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## **Oneness Pentecostalism: An Analysis**

by Fred Sanders on May 3, 2014

### **Not Your Grandpa's Anti-Trinitarianism**

It is a disturbing fact that the most vigorous form of anti-trinitarianism currently on the market is to be found within the sphere of conservative evangelicalism. In the nineteenth century, the dominant variety of anti-trinitarianism was the old-world Unitarianism which found fertile soil in America. (See Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945); for the stream of American theology I am here calling liberal, see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001) and *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900-1950* (Westminster/John Knox, 2003). For evangelical Christians of a conservative temperament, Unitarianism as a theological movement was as easy to ignore as any version of liberal theology. It offered a pervasively non-supernatural interpretation of Christianity, and thereby rendered itself irrelevant to churches which were committed to a range of traditional doctrines such as incarnation, atonement, miracle, revelation, the inspiration of scripture, and heaven and hell.

Today, however, there is an altogether different kind of anti-trinitarian teaching putting itself forward, one which bears no relation to the old liberal Unitarianism, and requires a completely different response from either Unitarianism or the more obviously non-Christian Jehovah's Witnesses movement. In this brief analysis, I would like to describe the movement known as Oneness Pentecostalism, identify its theological core, and explain what is at stake in arguments over Oneness doctrine. I will not cite Oneness authors at length nor interact with their arguments directly. Instead, speaking as an evangelical trinitarian to other evangelical trinitarians, I would like to recommend the strategic direction that evangelical engagement with Oneness groups should follow.

### **Identifying Marks of Oneness Pentecostal Churches**

“Oneness Pentecostalism” is a descriptive name for an anti-trinitarian religious movement that developed over the course of the twentieth century on the margins of evangelicalism. As a movement, it has existed in various denominational forms and organizations, with its largest current manifestation being the United Pentecostal Church International. In most of its major forms it has been distinguished by:

\*A commitment to baptism in Jesus’ name rather than in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (including re-baptism for those baptized wrong the first time);

\*An accompanying rejection of the traditional Trinitarian doctrine held by the historic Christian churches;

\*A consequent rejection of the pre-existence of the Son of God.

Sometimes (but not always) these churches are also characterized by:

\*Legalism that manifests itself in making salvation depend on water baptism using the Jesus-only formula, baptism in the Holy Spirit with accompanying signs of tongues-speaking, and maintaining specific standards of conduct.

\*Splitting Jesus Christ into a human person and a separate divine person, so that the one can pray to the other as “the Father.” (This is a form of the Nestorian heresy)

Because of the diversity among the autonomous congregations within the movement, it is important to separate these latter elements (legalism and Nestorianism) from the central analysis of their characteristic theology. Some teachers and groups will definitely be marked by legalism and Nestorianism, which are major doctrinal errors that distinguish them from normal Christians. However, other Oneness churches have eliminated these traits, and remain theologically objectionable on the grounds of the prior list alone.

### **Who Are the Oneness Pentecostals?**

Various Christian ministries have published helpful analyses of Oneness theology. (See for instance Robert M. Bowman, Jr., “Oneness Pentecostalism and the Trinity: A Biblical Critique,” *Forward* (Fall 1985); and numerous articles in the *Christian Research Journal*.) Gregory A. Boyd, who accepted Christ at age 16 in a Oneness church but later

embraced orthodox trinitarian theology, has written the only book-length engagement with Oneness theology that is widely available. (Gregory A. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).) I have profited from the previously published research on Oneness Pentecostalism, but it seems to me that much of the research is several years behind the current state of play for this rapidly-developing movement.

The largest Oneness denomination, the United Pentecostal Church International, claims over 4,000 churches in North America, and “a total worldwide constituency of more than 4,036,945.” (From the denominational web site, <https://www.upci.org>, retrieved in 2005.) This denomination has assembled a theological faculty at its Urshan Graduate School of Theology in St. Louis, and is attempting to provide an upwardly-mobile intellectual vanguard for the wider movement. (In addition to the teaching material available at their website (<https://www.ugst.org/>), see the resources at the affiliated site <https://www.apostolic.net/biblicalstudies>.) Their work is likely to render earlier critiques out of date, unless the central doctrinal issues are kept in focus.

