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TRACKING THE GOD CHASER:

An Examination of the Teachings of Tommy Tenney

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SYNOPSIS

Since the splitting of a church pulpit at Christian Tabernacle in Houston, Texas, in 1996, and the release of his best-selling book, *The God Chasers*, in 1998, Tommy Tenney has been in great demand as a speaker at church conferences and on television shows, such as TBN's *Praise the Lord*. The theme of most of his books and messages deals with developing a closer relationship with God, something that all of us should strive to do.

Tenney's beliefs and teachings, however, have a number of serious problems. To date he has refused to affirm publicly the vital biblical doctrine of the Trinity. He repeatedly denigrates Scripture and Christian doctrine, despite giving lip service to the necessity of both, and he elevates extrabiblical revelation and personal experience to a level equal to or higher than Scripture. He contends that people will be converted to Christ without ever hearing the gospel when God's power invades the church. Tenney poorly exegetes many scriptural passages, gives a pantheistic definition of God, has issued prophetic words without scriptural basis. The challenge is for Christians to put Mr. Tenney's teachings to the test by comparing them with Scripture.

My pastor friend [Richard Heard] stepped up to the clear pulpit in the center of the platform, opened the Bible, and quietly read the gripping passage from Second Chronicles 7:14... Then he closed his Bible, gripped the edges of the pulpit with trembling hands, and said, "The word of the Lord to us is to stop seeking His benefits and seek Him. We are not to seek His hands any longer, but seek His face."

In that instant, I heard what sounded like a thunderclap echo through the building, and the pastor was literally picked up and thrown backward about ten feet, effectively separating him from the pulpit. When he went backward, the pulpit fell forward. The beautiful flower arrangement positioned in front of it fell to the ground, but by the time the pulpit hit the ground, it was already in two pieces. It had split into two pieces almost as if lightning had hit it! At that instant the tangible terror of the presence of God filled that room (emphasis in original).¹

With that event on 20 October 1996, Tommy Tenney, who was guest speaker at Richard Heard's Christian Tabernacle in Houston, Texas, sprang into the Christian limelight and hasn't looked back. Since the debut of his million-selling book *The God Chasers* in 1998, he has written or cowritten over 20 books and has been a frequent guest on the Trinity Broadcasting Network's (TBN) flagship program, *Praise the Lord*.² He receives 500 invitations a month to speak and has had to hire 15 assistants since *The God Chasers* was published.³

Tenney has many valuable things to say. With respect to serving others, he writes, "You may never raise someone from the dead, but you can comfort the sick. You may never be able to open blind eyes, but you can change the oil in a single mother's car or prepare a meal for your ill neighbor. You may not be called to preach on the street corner or declare God's Word before thousands, but you could teach a class of three-year-olds that Jesus loves them."⁴ Concerning our Christian witness, he writes, "We spend entire lifetimes sitting in pews but leave the four walls of our churches and make no impact on our world whatsoever."⁵ Also apparent throughout his writings is that he is a family man devoted to his wife and three children, a virtue that is increasingly hard to find these days.

Despite several biblically sound and honorable aspects of Tenney's ministry, a number of serious problems plague his teachings and need to be addressed.

During the process of writing this article, I contacted Tenney through Jerry Parsons, Director of Ministry Development, and I asked if Tenney would be willing to answer some questions about his beliefs and teachings.⁶ Tenney agreed to view a list of e-mailed questions and decide whether to respond.⁷ Ten questions were then submitted to him.⁸ Five weeks later Parsons indicated that Tenney would decline the opportunity to reply.⁹ This is unfortunate, given the fact that Mr. Tenney wrote an entire book calling for greater unity within the body of Christ.¹⁰ Unity without discussion is very difficult.

TENNEY'S BACKGROUND

Tommy Tenney was raised under the teachings of a congregation of the United Pentecostal Church (UPC) in West Monroe, Louisiana.¹¹ He is the son of T. F. Tenney, who is currently a UPC District Superintendent in Louisiana, overseeing 300 churches. Tenney's wife, Jeannie, is the daughter of G. E. Switzer, pastor of Apostolic Church (UPC) in Belleville, Illinois.¹² Tenney began to preach at the age of 16, pastored for nearly 10 years, and has been an itinerant minister for nearly 20 years, traveling to over 40 nations thus far.¹³

This aspect of Tenney's background is especially relevant because the UPC explicitly denies the doctrine of the Trinity,¹⁴ an essential teaching of the Bible and the historic Christian faith. Contrary to Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19, official UPC doctrine also teaches that converts must be baptized only in Jesus' name and not in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, to baptize with any other formula is another gospel to them.¹⁵

Tenney left the UPC when "he realized that he 'couldn't enforce some of the views' of the UPC — including rules that to this day forbid pastors in the group from owning televisions."¹⁶ While we rejoice that Tenney has left the UPC, it is unclear as to whether he left for entirely the right reasons. Nowhere does he state that vital doctrinal issues such as the Trinity and salvation by grace through faith alone¹⁷ were factors.

