

Oneness Pentecostalism

By Jason Barker

Founder: Frank Ewart

Founding Date: 1913

Structure: Numerous denominations and independent churches.

Official Publications: Harvestime radio program, *The New Birth*, *The Oneness of God*.

Unique Terms: Apostolic, Jesus Only, Jesus Name baptism, prophecy wheel, emphasis on Acts 2:38.

Groups: United Pentecostal Church International, Apostolic World Christian Federation, Assemblies of the Lord Jesus Christ, Church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World.

HISTORY

The founding date of the Oneness Pentecostal movement can be traced to a specific event: a revival meeting in Los Angeles on April 15, 1913. The culmination of the meeting occurred when Canadian revivalist R.E. McAlister baptized converts not according to the Trinitarian formula of the historic Christian Church, but in the name of Jesus only.¹ While many at the meeting were shocked by this action, the burgeoning evangelist Frank Ewart spent many hours with McAlister following the service and was converted to the practice. According to many Oneness Pentecostals, McAlister taught Ewart that baptizing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, as stated in Acts 2:38,² was the fulfillment of the Trinitarian creed in Matthew 28:19.³ The passage from Matthew is fulfilled because Jesus, the Son, is simply the ultimate expression of the monotheistic God (rather than the Son being a distinct Person within the Trinitarian Godhead).

The next significant date in the development of the movement occurred exactly two years later, on April 15, 1915, when Ewart gave his first sermon on Acts 2:38. David Reed believes that, despite the claims of Oneness Pentecostals that Ewart preached the message given to him by McAlister, Ewart did not actually develop his modalistic theology until after this sermon.⁴ Nonetheless, the approximate date for the development of Ewart's teaching regarding the necessity of baptism in the name of Jesus only can be traced to this period.

Also on this date, Ewart rebaptized supporter Glenn A. Cook according to the Jesus only formula; Cook then rebaptized Ewart.⁵ This was the beginning of the rebaptism of thousands of Pentecostals. The Oneness movement quickly spread through Pentecostal churches, particularly the Assemblies of God. The AG debated the issue of baptism in Jesus' name at their 1915 general assembly, and in 1916 defeated the movement in their denomination by requiring adherence to Trinitarian theology in the Statement of Fundamental Truths.⁶ 156 ministers subsequently left the AG to form an independent Oneness denomination. In January, 1918, the General Assembly of the Apostolic Assemblies merged with the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, a denomination affiliated with the original Pentecostal revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles.⁷

A particularly significant event in the history of the Oneness Pentecostal movement occurred in 1945, when the Pentecostal Church, Incorporated, merged with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ to form the United Pentecostal Church International. Beginning with 617 churches in 1946, the UPCI currently has 25,283 churches with a membership of over 2.6 million.⁸

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Numerous individuals who are accepted within mainstream Evangelicalism are affiliated with Oneness Pentecostalism. The Christian musical trio Phillips, Craig, and Dean are all ministers in the UPCI. T.D. Jakes has roots in the Oneness Pentecostal movement,⁹ and his doctrinal statement currently proclaims his belief in three “dimensions” or “manifestations” of the one God;¹⁰ not surprisingly, doctrine is one of the two areas with which people typically express disagreement with Jakes.¹¹ Also, the popular worship choruses “Holy Ground” and “In the Presence of Jehovah” were written by UPC songwriter Geron Davis.¹²

In contrast to this popularity, Steve Winter, an allegedly defrocked Oneness Pentecostal pastor,¹³ is a particularly unpopular representative of Oneness Pentecostalism. He refers to both mainstream Christians and other Oneness Pentecostals on the Internet as “false Christian scum,” and runs a web site from which he charges Christians with adhering to “sub canine morals.”¹⁴ The extremity of his behavior motivated Oneness apologist Mark Bassett to tell him, “You imbecile...YOU [have] habitually and regularly been involved in the dissemination [sic] of inflammatory [sic] and defamatory material. matter [sic] of fact, this IS your universal reputation, in spite of the fact that you cranked a “Rev” in front of your name by personal whim.”¹⁵

DOCTRINE

Trinity: One of the two most distinguishing beliefs and practices within Oneness Pentecostalism (along with Jesus Only baptism — see below) is modalism. Oneness Pentecostals deny the Trinity, believing instead that the monotheistic God simply “manifests” Himself in the offices or roles of the members of the Trinity. For example, one statement of Oneness beliefs claims:

God is absolutely one, with no distinction of persons. (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:8; 45:5-6, 21-23; 46:9 Romans 3:30; Galatians 3:20; James 2:19). In order to save sinful humanity, God provided a sinless Man as a sacrifice of atonement — Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In begetting the Son and in relating to humanity, God is the Father. In working to transform and empower human lives, God is the Holy Spirit. Thus, for our salvation, God has revealed Himself as Father (in parental relationship to humanity), in His Son (in human flesh), and as the Holy Spirit (in spiritual action). (Malachi 2:10; Luke 1:35; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; 1 Timothy 2:5).¹⁶

David K. Bernard, one of the most significant Oneness apologists, elaborates: “The term ‘God the Father’ is biblical and refers to God Himself...[The Bible] also clearly teaches that Jesus is the one Father. The Spirit that dwelt in the Son of God was none other than the Father.”¹⁷

In other words, the Godhead does not consist of three distinct Persons with one substance. Instead, the single Person performs various roles to which He assigns the titles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When the monotheistic God acts as the Creator, He is performing as the Father. When He provided the atoning sacrifice to enable humans to be saved, He was performing as the Son. Finally, when He works to transform redeemed humans, He is performing as the Holy Spirit.