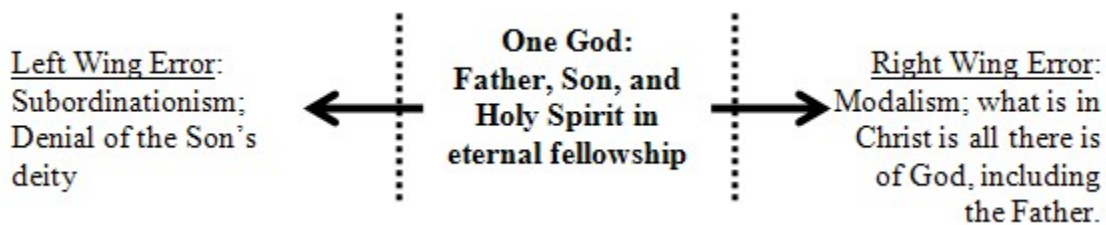
Oneness Pentecostal groups may soon take steps to distance themselves from some of their worst abuses (legalism and Nestorianism), and yet they will remain Oneness Pentecostals rather than trinitarian Christians. For this reason, it is crucial that the central defining elements of the movement, those commitments without which Oneness teaching would not be Oneness teaching, be the focus of our attention.

### **The Right-Wing Denial of the Trinity**

There are two ways to deny the doctrine of the Trinity. One way is to reject the divinity of Christ, assigning him the rank of a created being. This is the error of subordinationism. Subordinationists come in many varieties, ranging from those who say that Christ is simply a human being (ebionites, Socinians, modern liberal theology) to those who say that Christ is the greatest creature, the first thing made by God, far higher than human or even angelic creation (Arians, Jehovah’s Witnesses). We might call this type of anti-trinitarianism the left-wing denial of the Trinity, because rejection of the divinity of Christ is so typical of modern liberal theology, and requires its adherents to cast off a major element of Christian faith.

But there is another way to deny Trinitarian orthodoxy, and that is to consider Jesus to be so utterly and exhaustively divine that he is all there is to God. In this case, Jesus Christ’s divinity is recognized, but his relationship to the Father and his dependence on

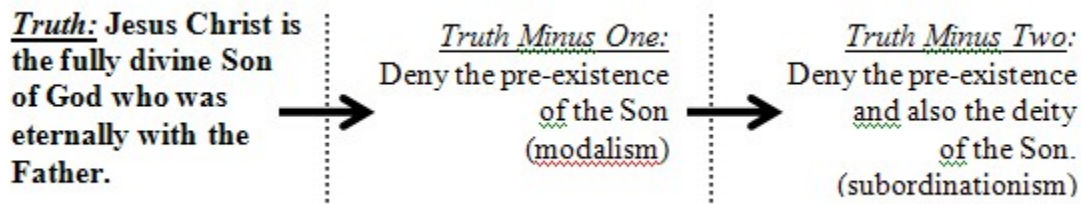
the Spirit are not acknowledged to be anything but his relationship to his own divinity. So confident are these teachers that Jesus is God, that they begin to think of him as the one unipersonal God taking on human nature. This view immediately raises the question of who Jesus Christ the Son of God is talking to when he prays to his Father. Since Jesus is all there is of God, he must be talking in prayer to himself somehow, and it must be himself in some other mode of being. Like subordinationism, this heresy comes in many varieties, but the family name that comprehends all its varieties is modalism.



