Bible's explicit monotheism. When one listens to believers talking about and with God, one gets the idea that their distinction between the three Persons can be attributed to their serving of three different Gods. In the light of the primary confession in the Bible about God that emphasizes the unity of the God who revealed the divine self to Israel and in the incarnation of Christ, such believers should reconsider their God-talk.

The early church was not unanimous in its view of the identity of Jesus, the man that represented the self-revelation of Israel's God to some disciples.⁷ This diversity of perspectives ranged from the early majority view among Jewish Christians that the emphasis on monotheism implies that Jesus was standing in a unique relationship with God in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. But he was not identical to God. Most of them probably accepted the God who revealed the divine self in Jesus, affirming that he was the expected Messiah. However, their expectations of what the Messiah should be initially did not live up to what Jesus was demonstrating with his ministry, message, and death. As Jews, they kept on distinguishing the Messiah from the Highest God.

Christians from other nations than the Jews evaluated Jesus based on their own religious and philosophical concepts. Some of them accepted that Jesus was like God or that Jesus uniquely represented God. However, it was difficult to explain how Jesus could have acquired salvation through the cross by atoning for human sinfulness; some Christians saw such reconciliation as an implication of Jesus' death. For that reason, they explained Jesus in terms that identified him with God.

Most Christians accept the traditional trinitarian view. However, it requires that they realize that the early church only defined this as the majority view in the fourth century CE due to the consultations called by Emperor Constantine to address the differences of opinion about Jesus' identity. Today, for the first time, it has become possible to begin to understand the differences of opinion that characterized the first three centuries of the Church's existence. This is due to discovering more documents that represent these views, especially in the Nag Hammadi library, because the

⁷ Researchers at the Westar Institute argue that the term "disciple" is an ecclesiastical translation of the Greek word. As a result, the term has associations that places it out of the ordinary. The early disciples thought of Jesus as their teacher and they identified themselves as "students." Instead, the Institute suggests that the primary translation for the Greek term is "student." In contemporary use, "disciple" does not necessarily imply "student" but instead someone following a master. For that reason, the researchers choose to use "student" (Erin Vearncombe, Brandon Scott and Hal Taussig, *After Jesus Before Christianity: A Historical Exploration of the First Two Centuries of Jesus Movements*, The Westar Christianity Seminar [New York: HarperCollins, 2021], 36).

fourth-century church successfully and effectively silenced any alternative views by persecuting their adherents and destroying their documents.

These historical developments imply that the Church should at least note and reconsider these alternatives. We should also question what they suggest for the uncritical and unqualified acceptance of the traditional view.

This study attempts to present these alternatives as far as is possible, followed by a description of an articulated Pentecostal hermeneutic as a means to revisit and reconsider the traditional view. Finally, the hermeneutic is applied to this task in the last two chapters, which discuss the various alternative perspectives that can supplement the way Pentecostals view God.

Steven Studebaker asserts that many Pentecostals are confessional but not functional trinitarians, implying the uncritical way they think (or do not think!) about the trinitarian grounding of their God-talk.⁸ They profess belief in the Trinity, but this is of little further consequence. It implies that Pentecostal scholars adopted the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed's primary content without considering their hermeneutical emphasis on Christocentrism, based on their pneumatology. They had not contributed in any essential way to trinitarian theology until the work of Amos Yong, Frank Macchia, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Kilian McDonnell, and Steven M. Studebaker.⁹

While most Christian believers accept that the God who revealed the divine self to human beings exists in a trinitarian way, they do so mostly without realizing or considering the analytical challenges this assertion implies. This book rethinks the trinitarian doctrine in an articulated, Pentecostal, hermeneutical way. Given the improbability of defining biblical monotheism in terms of a Trinity of persons, it asks whether Pentecostals should consider not thinking about God as three "persons."

⁸ Steven M. Studebaker, "Trinitarian Theology: The Spirit and the Fellowship of the Triune God," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*, edited by Wolfgang Vondey, Routledge Handbooks in Theology (Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 185-194 (185).

⁹ Studebaker, "Trinitarian Theology," 185.

