

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Oneness Pentecostalism

How Christians define and expound truth from God's Word sooner or later critically impacts not only their beliefs but also their practices and experiences. A good example of this is Oneness Pentecostalism. This discussion begins with an examination of this theology and concludes by linking its doctrinal deviations to spiritual deviations from the standard revealed in God's Word.

From the outset, a distinctive should be made between the vast majority of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in this country and the adherents of Oneness Pentecostalism. In 1916 a major division occurred among Pentecostals; subsequently, a significant number of them denied the truth concerning the Trinity and formed what today is known as Oneness Pentecostalism. As this article will demonstrate, the central pillar of its theology is a revival of the ancient heresy of modalism. In addition, Oneness Pentecostalism's narrow, myopic delineation of Bible truths has caused it to become one of the most legalistic branches of Christianity, emphasizing salvation by works to a degree unparalleled among Protestants. Oneness theology is built upon four main pillars. The first involves its understanding of God's nature, character, and being. The other three relate to its soteriological beliefs and practices.

God in Oneness Pentecostalism

Rather than embracing the full, albeit mysterious, revelation of the Trinity contained in Scripture, Oneness theology attempts to conform the mysterious Triune God to a theological mold that is more comprehensible to the finite human mind. However, this selective adoption of the full revelation of God renders Oneness theology inherently unscriptural and heretical.

Oneness theology, however, does hold some correct notions of God. First, it accurately and scripturally maintains that there is only one God, based on such key verses as Deuteronomy 6:4 and 1 Corinthians 8:4. All true Christians are certainly monotheists, and those who acknowledge the biblical view of the Trinity should resist the temptation to separate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into three Gods. Oneness Pentecostals often mock trinitarian believers for being tritheists (an accusation that is unfortunately accurate at times, at least in the subconscious thinking of some trinitarians). Nevertheless, in their teaching,

both trinitarians and Oneness Pentecostals agree that there is one God. Oneness theology also upholds the divinity and deity of Jesus and affirms that He is God incarnate, God Himself come as man. Finally, Oneness Pentecostalism is partially correct in its identification of Jesus with the Father and with the Spirit. Many biblical references demonstrate the oneness of the three of the Godhead. He is after all not three Gods, but one triune God. Oneness theology errs in this crucial point because it stresses the aspect of the oneness of God to the exclusion of the eternal distinction within the Godhead. Here lies the crux of this theology's problem: In each of its major themes, it consistently forces New Testament revelation into a more narrow constraint than was ever intended by its writers. For example, Oneness Pentecostalism is biblical in maintaining that the Son, Jesus, is called the Father. Isaiah 9:6 clearly states that not only will the child be called the Mighty God, but also the son will be called the Eternal Father. Likewise, in John 10:30 Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," and in John 14:9, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how is it that you say, Show us the Father?" While these and other passages clearly identify the Son with the Father, Oneness theology deviates from Scripture by not equally emphasizing the *distinction* among the three, such as that revealed at the Lord's baptism where the Father spoke from the heavens and the Spirit descended as a dove upon the Son who was standing in the water. Rather than embracing the Bible's multifaceted presentation of truth, Oneness theology latches on to a single facet, one angle of a particular truth, and makes it the whole. A more balanced view of the Trinity reveals that the Father and the Son are one, and simultaneously reveals that they are eternally distinct (yet not separate). On one hand, the Son's coming was the coming of the Father. To see the Son is to see the Father, for the Son lived because of the Father (John 6:57). The Bible shows an organic, essential oneness between the Father and the Son. On the other hand, the Bible just as clearly maintains a distinction between the Father and the Son. For example, 2 Corinthians 13:14, written long after the ascension of Christ, states, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Oneness theology deviates from Scripture by not equally embracing both sides of this twofold divine revelation.

The Scriptures are, above all else, a revelation of God the

Father in Christ as the Spirit—our wonderful Triune God! Whenever we come to the matter of the person and nature of God, we must be prepared to be enlarged in our view and broadened in our understanding. We should never make God smaller than the Bible reveals Him to be! Although God is infinitely and immeasurably profound, He has chosen to reveal Himself by Scripture—and we are obliged to say “amen” to all that is revealed, regardless of our capacity to understand it or reconcile its truths. Yes, there is one, and only one, God and we know this because He has revealed it by His Word. Yet mysteriously, this one God exists eternally as three distinct (but *never separate*) persons, and we know this because this *also* is revealed. On one hand, Jesus is identified *with* and even *as* the Father (John 10:30; 14:7; Isa. 9:6) and also as the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17). On the other hand, the Father, Son, and Spirit—the three of the Godhead—are distinct in economy (activity) and in essence (being). From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible shows God as one yet distinct in a threefold way—a *Tri-une* God.