Oneness Pentecostalism, as a type of modalism, is a right-wing denial of the Trinity. Evangelicals instantly recognize the left-wing error, subordinationism, as heretical, and consider it a sub-Christian idea of God which cannot be sufficient for salvation. We would say that since subordinationists (Arians, Socinians, or Jehovah's Witnesses, for example) do not worship the right God, they are not saved. But we find it harder to say this about modalists, especially modalists like the Oneness Pentecostals who pray, sing, and behave so much like evangelicals. One reason for our difficulty might be that we are so committed to the deity of Christ (rightly so!) that while we can easily see how this doctrine could be under-emphasized, it is hard for us to imagine how it would be possible to over-emphasize it. Yet over-emphasizing or misunderstanding Christ's deity is exactly what Oneness Pentecostals have done.

### **How Many Ways Is It Wrong?**

Another reason for our difficulty comes from mistakenly thinking of Oneness as being a deviation from Christian doctrine that lies in the same direction as subordinationism, but simply doesn't go as far. If Christians believe in Jesus Christ as (1) the fully divine Son of God who (2) eternally existed with the Father before taking on human nature in the incarnation, then Oneness theology only denies his eternal existence (2), while subordinationism denies both this pre-existence (2) and his full divinity (1).



There is a grain of truth in this way of thinking about the two heresies, and in some ways subordinationists (Jehovah’s Witnesses or liberal theologians) are in fact twice as bad as modalists (Oneness Pentecostals).

However, because the truths being denied are very different truths (divinity and eternal pre-existence), it is not finally accurate to rank them in this way. Calvin complained of heretics “who, while they dare not openly deprive him of his divinity, secretly filch away his eternity.” (Institutes I:13, section 8. Note however that his opponents teach an adventitious word at creation, so this quote is not from a context in which he addresses modalists of the Oneness sort.) I recommend viewing the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as the right way to understand the person of Jesus Christ, with subordinationism as the left-wing error and modalism as the right-wing error. They are equally bad, but they err on opposite sides of each other.

However, it is high time to supplement this analysis of the position occupied by the Oneness teaching with some reflection on the content of the teaching itself.

### **One Bad Idea That Kept Getting Worse**

Oneness Pentecostalism began in 1913 at a Pentecostal camp meeting in Arroyo Seco in southern California. An evangelist named R. E. McAlister preached on the discrepancy between the command in Matthew 28:19 to “baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” and the Apostles’ reported practice of baptizing in the name of the Lord, or of Jesus (Acts 2:38 et al). The sermon provoked at least two responses. First, a man named John Scheppe passed the evening meditating on the problem, and first thing in the morning ran through the camp shouting that he had been given a revelation: baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ was the true baptism.

The second response was more measured, but ran along similar lines. Frank J. Ewart began pondering McAlister’s sermon and discovered a way to harmonize the two baptisms: the name “Jesus” must be the actual name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

the one name into which we are to be baptized. He would later summarize this in the words, “I believe that the Apostles knew how to interpret Matthew 28:19,” adding that “if one single, isolated example of Christian baptism could be found in the Bible to fit the trinitarian interpretation of the Great Commission there would be some excuse for intelligent people adopting it.” (J. Ewart, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (St. Louis, MO: Pentecostal Publishing House, n.d.), p. 16. Reprinted in Donald Dayton, ed., *Seven ‘Jesus Only’ Tracts* (NY: Garland Publishing, 1985).)

In Ewart’s hands, Oneness doctrine took on its basic outlines. The discovery of the right name into which to be baptized was revolutionary. If “Jesus” is the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, then Jesus is himself the exhaustive totality of what had mistakenly been called the Trinity. The ancient Christian doctrine of God would have to be modified drastically to fit the new “apostolic” understanding of baptism.

Oneness teaching has developed since Ewart’s time, but in his thought the basic elements are all present: the discovery of a new formula for baptism and a revision of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity to put more focus on Jesus, whose name comprehends everything about God. The volatile combination of a new practice (re-baptism to achieve theological correctness) and new doctrine (anti-trinitarian Jesus-centered modalism) came to be known as “the new issue,” a radical claim which demanded a decision, and it burned through early Pentecostalism like a wildfire.