TENNEY AND THE TRINITY

Failing to find a doctrinal statement on Tenney's Web site, I sent them an e-mail requesting a statement of faith.¹⁸ Rather than forwarding one, Tenney's daughter, Tiffany, suggested I read his book *God's Dream Team*.¹⁹ In this book he writes, "Christians share a common body of beliefs, such as salvation by faith in Christ, the divine inspiration and authority of Scriptures, the deity of Jesus Christ and the triune oneness of God."²⁰

While initially it may appear that Tenney embraces the Trinity, he never explains what he means by "triune oneness," a term that is vague and open to various interpretations. For example, one New Age Web site writes, "Within our center of self-conscious awareness, or cosca, the First, Second and Third Principles of Consciousness, called Father, Son and Holy Ghost, co-exist in Triune Oneness."²¹ Religious Science founder Ernest Holmes wrote, "The Universe is threefold in Its nature. It is Spirit, Soul and Body.... The Spirit impregnates the Soul with Its Ideas, and the Soul gives form to these Ideas and clothes them with flesh. But this is the Trinity of Unity, a Triune Oneness; for the Three are really one."²² Although I am not suggesting that Tenney is a New Age or Religious Science practitioner, only a careful explanation from him can determine the precise meaning he intends with the term "triune oneness," especially given his extensive background in an anti-Trinitarian denomination and conspicuous lack of clear commentary on the doctrine of the Trinity in his more than 20 published books. In light of this situation, it is most regrettable that one of the questions Tenney declined to answer was whether he would affirm the definition of the Trinity as expressed in the Athanasian Creed.²³

He does write, however, "Theologians struggle vainly to draw a line between Sonship and Fatherhood. We are unable to describe the oneness of Father and Son or the unity of the Trinity because these things are beyond our comprehension."²⁴ Historical biblical Christianity not only *can* but always *has* drawn a line between the Son and the Father. For example, it was the Son who died on the cross, not the Father. On the other hand, for someone holding to a Oneness view of the Godhead in which the Father and Son aren't distinct Persons simultaneously, drawing such a line poses a problem. Moreover, consideration of other factors in Tenney's teachings may help us better understand his thinking on the Trinity.

In his call for unity in the church, he writes, "Unity is achieved through tolerance.... The apostle Paul taught tolerance for the sake of the gospel in the area of personal opinion. He did not, however, encourage us to compromise doctrine or biblical standards for the sake of agreement."²⁵ To this well-taken point he adds, "Too often

we cling to our own personal opinions and close-minded interpretations, to the detriment and destruction of unity in the Body.”²⁶ Tenney apparently holds, therefore, that there are some doctrines we must believe, but another question he declined to answer in my e-mail to him was whether he considered the Trinity an essential doctrine. Nowhere in his writings does he say it is. His continued elusiveness when it comes to this topic suggests that this doctrine is one he would relegate to the category of personal opinion.

Tenney seems to feel little need to defend *any* essential doctrine. He writes, “God does not need people to fight for Him; He needs people who will be servants. The principles of His kingdom will fight for themselves.”²⁷ He affirms, “God is fully God, whether we all describe and worship Him in the same way or not. He is well able to correct error, reprove wrongs, redirect misdirected emphases and reform errant theology.”²⁸ The inspired authors of Scripture do not agree with Tenney. Jude states, “I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). Furthermore, Paul urged, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). Nowhere does Scripture teach that we are to sit back and let God, independent of human agents, take care of error in the church.

Given Tenney’s anti-Trinitarian background, his lack of any clear affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity even when directly questioned, and his disregard for the central role of this essential doctrine, there exists sound warrant for regarding him as a non-Trinitarian until he clearly explains otherwise. The same concern has previously been raised with T. D. Jakes.²⁹ We may well be dealing with a new generation of Oneness Pentecostals who seek to expand their influence into orthodox circles by affirming the “Trinity” (unlike previous generations) while nonetheless refusing to be specific about what the term means to them.