Gregory A. Boyd, a former Oneness Pentecostal, says, “Groups that have denied the doctrine of the Trinity...have almost always held to a number of other esoteric and unhealthy beliefs, particularly in regard to the doctrine of salvation by grace” (131-132). Boyd contends that it is the Oneness view of the Trinity which, with the passing of time, tainted these believers’ thinking on other major issues as well. Certainly, one’s view of God will affect his entire spiritual outlook. But even *more* than their erroneous, heretical denial of the Trinity, I believe it is their overall approach to the Bible that corrupts many of their major doctrines—their “oneness” doctrine being only the first example. In many of their doctrines, Oneness teachers take one side of truth and exalt it as the *only* side of truth. This practice is seen also in the Oneness teaching of baptism.

“Jesus’ Name Baptism” for Salvation

We should acknowledge that Oneness theology is accurate in stating that the words spoken in Matthew 28:19 should not be used as a formula for baptism. However, almost incredibly, after mocking others’ formulaic use of Matthew 28:19, their teaching turns around and requires instead the invocation of the words *in the name of Jesus Christ* as a baptismal formula (Acts 10:48). Not only is this phrase a mandatory formula, but it is set forth as a prerequisite for salvation! Boyd incisively debunks the notion of a baptismal formula:

This view, I would argue, really presents a return to a form of paganism in which it is believed that deities can be manipulated to behave in certain ways by the utilization of certain incantations and formulas invoked by devotees. In this view, saying the correct formula somehow causes God to forgive your sins; saying a different formula, however,

prevents God from forgiving your sins. In other words, the God presupposed in this theology will damn a person on a technicality. (145)

To baptize a believer in the name, or as the Greek text says, *into* the name, is to baptize him into a person—the Triune God. Yet Oneness theology errs by requiring the recitation of the phrase *in the name of Jesus Christ* for salvation, based on the following examples in Acts. However, when one even casually examines the Greek text in Acts, one finds “upon [*epi*] the name” (2:38), “into [*eis*] the name” (8:16), and “in [*en*] the name” (10:48, see Boyd 145), as well as Paul’s baptism while calling on the Lord (22:16) (saying, “Lord Jesus,” cf. 7:59). Acts certainly does not attempt to give a prescriptive soteriological formula for baptism. Again, Boyd aptly explains that such a teaching “exchanges the perfect security and the total sufficiency of the work of Christ on the cross for the ‘security’ of a precise baptismal formula” (132). Oneness theology takes a *descriptive* example and makes it rigorously *prescriptive*.

Tongues for Salvation

Oneness teachers insist that speaking in tongues is the necessary evidence of salvation. While many other Pentecostals identify tongue-speaking with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, this faction goes even further by claiming that one does not have the indwelling Spirit unless evidenced by tongue-speaking. They admit that every believer may not have the *gift* of speaking in tongues, but nonetheless they insist that every believer speak in tongues as an “initial evidence” of having received the Spirit. To the Oneness teacher, the only possible reason for a potential believer not to have spoken in tongues is that God has judged him unworthy of salvation, possibly due to an incomplete surrender to God, a partial repentance from sin, or a deficit of faith. Among Oneness Pentecostals, a person who has yet to speak in tongues is excluded from the believing community as someone evidently unsaved and is assumed to be living in a substandard moral and spiritual condition.

For scriptural support, Oneness teachers employ four portions from the book of Acts which describe instances of the Holy Spirit falling upon a group of believers with a miraculous result, including speaking in tongues. Oneness teachers encourage people to seek a “second blessing,” praying and fasting for the baptism of the Holy Spirit and begging God for the experience of speaking in tongues. However, if we use these historical descriptions in Acts as prescriptions for normal, everyday Christian experiences (which we should not do unless they are confirmed elsewhere in the Bible as normal practices), then we should *never* encourage people to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Nowhere in Acts (or the rest of the Bible) are believers instructed to seek either the baptism of the Holy Spirit or tongue-speaking. Rather, the Spirit simply fell on