The fledgling Assemblies of God movement was forced to hold a number of general council meetings to render a decision about “the new issue,” and in October 1916, Oneness teachers were expelled. (A reliable brief history of the movement can be found in the article “Oneness Pentecostalism” by D. A. Reed, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley Burgess and Gary McGee (Grand Raids: Zondervan, 1988).) It is worth noting that early Pentecostals were suffering through tremendous tensions of their own with mainline churches, and were strongly inclined to allow a diversity of views to flourish in any area where it seemed that the Spirit might be moving. But Oneness denial of the eternal pre-existence of the Son crossed a clear doctrinal line, and demanded expulsion even from the Assemblies of God.

### **Where It Came From, Where It Went, Where It’s Going**

There is a logical blunder called the genetic fallacy, which goes like this: “Since x came from something bad, x is bad.” This move is a fallacy because instead of evaluating x on its own merits, it attempts to prejudge x with reference to its genesis, not taking into

account possible substantive changes since its origin. A silly example would be, “Why should I listen to you, since everybody knows that when you started your career on earth you were a drooling baby with no muscle control?”

However, pointing out the origin of Oneness Pentecostalism is not the same as committing the genetic fallacy. It is fair to criticize Oneness Pentecostalism by pointing to its origin, because its subsequent history is marked by rationalizations and ad hoc justifications for the original idea. A tradition may well start with a bad idea and gradually purify itself (as some forms of classical Dispensationalism taught untenable doctrines, but later dispensationalists freely modified them in light of further study and testing by Scripture).

Oneness Pentecostalism, on the other hand, has grasped its original bad idea more tightly as the years went by, and has allowed its commitment to push it into a major revision of the Christian doctrines of God and Christ. The origin of Oneness Pentecostalism is relevant because it shows that in a flash of revelation in 1914 a divisive new idea was seized on, and that idea (Jesus-only baptism) was cultivated into a full-scale revision of the Christian doctrine of God. This kind of radicalism is always a sign of a lack of balance and perspective.

### **What Happened at the First Christmas**

The best way to grasp the central doctrinal deviation of Oneness Pentecostalism is to focus attention on what took place in the incarnation. We should admit that the first Christmas was a huge surprise to everyone except God: Throughout all of His history with His chosen people, God had revealed Himself intimately, and yet had never revealed in a clear way that He had a Son. The eternal existence of the divine Son of God was a secret God kept from even His best friends to whom He revealed Himself most clearly (Abraham, Moses, David). When the Son came into the world in human form, this was a new revelation of something that had eternally been true: God has a Son. As Hebrews 1:1 says, “God spoke in many ways and in many portions to the fathers through the prophets, but in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.”

The first Christmas was a new revelation and an epochal surprise in the history of salvation, which required God’s people to revise their theology from mere monotheism to trinitarian monotheism. Christians recognize that acknowledging the divinity of Christ requires that we confess the fact that he eternally pre-existed his coming into the world as a man in the incarnation. In other words, if Jesus is God, then the one God

must always have included in His divine nature at least these two persons: God the Father and God the Son. To say this is already to have accepted the basic elements of the doctrine of the Trinity, and to have expanded Old Testament monotheism to make room for what God has revealed about Himself in the New Testament.

### **Helpful Creeds, Confessions, and Doctrinal Statements**

Leaving aside for a moment the ancient creeds of the Christian church, we can see by looking at more recent documents that evangelicals have understood the doctrine of God in this way. The statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals obviously reflects this belief when it says “We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” In other words, God eternally existed not only as Father but also as Son. He did not begin to be a son or have a son on the first Christmas, but always had the Son with him, “eternally existent.”