In other words, the research aims to revisit and rethink the original and traditional doctrine of the Trinity, developed in the Church in different shapes through the centuries. The purpose is not to undermine believers' assertion that God exists as a Trinity of persons, but to challenge them to consider and question the statement from various perspectives, including theological, philosophical, and sociological views. These questions are then brought into relation with the Pentecostal hermeneutical process of interpreting the Bible.

Therefore, the doctrine is visited in chapter 2 in terms of a short discussion of biblical authors' views of God's economy and essence and discusses various aspects referring to God found in the Old and New Testaments. Only then can the opinions of the Church be briefly reviewed to sketch an idea of the diversity of Jewish and Christian responses to God-talk that developed through the ages (chapter 3).

Next, chapter 4 asks whether classical Pentecostalism demonstrates a distinctive way of reading the Bible when compared to other traditions. It will become clear that they do not share a common hermeneutical perspective for historical and doctrinal reasons. In broad terms, it is possible (and necessary) to distinguish between an unarticulated hermeneutic, followed by the majority of Pentecostals, and an articulated hermeneutic, developed in scholarly circles. The next two chapters (5-6) investigate and describe alternative methods of God-talk. However, these attempts at God-talk are qualified as limited and temporary because the subject matter is indefinable and uncontainable in terms of human words.

Reasons for Another Study

The two main reasons for the present study are centered around philosophical and pastoral concerns.

First, both academic and popular philosophy have been asking important questions about the logical consistency of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, influencing how contemporary Western people view the Church and its task in the world. The traditional trinitarian doctrine confronts one

with logical challenges, forcing thinking people to face its ostensible inconsistencies.

To think logically implies that one accepts that there are certain premises, foundational ideas, or assumptions that have inevitable consequences if they are true. For example, how rational and logical is the doctrine of the Trinity that states that one can be equated to three when it concerns the Divinity? Augustine's classic formulation in his dissertation about the Trinity states that "...the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; the Father is good, the Son is good, the Holy Spirit is good; and the Father is omnipotent, the Son is omnipotent, and the Holy Spirit is omnipotent; but yet there are not three gods, not three goods, not three omnipotents, but one God, one good, and one omnipotent, the Trinity itself."¹⁰ Logically, how can one be three? In contrast, Judaism and Islam have considered the idea of three persons within one Divinity repulsive and illogical; hence, they reject Christian claims of trinitarianism.¹¹

Logical Challenges of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Many thinking persons find the traditional doctrine a mathematical absurdity. It is impossible to state that one can be three and three can be one in logical terms. One such argument is found in David Bernard's book. He argues that a triadic account that identifies the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as holding all the properties of God implies that the Father, $F^{(Pl...N)}$, the Son, $J^{(Pl...N)}$, and the Holy Spirit, $S^{(Pl...N)}$, hold a common set of properties. It identifies each as God. Algebra, or Leibniz, dictates that if F , J , and S have a common set of properties, by the law of the identity of the indiscernible $[(x)(y)[(y=x) \supset (D)(Dx=Dy)]$, it follows that F , J , and S are identical and simply the same.¹² However, since the Father, Son, and Spirit share a common set of God properties, and yet each holds a collection of

¹⁰ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 8: Preface, 4. In the translation of Stephen McKenna, *Augustine: On the Trinity*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, edited by Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹¹ M. John Farrelly, *The Trinity: Rediscovering the Central Christian Mystery* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 2.

¹² David Bernard, *The Oneness of God*. Series in Pentecostal Theology, vol. 1 (Hazelwood, MI: Word Aflame, 1983).

properties distinct from the other, the analytical challenges increase. Now $F^{((Pl...N)+Xl...N)}$ & $J^{((Pl...N)+Yl...N)}$ & $S^{((Pl...N)+Zl...N)}$ implies that F, J, and S hold all the divine properties, but each one also holds some properties possessed by none other. The Father is God, the Son is God, and Spirit is God; there are not three Gods, but only one God!

To explain that in grammatical terms is to assert that the “one” in Deuteronomy 6:4 and the “one” in John 10:30 are not identical in terms of identity - that is, they are not the same. Instead, the same word is used for the “one-ness” in Genesis 2:24, stating that Adam and Eve shared “one” flesh. However, Adam and Eve are not identical; at the same time, their closeness is so perfect that the passage describes them as sharing one flesh. According to David Myer, in the same way Adam and Eve were two different persons but shared one flesh, God consists of three persons but is one God.¹³

It is clear why the philosopher Richard Cartwright concluded that the doctrine of the Trinity is inconsistent, incomprehensible, and contradictory, leaving only modalism and tritheism as potential solutions.¹⁴ The logic of the identity of indiscernibles explains that modalism requires that there be exactly and only one God. In contrast, tritheism requires an indefinite article before each person designated as “God,” concluding that there are three Gods.