SCRIPTURE AND FRESH REVELATION

Although Tenney’s views on the Godhead may not surprise some, his denigration of Scripture and doctrine is still shocking. He writes:

Truth is where God’s been. Revelation is where God is....Unfortunately, the Church today spends countless hours and much energy debating where God has been...[God chasers] want to run hard and hot on this trail of truth until they arrive at the point of revelation, where He presently exists....God chasers don’t want to just study from the moldy pages of what God has done; they’re anxious to see what God is doing. There is a vast difference between present truth and past truth (emphases in original).³⁰

This isn’t an isolated quote. Tenney also states, “We’ve tried to cram doctrine down people’s throats...but people don’t want doctrine, they don’t want tracts...they just want Him!”³¹ Apart from the teaching of Scripture, however, people can’t *have* Him, because the Holy Spirit works through Scripture to reveal Himself to us (2 Tim. 3:14–17). Additionally, the Bible does not tell us to give people whatever they want. Humankind, in its fallen state, doesn’t know what is best (Rom. 3:10–18). Regarding the importance of doctrine, Martin Luther wrote:

The great difference between doctrine and life is obvious, even as is the difference between heaven and earth. Life may be unclean, sinful, and inconsistent; but doctrine must be pure, holy, sound, and unchanging. Life may show omissions and come short of what doctrine calls for. But from doctrine (says Christ, Matt. 5:18) not a tittle or letter may be omitted, however much life may fail to meet the requirements of doctrine. This is so because doctrine is God’s Word and God’s truth alone, whereas life is partly our own doing. On this account doctrine must remain entirely pure. God will have patience with man’s moral failings and imperfections and forgive them. But He cannot, will not, and shall not tolerate a man’s altering or abolishing doctrine itself. For doctrine involves His exalted, divine Majesty itself. In the sphere of doctrine, therefore, forgiveness and patience are out of order.³²

In sharp contrast, Tenney writes:

We make a great deal out of reading the Word and that is important. But we need to remember that the early Church didn’t have access to what we call the New Testament for many years. They didn’t even have the Old Testament Scriptures because those expensive scrolls were locked up in synagogues....So what did they have? They walked and talked with Him in such a rich level of intimacy that it wasn’t necessary for them to pour over dusty love letters that were written long ago (emphases in original).³³

In an endnote, Tenney says he didn't mean to imply that the Bible is unnecessary or irrelevant, but his repeated denigration of Scripture is irresponsible at best and sends a clear signal to the reader that personal, subjective experience takes precedence over objective Scripture.

Tenney further declares, "Religious spirits must preserve where He's been at the expense of where He is! But a man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with only an argument."³⁴ Cults such as Mormonism have adopted the same philosophy and this has led them into a great deal of error. Rather than relegating our intellect to second place, Christ urges His followers, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Indeed, all personal, subjective experience must be tested by Scripture and not the reverse (1 Thess. 5:21).

In defending the necessity of fresh revelation, Tenney writes, "Saul was faithfully following the old dusty footprints of the law that had turned to legalism. That empty legalism without revelation caused Saul to persecute the Christians who were following fresh new tracks of revelation....Honestly, if you ever have a real visitation of the manifest presence of God in your church, it will probably mess up your theology...."³⁵

If an experience will "mess up" what God's Word clearly teaches, we can be certain it is not from God! Because the early church was aware that heresy was quickly creeping in, it formulated creeds to combat false doctrines. Correct doctrine was considered so important that Christians would die rather than let heresy enter the church. It appears that Tenney, on the other hand, would have experience and new revelation take precedence over Scripture and sound doctrine.

Tenney writes:

*We all need to read and study God's Word daily, but we don't need to worship past revelation to the exclusion of all new revelation. Luther had a wonderful revelation of God's grace and he shared this 'footprint of God' with the world. Once the truth of 'salvation by faith' was laid down as a doctrine, men felt compelled to build a camp or shrine around that truth as if that was all there was and ever would be. I believe that God is constantly giving us new revelations of His Person.*³⁶

What Martin Luther proclaimed was not a "new revelation," but an essential doctrine that always was present in Scripture. Luther woke the church up to the fact that it had strayed from that doctrine. If Christians have built a "camp" around that truth, they have done well because their salvation depends on it! Tenney's "new revelation" suggests that Scripture is insufficient, and he opens wide the door to false teachings.

DISCERNING TRUTH FROM ERROR

"If we can just turn on the light of His glory," says Tenney, "then suddenly everyone will see and know the difference between truth and error. Most people will choose truth when given the opportunity; it is just that *they have never have [sic] had enough light around them to see the way*" (emphasis in original).³⁷

This statement contradicts God's Word on several counts. First, Scripture is our means of separating truth from error. Paul declared, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Second, it flies in the face of the inherent sinfulness of humankind. The prophet Jeremiah made it clear that "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9). Fallen men and women will not choose truth on their own (John 6:44). Third, Paul taught, "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). Here, contrary to Tenney, Paul shows that although they are without excuse, sinful people tend to ignore God's revelation in nature.