Oneness Pentecostals refuse to make this adjustment to their Old Testament version of monotheism. Faced with the incarnation of the Son of God at the first Christmas, they refuse to draw the inference that the one God must have always had a Son. In order to avoid this inference, they postulate instead that God has entered into a new mode of existence at the incarnation. The one, uni-personal God continued to be himself outside of the man Jesus Christ, but at that point in time he began a new, simultaneous existence in the mode of humanity. When Paul says that “God sent forth his Son in the fullness of time,” trinitarians infer that God must have had a Son to send forth when the time came. Oneness Pentecostals must interpret this biblical language to mean that when the time came, God put into action his plan to begin a new mode of existence among men, which he would call “the Son.” David K. Bernard calls this “the beginning of the Son,” saying

The Sonship—or the role of the Son—began with the child conceived in the womb of Mary. The Scriptures make this perfectly clear. Galatians 4:4 says, “But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.” The Son came in the fullness of time—not in eternity past. The Son was made of a woman—not begotten eternally. (David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God*, Revised Edition, p. 104. I am citing the version available on the CD-Rom, *The Complete Works of David K. Bernard* (Word Aflame Press).



“The Son of God,” for Oneness Pentecostalism, is the new mode of existence that the one God entered into in the incarnation. This brings up the most obvious question that trinitarians want to ask Oneness Pentecostals:

### **Who Was Jesus Praying To?**

The short answer, for Oneness Pentecostalism, must surely be “to himself.” In fact, many Oneness teachers have said something like this, specifying that the human nature of Christ was praying to his divine nature. That is widely recognized as an unacceptable answer, since it makes Jesus into two distinct persons, a human self and a divine self. This is the heresy of Nestorianism, and while several Oneness teachers fall into it, more thoughtful teachers do not. Instead, they describe the incarnation as bringing about a real personal distinction between the Father and the Son, a kind of distancing between God’s existence in the mode of his eternal being, and God’s existence in the new mode of his incarnate self.

In order to get a good understanding of the Trinity, one of the best things you can do is read the Gospel of John in a single sitting. Read it as fast as possible, and all at once, and you will certainly notice that Jesus Christ is practically obsessed with one subject: his holy Father. He prays to the Father, teaches about the Father, explains the love he and the Father have for each other, claims to be sent by the Father, looks forward to returning to the Father, asks the Father to glorify him with the glory they shared before the foundation of the world, etc. It is very clear that Jesus stands personally before another divine person, the Father.

Oneness Pentecostals must account for this, and given their commitments, they have only two choices: they can ignore all of the personal distinction, paraphrasing the texts into poetic metaphors useful for teaching us how to act toward God, or they can admit that real interpersonal communication is going on here between Father and Son, but claim that this personal distinction first came into being when Jesus Christ was born among us. This latter option, taking personal interaction seriously even though they are committed to a uni-personal God, leaves them in the position of having to say that the uni-personal God became bi-personal in the incarnation. In other words, they can either ignore the interpersonal dialogue of Jesus with the Father, or they can say that God split himself into two persons for a period of time, but will return to unity with himself when the project is complete.

### **Tortured Exegesis vs. the Presupposition of Pre-existence**

A doctrine like “the eternal pre-existence of the Son” may seem like a mouthful, or an advanced, abstract theological topic. As such, it may seem a weak and speculative thing to use as an excuse to refuse Christian fellowship to a group. But in fact the idea contained in “the eternal pre-existence of the Son” is quite simple, and is surely the unspoken presupposition which Bible-believing Christians have always had in mind when reading Scripture.

When a theologically untrained Christian reads at the opening of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, and all things came into being through Him.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...”, what is he likely to think except that some person called the Word was always God with God and then became incarnate? He would be right to think so, because he would be instinctively making the same adjustment to his monotheism that the apostles and church fathers made in light of the revelation of Christ as God. Oneness believers, having rejected the obvious inference of the eternity of the Son, must work harder with this verse, taking it to mean something like “God always had a plan to become incarnate, since the beginning when he created, and finally he carried out that plan.”

But notice what happens when the eternal Son (the Word who was God) is juggled away: God’s plan to become flesh (his “word” or logos) must now be the thing that John is calling “that which was with God, and was God.” Would we really want to affirm that God’s plan to become flesh is itself God? In John’s teaching, there must be something or someone that “was with God, and was God” in the beginning. For trinitarian Christians, that something or someone is Jesus the eternal Word, about whose incarnate ministry the rest of John’s Gospel tells.