Theophilus of Antioch, a second-century Christian, is widely recognized (according to available evidence) as the first individual to use the word “Trinity” in explaining the biblical teachings about God.¹⁸ The lack of earlier documentary evidence for the word “Trinity” leads many Oneness Pentecostals to assume that “power hungry bishops” in the early conciliar period devised the doctrine in order to accommodate Greco-Roman traditions.¹⁹ They allege that the doctrine was developed further at the Council of Nicaea to accommodate the combined theological and political aspirations of Emperor Constantine.²⁰

Jesus Only Baptism: As stated in the “History” section of this *Profile*, the Oneness Pentecostal movement started when R.E. McAlister baptized respondents at a revival in the name of Jesus only. Modern Oneness Pentecostals continue the practice because they believe, as did McAlister, that Acts 2:38 was the fulfillment of Matthew 28:19. David K. Bernard states, “[Matthew 28:19] teaches the titles of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost identify one name and therefore one being... The church correctly carried out the instructions Jesus gave in Mt.28:19 when the apostles used the name of Jesus in water baptism.”²¹ The UPCI elaborates: “The word name is used here in the singular, and it is the focal point of the baptismal command.

The titles Father, Son, and Holy Ghost describe God's relationships to humanity and are not the supreme, saving name describe [sic] here, which is Jesus."²² In other words, the apostles baptized in the name of Jesus alone, and in doing so perfectly carried out the instructions of the Lord.

Furthermore, Oneness Pentecostals claim that Christians must be baptized according to the "Jesus Only" formula in order to be saved.²³ The "Jesus Only" understanding and practice of baptism is thus tremendously significant to the spiritual state of Oneness Pentecostals.

Tongues: Many Oneness Pentecostals believe that Christians must receive the gift of tongues, or *glossolalia*, in order to be saved. It should be pointed out that such Oneness Pentecostals do not believe that the gift of tongues in itself will save individuals; however, any individual who has received the Holy Spirit, and thus will be saved, will also receive and exhibit the gift of tongues. David K. Bernard explains,

Tongues in and of themselves do not save. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Spirit baptism and tongues is similar to that of faith and works. We are saved by faith, not works, yet works always accompany genuine faith. Likewise, tongues cannot save us, yet the Spirit baptism produces tongues as the initial sign...A Spirit baptism without tongues is a nonbiblical concept; the Bible does not discuss this possibility. We should always expect speaking in tongues when someone receives the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Trinity: There is one God (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 6:4; 32:39; Isaiah 43:10–11; James 2:19). Within the Godhead there are three distinct Persons: God the Father (2 Peter 1:17), God the Son (John 1:1, 20:28), and God the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:4). The Son cannot be simply a temporary manifestation of the Father, because the all things were created through the Son (Hebrews 1:3) and He is eternal (Hebrews 1:8, 10). The Oneness belief system displays three misunderstandings: a misunderstanding of the bases for conciliar proclamations, a misunderstanding of the origins of modalism, and a misunderstanding of what the Bible teaches regarding the Trinity. Properly understanding all three points is vital for accurate Christian theology.

Conciliar Proclamations: Many Christians inaccurately believe that the seven Ecumenical Councils of the early Church were occasions on which new doctrine was developed. Instead, the councils clarified the consensus fidelium (consensus of the faithful, or the "mind of the Church"), and defended it from heretical attacks. For example, the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) did not "decide" that Jesus Christ is of the same substance as the Father. Similarly, the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.) did not "decide" that the Holy Spirit is also God. Instead, these councils, in reaction to heresies afflicting the Church at the time, clarified the biblical teachings for the faithful by creating pronouncements that would teach the biblical doctrines in ways that could be easily understood by the Church. Thus, the Nicene Creed was written at the Council of Nicaea in order to clearly promote the core doctrines of Christianity (including the belief that Jesus Christ is a distinct Person who is of one substance with the Father).

Modalism: The doctrine of the Godhead taught by Oneness Pentecostals, rather than having its roots in the Bible, can instead be traced to the heresy of modalism taught in the third century by Sabellius (although it was first taught in 190 by Theodotus of Byzantium). Sabellius taught that the monotheistic God (called a monad) progressively revealed Himself through the offices of the Trinity. Significantly, Sabellius was excommunicated from the Church for his aberrant teachings. The Oneness Pentecostal teaching that God "manifested" Himself through the offices of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comes directly from Sabellius, who even used the term "manifesting" to define his doctrine.²⁴

Biblical Teaching of the Trinity: A Oneness teacher wrote, "To say that God is three persons and find substantiation for it in the Scripture is a work in futility. There is literally nothing in the Bible that supports God being three persons."²⁵ On the contrary, however, the passages above clearly show that the concept of the Trinity can be found in the Bible. Oneness Pentecostals are correct in pointing out that the God of the Bible is monotheistic. Nonetheless, because the Bible also teaches that there is a Person called God the Father, a Person called

God the Son, and a Person called God the Holy Spirit, it is clear that the Bible teaches that within the nature of the one God there exist three separate and distinct Persons.