¹³ David O. Myer, “Teaching the Trinity,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 3-4 (July/October 2003), 288-94 (89).

¹⁴ Richard Cartwright, “Philosophical Essays, 17,” available at <http://www.kmgsleymc.com/Clark/lists/Eyrmg/Notes/Trinity.html>; accessed 2021-01-20. Cartwright states that “The Father is God,” “The Son is God,” and “The Spirit is...God.” At the same time, he explains that “The Father is not the Son,” “The Father is not the Holy Spirit,” and “The Son is not the Father.” How can there then be one God? At the same time, he states that the Father is neither made, nor created, nor begotten; the Son is from the Father alone, neither made nor created, but begotten; and the Holy Spirit comes from the Father and the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding. He also adds what the Father is, such is the Son and such the Holy Spirit.

That seems to be why *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* answers the question, “how does one preach the Trinity?” with, “one does not preach it at all!”¹⁵ It accords with the sentiments and practice of many present-day Christian believers for whom trinitarianism poses no challenge. They simply ignore it, and it has little or no effect on their religious lives or beliefs. They do not try to defend the doctrine intellectually because of its incoherence or incomprehensibility. At the same time, they do not actively disbelieve it; they simply ignore it.¹⁶

Necessity of the Son’s suffering and death to appease the Father’s wrath

Another question challenged my rational abilities for many years. Why did God send someone (a “person” presupposes that it is “someone”) who, as an inherent part of the divine self, needed to appease divine wrath about the occurrence of human sin by sacrificing the life of that innocent person, who is God? How can God pay the price for sins required by the Divinity by offering the divine self, represented in the Son of God? Do you see the logical challenge this holds?

Frank Macchia attempts to explain the logic of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity in this way. He says only God can save. The Father saves; the Son, Jesus Christ, saves; and the Holy Spirit saves. He concludes: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God.¹⁷ Few believers would refuse to accept that God (alone) can save human beings from the effects of their decision to lead a sinful life, which separates them from God. They would also agree that the Son saves. However, is it logical to assert that “Father” and “Son”

¹⁵ Thomas Carson, “Trinity,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, edited by Thomas Carson, 2nd ed., 299-300 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research Inc., 2002). See also discussion in David P. Meyer, “Teaching the Trinity.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (2003), 288-94.

¹⁶ Farrelly, *The Trinity*, 2.

¹⁷ Frank D. Macchia, *The Trinity, Practically Speaking* (Westmont, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 5.

refer to human language that describes them as “persons” while these terms are utilized to refer to a mystery contained in the Divinity?¹⁸

Pastoral Concerns

Pentecostals exposed to a scientific way of thinking based on logical principles experience difficulties reconciling some of their beliefs with what they understand of reality and the logical consistency required of thought about facts, forming the second reason for the study. Many Pentecostals get confused when confronted with such an analysis of the logical consistency of the conventional doctrinal view. For example, how can one reconcile faith in divine self-revelation with, on the one hand, the biblical revelation of divine monotheism and, on the other hand, clear, logical rules about analytical thinking when attempting to understand the Trinity of three “Persons”?

Prevalence of Conventional Trinitarian Views Among Classical Pentecostals

How many classical Pentecostals hold the traditional trinitarian view? Research completed by others shows that most of them subscribe to this view. Through insightful empirical research done in Birmingham, England from 2003 to 2005, Mark J. Cartledge attempts to categorize different theological models of the principle and tested adherence to these models among respondents of several theological institutions in the United Kingdom.¹⁹ He intentionally focused his research on students informed about the doctrine of the Trinity at the graduate level. The study represented 16.2 percent of such students. They represented four primary theological contexts for theological training for the ministry, including the ecumenicity

¹⁸ The “Spirit” is left out for the moment because the biblical term “spirit” refers to various phenomena, among which the wind, breath, the life force, or living essence in human beings, and the life force contained in God. In time, it will be argued that the name God revealed to Israel as the divine designation, YHWH, refers to God as the life force *per se*.