Pre-existence is also the best way to make sense of the famous passage in Philippians 2, in which Paul exhorts his readers to “have this mind in yourself which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not grasp equality with Him, but made Himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant...” It certainly seems that before the incarnation, somebody who already existed made a decision to take on the form of a servant. Similarly, in Galatians Paul says that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman.” Apparently God had a Son to send forth. For Oneness Pentecostals this verse must come to mean, “When the fullness of time had come, God became human, and then as God-become-human he maintained an interpersonal relationship with himself which had not previously existed.”

### **Who or What Did God Reveal?**

Oneness Pentecostalism is a modern evangelical form of modalist heresy. There are better and worse forms of modalism, and Oneness teaching is, all things considered, on the better side. The worst versions of modalism portray God the Father turning into God the Son and then into the Holy Spirit, one after another but never at the same time. Oneness Pentecostalism, at least in the hands of its most responsible teachers, portrays God the Father approaching the incarnation in such a way that he wills to begin existing simultaneously in a new temporary mode of enfleshment called “the Son.” This at least has the virtue of saving the appearance of real interpersonal relationship between the Father and the Son. However, as a form of modalism, Oneness teaching falls prey to the fundamental problem of its heresy.

The fundamental problem of all forms of modalism is this: if God, in order to reveal Himself, becomes something other than what He is, then he has not revealed Himself but has revealed something else. In this case, if God emerges from a state of being a non-modal and non-interpersonal being to become a modal, interpersonal being in the story of Jesus, then He has not revealed His true non-modal, non-interpersonal self. He has revealed instead a Father-God who has interpersonal fellowship with Himself in the modal person of the incarnate God, Jesus Christ.

But according to Oneness theology, that interpersonal fellowship of Father and Son is precisely the thing He is not. So the unipersonal God attempts to reveal Himself but instead reveals an interpersonal divine being. The early Christians recognized this dilemma and solved it by confessing that if God reveals Himself to us by showing Himself to have a Son, then He must always have had a Son to show us in the fullness of time. Modalists, including Oneness Pentecostals, should face the unpleasant implication that their view makes God reveal Himself as that which He is not. Such a revelation, by its nature, cannot be true.

### **The Sociological Issue: Evangelical, but not Christian**

One of the most difficult aspects of coming to terms with Oneness Pentecostalism is that these churches are culturally and sociologically evangelical. They have a high view of Scripture’s authority, a heart for worship, a passion for evangelizing, and a commitment to living lives marked by holiness. Though they struggle with legalism, they are often marked by grace, and they certainly say all the right things about salvation by God’s unilateral action of unmerited mercy. They teach and preach and sing and give and live like the sociological group we recognize as “evangelical Christians.”

Yet because of their serious doctrinal deviation, it is tempting to say that they are in the odd position of being evangelical but not Christian. What do I mean by calling them non-Christian? I mean that it is possible to look across the surface of the whole world and back through two thousand years of Christian history and recognize, for all the differences of opinion and practice, such a thing as “the Christian thing.” What C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity” is something real and recognizable.

But that identifiably Christian thing is trinitarian. From the baptismal formula in the Great Commission itself, to the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, down through the Reformers and out to the fundamentalists, across the great divides that mark off Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Christian churches have argued that the right interpretation of the Bible is the trinitarian interpretation. In choosing a posture toward Oneness Pentecostalism as a movement, evangelical Christians find themselves standing squarely alongside Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, saying (in the words of the National Association of Evangelicals’ statement of faith) the same thing as intended by the Nicene theologians: “We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

“Eternally existent” draws a sharp line against Oneness Pentecostalism, a line their movement began by drawing. The “New Issue” of Jesus-only baptism and Oneness doctrine caused this group to come out from the Assemblies of God and declare themselves separate. So convinced were early Oneness teachers of their distinctiveness and their mission, that when Assemblies churches would re-admit them to fellowship, they would immediately begin proselytizing and promoting the “New Issue” in the church.