SALVATION WITHOUT THE GOSPEL

Tenney said after the pulpit split at Christian Tabernacle, the church immediately began to have altar calls. He wrote that the saved "joined with the parade of the unsaved, who were now saved, provoked purely by encountering the presence of God. There was no sermon and no real song..."³⁸ — and no gospel message! If people are saved *apart* from the Word of God, one has to wonder both *from* what and *to* what they are being saved. The lost need to hear both the Law and the gospel — the Law to make people aware of the fact that they are sinners unable to save themselves and the gospel to present the good news that Christ has redeemed them. None of that seems to be a factor in the revival Tenney is touting.

Tenney believes if we can bring God down from heaven, His very presence will cause people to repent. He states, "If somehow we can recreate the throne zone...as it is in Heaven in our churches and meetings, if our worship becomes so compelling that the manifest presence of God begins to put itself on display in our midst, then we will see the glory of God begin to flow through our cities. When this happens, the lost will come to Christ on a massive scale that we have never seen before."³⁹ Tenney informs us that God "wants to come ever stronger...until your flesh won't be able to stand it. The beauty of it is this: neither will the unsaved driving by be able to resist" (emphases in original).⁴⁰

The apostle Paul once asked, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:14, 17). If Scripture knows of no other way to be saved, what makes Tenney think *he* does?

OTHER PROBLEMATIC TEACHINGS

Tenney has made numerous other problematic statements in his books and tapes that bear examination. What follows are just a few of them.

A Pantheistic God. In *The God Chasers*, Tenney gives a pantheistic definition of God, writing that God

*is that "particle" in the atomic nucleus that nuclear physicists cannot see and can only track....God is everywhere in everything. He is the composite of everything, both the glue that holds the pieces of the universe together and the pieces themselves! This explains why people can sit on a barstool in an inebriated state and suddenly feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit without the benefit of a preacher, gospel music, or any other Christian influence. God is literally right there in the bar with them....*⁴¹

It is true that "in Him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17), but it is unscriptural to say God is a "composite of everything" or that He comprises the "pieces themselves." As John Ankerberg and John Weldon write, "God did not emanate something of Himself in the process of creation so that everything in creation is a part of God....He spoke and it came to be."⁴²

Hearing God's Voice. Also of great concern are the "prophetic" words Tenney has received. This is illustrated in a revelation he had in Los Angeles. During a severe El Niño-related thunderstorm, God supposedly told Tenney, "Just as they are unprepared for the rain in the natural, so are they unprepared for My rain in the Spirit. And I will come upon them suddenly." Tenney then heard the meteorologist say, "This is not the last storm. Actually, *they are stacking up* out in the Pacific *like waves*, one against another." This "struck a prophetic nerve" in Tenney: "El Niño in Spanish means 'the babe' and is used to refer to the babe of Bethlehem! That weatherman didn't realize that he was prophesying, but he was talking about the 'Christ child,' the Source of all the waves of glory about to sweep over this planet" (emphases in original).⁴³ With such interpretations of natural events, totally unsupported by Scripture, one may prophesy anything without fear of being wrong.

Joseph's Rejection of Jesus. In an audiotepe entitled *Dealing with Rejection*,⁴⁴ Tenney draws some rather shocking and unwarranted conclusions about Joseph, Jesus' earthly father. He states, "Joseph took Jesus in as quote 'his son,' his supposed son. But I personally believe that Joseph began to have a problem with Jesus. That as he was raising Jesus, first of all, he had no honeymoon with his betrothed bride for at least a year....How would that make Joseph feel?" According to Tenney, after James was born, Jesus is "left out." That is why Joseph left Jesus at the temple when He was 12! Tenney suggests that Jesus' siblings and neighbors didn't believe He was the Messiah because Joseph would squelch all attempts to discuss it. Whenever Mary would speak up, "Joseph would snarl and look at her and say 'Shut up, Mary! They won't understand it anyway. I never did understand it.'" That may be why, according to Tenney, Joseph is never heard from again after the temple experience. Of course, this dishonoring view of Joseph has absolutely no support from Scripture.

TEACHING: AN AWESOME RESPONSIBILITY

Tommy Tenney's intentions may be good, but the profession of pastor or teacher carries with it enormous responsibility. James wrote, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). What a teacher communicates can have an immense impact on the lives of many Christians; therefore, the responsibility of communicating accurate doctrine is equally immense.

Many of Tenney's teachings have great potential for harm because of his denigration of Scripture, lack of concern for defending the faith, emphasis on new revelation and experience, and poor exegesis of biblical passages. By elevating experience and "chasing" after God through ongoing new revelations, Tenney exhibits a dissatisfaction with the very Word of God.