Baptism: The “Jesus Only” formula reflects an egregious decontextualization of Scripture. For example, examining Matthew 28:18 clearly refutes the Oneness understanding of Matthew 28:19. Jesus claims in verse 18 that all power was given to him by the Father; this claim would be meaningless, and would perhaps even be an indication of schizophrenia, if the Father and Son were actually the same person. Thus, just as he claimed in verse 18 the authority given to him, in verse 19 he commands the apostles to go forth and to baptize upon that authority (i.e., the command of Jesus).²⁶ Such an understanding is confirmed by Acts 10:48, which similarly expresses the authority by which baptism is performed.

The Oneness understanding that salvation depends upon Jesus’ Name baptism is similarly refuted by Scripture. Oneness Pentecostals use Acts 4:12 as evidence that salvation comes through this baptismal formula.²⁷ If salvation comes only through being baptized by the sacred name of God, and if the Son is simply a manifestation of God the Father, then baptism would therefore need to be performed in the name of Elohim or Yahweh (provided in the Old Testament). Since even Oneness Pentecostals would dispute this understanding, the necessity of baptism in the name of Jesus only is easily refuted using their own logic.

Tongues: It is not the purpose of this Profile to argue for or against glossolalia. Nonetheless, it is necessary to point out that the Oneness belief in the gift of tongues as a necessary evidence of having the Holy Spirit (as opposed to the gift as an evidence of the fullness of the Spirit, as some Pentecostals believe) is unbiblical. Even Bernard admits that many of the biblical accounts of conversions do not describe receiving the gift of tongues. Therefore, Oneness Pentecostals are erroneously attempting to argue that something that occasionally occurred should therefore always occur; it is impossible to argue this point when the Bible does not make such a claim.

Notes

- 1 David Reed, “Oneness Pentecostal Origins,” <http://eli.elilabs.com/~mbasset/oporigin.txt>.
- 2 “Be baptized everyone of you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the remissions of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”
- 3 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- 4 Reed, <http://eli.elilabs.com/~mbasset/oporigin.txt>. Reed spells Frank Ewart’s last name “Uert.” This variance exists in several other texts as well.
- 5 Mike Oppenheimer, “The Modern Beginnings of Oneness,” <http://www.letusreason.org/Onenes21.htm>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *About the United Pentecostal Church International*, <http://www.upci.org/main/about>.
- 9 J. Lee Grady, “The Other Pentecostals,” *Charisma*, June (1997), 68.
- 10 *Doctrinal Statement for T.D. Jakes/Potter’s House Ministries*, <http://www.tdjakes.org/ministry/doctrine.html>.
- 11 Questions for T.D. Jakes, <http://www.tdjakes.org/ministry/faq/tdjakes.html>.
- 12 Grady, 68.
- 13 Steve Adams, *The Steve Winter FAQ*, <http://www.mcs.net/~sadams/winfaq.html>.
- 14 See <http://www.prime.org>.
- 15 Mark Bassett, “Re: The false christian [sic] scum, Richard “the harlot” Harlos,” [http://x26.deja.com/=dnc/\[ST_rn=ps\]/getdoc.xp?AN=463693601&CONTEXT=928772598.353501326&hitnum=75](http://x26.deja.com/=dnc/[ST_rn=ps]/getdoc.xp?AN=463693601&CONTEXT=928772598.353501326&hitnum=75).
- 16 *The United Pentecostal Church International*, <http://www.prairienet.org/community/religion/fire/meet.html>.
- 17 David K. Bernard, J.D., *The Oneness of God*, <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/pentecostal/One-Ch6.htm>.
- 18 See the letter of Theophilus to Autolytus in Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1884), Book 2, Chapter 18.
- 19 Timothy Crews, *Spiritual Roots*, 2nd edition (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 10.
- 20 Ibid., 11.
- 21 Bernard, <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/pentecostal/One-Ch6.htm>.
- 22 *Why We Baptize in Jesus’ Name*, <http://www.upci.org/tracts/baptize.htm>.
- 23 *The Apostles’ Doctrine*, <http://www.upci.org/tracts/doctrine.htm>.
- 24 Gene Frost, *The ‘Oneness’ Doctrine of Pentecostalism* (Nelson, B.C.: MacGregor Ministries, 1974), 21–22.
- 25 2 Thomas Weisser, *Three Persons from the Bible? or Babylon* (n.p.: n.p., 1983), 2.
- 26 See Mark McNeil, *An Evaluation of the Oneness Pentecostal Movement* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 8.
- 27 “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”



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