### **Normalizing Relations with an Abnormal Theology**

If Oneness Pentecostalism, and especially the United Pentecostal Church International, is entering a kinder, gentler phase in which it minimizes its differences from orthodox theology, this is a sign of danger as well as promise. It is dangerous because winsome, well-spoken Oneness teachers can proselytize in trinitarian churches, promoting their views at every chance. As they learn the rhetoric of compromise and reasonable, non-condemning dialogue, these Oneness teachers will become increasingly attractive to mainstream evangelicals. Whenever they persuade a mainstream evangelical group to accept them, this acceptance goes on their growing list of “evangelicals who gave us the stamp of approval:”

The National Religious Broadcasters, an arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, has accepted Oneness individuals and groups as members. The Society for Pentecostal Studies, an interdenominational organization of Pentecostal and charismatic scholars, also accepts Oneness believers as members, and one recently served as its president. Major evangelical and charismatic publishers publish and market books and music by United Pentecostals. Evangelical radio stations worldwide routinely carry programs by United Pentecostals, including Harvestime, the UPCI's official radio broadcast. (David K. Bernard, "Answering the Charge of Cultism." From the October- December 1993 Forward, a quarterly magazine for United Pentecostal Church International ministers.)

Thus any compromise or collaboration with Oneness groups is likely to end up being counted as endorsement. To accept members, clients, employees, or students without very clear definitions of where the lines must remain drawn, would be to add one's institutional name to a later Public Relations push by Oneness leaders arguing that their views are acceptable Christian views.

On the other hand, along with the danger there is some promise in the kinder, gentler Oneness profile. It will be difficult for Oneness teachers to talk openly about their views in a winsome way without coming to terms with many problems in their historical legacy. Some of the advanced work going on at the UPCI's Urshan Graduate School of Theology already shows signs of moving toward real change in the direction of orthodoxy. Some scholars there are explicitly embracing the ancient Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ, which is no small feat for Oneness people. If their views are considered acceptable by the official UPCI and its churches, then Oneness Pentecostalism will have taken a substantive step toward clarifying their doctrinal position. So far, the only benefit I have seen from this clarification is that it enables us to focus more tightly on the one or two real remaining points of division: the pre-existence of Christ, the eternal existence of the Trinity in three persons.

As Oneness Pentecostal representatives push for acceptance from evangelicals, they will sometimes be driven to downplay the importance of doctrinal distinctions. It is worth asking how they will handle serious doctrinal distortions in their own ranks. Recent years have indeed seen the outbreak of a major theological controversy within the ranks of Oneness: a handful of pastors have begun teaching that Christ did not receive a body from Mary, but rather that he brought it with him from heaven. This "divine flesh" Christology is driving UPCI headquarters to distraction, especially because it is centered in the ministry of a few pastors in Ethiopia, a church which the UPCI would like to be able to point to as a symbol of everything that is good, vital, and expanding in their

movement. After sweating out a decision about whether Oneness believers are saved, it is rewarding to be able to watch them sweat out a similar decision with regard to some wild sheep in their own fold. In God's providence and care for his sheep involved in this deeply erroneous movement, it is worth praying that their scholars would begin to perceive points of real agreement as a sign that normal Christianity is a good tradition they should consider linking back up with. Similarly, we can pray that the breakout Oneness celebrities like T. D. Jakes and Tommy Tenney notice that they sell more books and seminars when they preach and teach more like normal Christians. If Oneness commitments only close doors, and every move in the direction of historic biblical Christianity opens doors, perhaps the leaders of the movement will be prompted to reconsider even the core differences.