those early believers unexpectedly (“the wind blows where it will”), and tongue-speaking occurred spontaneously and effortlessly. Many Pentecostal believers, including those outside of Oneness Pentecostalism, encourage other Christians to seek the “second blessing,” even though the New Testament never even hints of a second blessing. To believers, Christ alone is our first and final blessing. Paul tells us that *every* spiritual blessing is in Christ (Eph. 1:3). When you have Christ, you have the “all and in all” (Col. 3:11). Christ as the believers’ unique blessing breathed Himself pneumatically into His disciples in John 20:22. This was for Christ to fill them inwardly (Greek, *pleroo*) as their inner life. Later, on the day of Pentecost, they were again filled with the Holy Spirit, but this time in an outward way (Greek, *pletho*), as if being clothed (Acts 2:4). This was for Christ to be their power. Peter described this event as the fulfillment of Joel’s prophetic word: “I will pour out of My Spirit upon *all* flesh” (v. 17). This outpouring of Christ as the Spirit of power was accomplished at that moment for the entire Body of Christ—it is not conditionally based on behavior, nor is it to be sought. It is not a “second blessing” to be begged for; rather, it was promised and outpoured on the entire Body of Christ once for all.

Further proof that speaking in tongues is not the unique evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit is the fact that the incident of the disciples’ miraculous tongue-speaking recorded in Acts 2:4 did not occur until several days *after* Christ had breathed Himself as the Spirit into them, regenerating them, in John 20:22.

Consistent with the inclination of Oneness theology, this teaching majors on the minors, overemphasizing what is essentially a footnote in Scripture. First of all, tongue-speaking is spoken of in only two of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament (the baptism with fire in Matthew 3:11-12 being for judgment on those who refuse to receive the Holy Spirit). Only Acts and 1 Corinthians mention tongues. Acts historically records its occurrence three times, and 1 Corinthians is actually Paul’s rebuke and adjustment of these immature believers’ misuse and overuse of tongue-speaking. For example, Paul speaks of the church in Corinth, which was so much for this particular gift, as being fleshly and fleshy infants in Christ (3:3, 1). Second Corinthians, a more positive Epistle, never mentions tongues. In addition, Romans, regarded as the classic description of the normal Christian life and church life, never mentions the gift of tongue-speaking. (Significantly, Paul wrote Romans from the city of Corinth, while observing the childish and divisive condition of this church which so zealously promoted tongue-speaking.) Paul does not mention miraculous gifts in Romans, but he does mention gifts produced from the maturity of the divine life imparted at regeneration, such as service, teaching, giving, leading, and showing mercy (12:4-8). In his other thirteen Epistles, Paul never speaks of tongues other than his

adjustment in 1 Corinthians, yet this teaching is showcased in Oneness theology as if it were a central doctrine of God’s eternal purpose.

Salvation Maintained by Behavior

This narrow theological view is also reflected in the legalistic standards imposed on adherents of Oneness theology. Rules concerning hair length, skirt length, and entertainment are vigorously applied. Men are required to keep their hair short, women are forbidden to cut their hair, and members are expected not to own televisions or attend movies. This sort of orchestrated uniformity, rallied around the banner of codes of conduct, only further confirms that this theology has missed the central point of the New Testament revelation.

The Central View of God’s Economy

Each deviant teaching and practice in Oneness theology serves to reinforce its deviation from God’s New Testament economy. For example, its view of the Father, Son, and Spirit as three temporary modes of existence rather than three eternally co-existing and coinhering hypostases greatly limits the richness and fullness of the believer’s understanding, pursuit, and experience of God. Second, its insistence on the formulaic use of the phrase *in the name of Jesus* at baptism obscures the biblical truth that baptism is a grafting, a union of the believer with the death, resurrection, and person of Christ (Rom. 6:1-5). Third, its requirement of tongue-speaking as evidence of salvation causes the believer to deviate from the scriptural exhortation to enjoy the divine life received at his new birth, and instead to fixate on the manifestation of a miracle which Scripture never instructs us to seek. Fourth, it gauges the success of one’s salvation experience and spiritual growth by the ability to comply with certain rules regarding outward appearance and behavior. This misdirected emphasis distracts believers from pursuing the growth of the divine life, which is the increase of God’s element in their being, focusing instead on self-improvement and self-adjustment. We believers are blessed with the dispensing of the complete Triune God—not a modalistic God; with an actual, vital oneness with Christ—not a formulaic baptism; with God’s complete judicial and organic salvation—not the pursuit of tongue-speaking; and with the genuine transformation of our soul—not self-adjustment. What a blessing it is to experience and enjoy the Triune God in the divine dispensing according to the divine economy!

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Works Cited

Boyd, Gregory A. *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.