¹⁹ Mark J. Cartledge, “Empirical-Theological Models of the Trinity: Exploring the Beliefs of Theology Students in the United Kingdom,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 19, no. 2 (2006), 137-162.

of the Church of England, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and United Reformed churches; the Evangelical interdenominational and denominational context; the Pentecostal context; and two denominational colleges training ministers. Of the sample, 60.2 percent were men, and 39.8 percent were women.

Cartledge did empirical work among core members (house group members) of Pentecostal and charismatic Churches, as well as mainline Free Churches classified as charismatic in other research.²⁰ The results of the two studies are, in broad terms, the same. Of participating respondents, 37.9 percent were male, and 61.0 percent were female. The results provide interesting data. The majority of the respondents preferred to think about God in terms of three persons (62.2 percent) rather than one being (27.3 percent) and the persons of the Godhead as equal (87.5 percent) as opposed to unequal (3.5 percent). They viewed the Divinity as a community (53.1 percent) as opposed to a hierarchy (20.4 percent), as different (61.8 percent) as opposed to identical (18.0 percent), and as eternal (83.9 percent) as opposed to historical (0.8 percent). In addressing the Divinity in worship, prayer, adoration, thanks, and fellowship, the majority preferred to call on the Father in worship (39.5 percent), prayer (50.6 percent), and thanks (43.4 percent). They addressed Jesus Christ in worship (32.9 percent), prayer (25.9 percent), and gratitude (30.0 percent). They mostly ignored the Spirit as the one addressed in worship (0.9 percent), prayer (1.1 percent), and thanks (0.9 percent). In adoration, however, the picture changed dramatically; they preferred adoring Jesus (40.8 percent) as opposed to the Father (30.3 percent) and the Spirit (1.6 percent). Similarly, they preferred having fellowship with Jesus Christ (33.2 percent), to having it with the Father (23.5 percent), and the Spirit (15.5 percent).²¹

Cartledge concludes, among other things, that most Pentecostals subscribe to the traditional view of the Trinity, a belief with which he agrees. He also finds in his empirical research that it is possible to identify five empirical-theological models of the Trinity. Only one represents an Orthodox-

²⁰ Mark J. Cartledge, "Trinitarian Theology and Spirituality: An Empirical Study of Charismatic Christians," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 17, no.1 (2004), 76-84.

²¹ Cartledge, "Trinitarian Theology and Spirituality," 81.

exclusivist stance and deserves to be called a proper Trinitarian model, although the Pneumatic-social model comes very close. At the same time, the Orthodox-exclusivist model is the dominant model throughout the sample, with a Modalist model following it and the Subordinationist and Transgender model in the third position. Students from Pentecostal and Evangelical educational contexts tended to prefer the dominant model, while students from the ecumenical context liked the Transgender model. Finally, the Adventist theological context picked the Modalist model *par excellence*.²²

Another case study: Trinitarian theory and some South African Pentecostal students

To find out how the trinitarian theory functions among Pentecostal theological students, I completed a quantitative case study in April 2022. It consisted of a short questionnaire addressed to 68 Pentecostal students registered in graduate (BTh and BTh Hons) studies at North-West University in South Africa at its three campuses: the Vaaldriehoek, Potchefstroom, and Mafikeng. Fifty-four of the students responded to the questionnaire (79 percent). Twenty-one (31 percent) students are not South African citizens, but come from different Southern African countries.

The four questions addressed to the students were: firstly, how do you think about God as a Trinity? What does it mean? Next, what do you think the Old Testament teaches about God as a Trinity? And thirdly, what does the New Testament teach? Lastly, what do you think it implies to state that God consists of three persons? As a rule, the students' responses were informed and well formulated.

To the first question, most students responded that God as a Trinity implies that God is one while simultaneously consisting of three persons. One of the students provided an example: the supremacy of heavenly rule functions the same way as the monarchy in the United Kingdom, which consists of one unit and several preeminent rulers. It is not clear what the student meant by such rulers. Some respondents explained the Trinity in different ways. One

²² Cartledge, "Empirical-Theological Models of the Trinity," 157.