Of course, responsibility for Tenney's impact doesn't rest solely on his shoulders. Christians have a duty to follow the Bereans in Acts 17:11 and compare all teachings with Scripture. Those who criticize some of today's teachings are often accused of putting God in a box. In a sense, they are correct. All teaching must conform to what we know about God as contained in His Word. To go outside of that box is to invite false teachings into the church.

An article in the *Washington Times* last summer told of how a paradigm shift is occurring with many churches deemphasizing formal theological training for their pastors in favor of "on-the-job training."⁴⁵ The article reports that churches are asking what people want, with the answer being, "People want experience....So worship is everything." If that is the coming trend in Christianity, it is imperative that Christians test everything they hear from the pulpit and see in their favorite Christian bookstore. Failing to do so, the Christian church may well find itself in a new Dark Ages.

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Notes

1. Tommy Tenney, *The God Chasers* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1998), 7.
2. GodChasers Network, 15 August 2001 (<http://www.godchasers.net>).
3. J. Lee Grady, "Who Is This God Chaser?" *Charisma*, March 2000, 55.
4. Tommy Tenney, *God's Secret to Greatness* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2000), 21.
5. Tommy Tenney, *The God Catchers* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 63.
6. E-mail to Tommy Tenney, 10 April 2001.
7. E-mail from Jerry Parsons, 4 June 2001.
8. E-mail to Jerry Parsons, 15 June 2001.
9. E-mail from Jerry Parsons, 25 July 2001.
10. Tommy Tenney, *God's Dream Team: A Call to Unity* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1999).
11. Tommy Tenney, *God's Favorite House* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1999), 1.
12. God Chasers Web site Staff Bios, <http://www.godchasers.net/bio.html>. Switzer's Web site, <http://www.apostolicchurch.net/home.html>.
13. Tommy Tenney, *How to Be a God Chaser and a Kid Chaser* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2001), 14, and God Chasers Web site at <http://www.godchasers.net/bio.html>.
14. The Trinity is defined as three coequal, coeternal, and coexistent Persons — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — subsisting within the nature of the one true God. The UPC holds to a form of an ancient heresy known as Sebellianism or Modalistic Monarchianism, which denies the eternal distinctions among the three Persons of the Godhead. (See the UPC official Web site at http://www.upci.org/doctrine/60_questions.asp). For a helpful article on the importance of the Trinity, see James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal* 21, 4: 20.
15. See UPC Web site at <http://www.upci.org/doctrine/baptism.asp>.
16. *Charisma*, March 2000, 55.
17. UPC also teaches that baptism in Jesus' name alone and speaking in tongues are indispensable to salvation.
18. E-mail to Tiffany Tenney, 8 February 2001.
19. E-mail dated 8 February 2001.
20. Tenney, *God's Dream Team*, 18.
21. "The Natural Phenomenon of Self-fulfillment," *Brainstar Presents a Spiritual Renaissance at the Living Tree* at <http://business.fortunecity.com/geffen/245/7melessay.html>.
22. Earnest Shurtleff Holmes, *The Science of Mind*. See <http://website.lineone.net/~ernestholmes/sompart3.htm>.
23. This well-formulated ancient creed states, in part, "We worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance....But the whole three persons are coeternal together and coequal."
24. Tenney, *God's Dream Team*, 31.
25. *Ibid.*, 111–12.
26. *Ibid.*, 112.

27. Ibid., 64.
28. Tommy Tenney, *Answering God's Prayer* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2000), 185.
29. See Jerry L. Buckner, "The Man, His Ministry, and His Movement: Concerns about the Teachings of T. D. Jakes," *Christian Research Journal* 22, 2 (1999): 12–19.
30. Tenney, *The God Chasers*, Introduction.
31. Ibid., 48–49.
32. *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, comp. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994), 417.
33. Tenney, *The God Chasers*, 74.
34. Ibid., 20.
35. Tenney, *God's Favorite House*, 40.
36. Ibid., 39.
37. Ibid., 64.
38. Tenney, *The God Chasers*, 8.
39. Tenney, *God's Favorite House*, 122.
40. Tenney, *The God Chasers*, 12.
41. Tenney, *The God Chasers*, 36.
42. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 583.
43. Tenney, *The God Chasers*, 109–10.
44. Tommy Tenney, *Dealing with Rejection* audiotape (Pineville, LA: GodChasers.network, n.d.), side 2.
45. Julie Duin, "Pulpits in Peril," *Washington Times*, 6 July 2001, sect. A.