### **A Salvation Issue? “Whosoever Will Be Saved...”**

Inevitably, the Oneness question will be posed to and by evangelicals in terms of salvation. “Is this a salvation issue?” is often the final court of appeal for evangelicals. First of all, let me point out that even if it were not a salvation issue, it could still be important. Only an evangelical culture in which doctrine and truth are not considered relevant to Christian life could the question “Is this a salvation issue” function as a diagnostic check for every doctrinal discussion, with the implicit presupposition being that we should think very little about anything that does not directly impinge on whether you go to heaven when you die. Some things may not be salvation issues but may still be fundamentally wrong and therefore to be avoided. A Christian can be saved and go to heaven with a great number of wrong ideas in his head. Many believers have had shocking experiences in which we discover some amazing and important theological truth that has somehow escaped us in years of the Christian life. Many evangelical Christians believe, for example, that Jesus got rid of his human body when he ascended to the Father, undid the incarnation, and is no longer a human. That is a false belief, and reading Hebrews would correct it rapidly. Is it a salvation issue? No, but if a whole church began belligerently preaching the non-humanity of the ascended Christ, it would be grounds for warning them sternly that they were deviating.

Second, if the question is, are Oneness Pentecostals evangelical Christians, then the answer is obviously no, whether this is a salvation issue or not. It is not helpful to make a real distinction between “being saved” and “being Christian,” but consider the gap that can exist between a person's encounter with Jesus Christ and their ability to articulate a proper Christian self-understanding. I know a man who accepted Christ twenty years ago in a Oneness church, and then after a decade in that church, came to see that the Bible teaches the eternal triunity of God rather than what his church had taught him

about the unipersonal God who temporarily enters a mode of enfleshment. My friend traded his unbiblical theology for a biblical understanding, and changed churches. Has that man been a Christian for ten years or for twenty? After much soul searching, he describes his spiritual journey in these careful terms: “Twenty years ago, I came into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and ten years ago I was set free from unbiblical, sub-Christian teachings about who he is, accepting instead the true Christian doctrine.” I hesitate to make generalizations from this difficult and fearful testimony, but I am inclined to say that there are people in Oneness churches who are saved by trusting in Jesus Christ, but who are laboring under starkly unbiblical teaching about who he is. Furthermore, the churches they are in are not Christian churches.

Third, the ancient church did in fact speak strongly on this issue, and decided that in fact the broad outlines of trinitarian Christianity are among the things necessary for salvation. The 5th-century Athanasian Creed says it memorably:

Whosoever will be saved,  
before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [universal] faith;  
Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled,  
without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.  
And the catholic faith is this:

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;  
Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.  
For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son,  
and another of the Holy Spirit.

These infamous “damnable clauses” are hard to maintain in the face of sincere, and sincerely wrong, people who look to Jesus Christ for salvation. What would lead the ancient church to say this? I believe it has to do with the question of identifying God. If the question is, “Who is God and how can I recognize Him,” then the Christian answer is, “God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.” Confessing Jesus Christ as God necessarily entails that the true God must be thought of as being like Jesus Christ, as including in his very being the eternal Son.

It is possible to identify the right God and yet have some wrong, unbiblical ideas about him. Where is the line between worshiping the wrong God, and worshiping the right God the wrong way? At some point in our doctrinal apprehensions of God (which are our human responses to his revelation), we approach a line beyond which we are not

merely having some bad ideas about God, but are actually mis-construing his very identity. A Christian should be able to walk into a room full of putative gods and pick out the true one. The true one is that one divine Being who in the Old Testament made his oneness clear, and in the New Testament made clear that as the one God, he “eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

(This is an article I wrote in 2005 and then published in the well-edited but short-lived *Countercult Apologetics Journal* in 2006. It’s been around the web in a variety of forms, but given the fact of link decay, I wanted to put it here at my main blog site. I also wanted to put it back into circulation this week because of current confusion about whether the Oneness teaching is false doctrine. I would like to write more on the subject, change the way I said certain things, and update some of the information, but what I’ve posted here is the text from 2005, w/a couple formatting changes, paragraph breaks, and subheads for blog publications.)

*This was originally published on September 28, 2011. It has been republished here as part of Scriptorium Daily’s 10 year anniversary celebration.*

**End Quote/Excerpt.**

The previous is an essay by Fred Sanders titled **Oneness Pentecostalism: An Analysis** and is taken from The Scriptorium Daily as per <https://scriptoriumdaily.com/oneness-pentecostalism-an-analysis>