

World Religions, Cults, and Aberrant Beliefs

Lesson 13 – Oneness Pentecostalism

Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

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History

Pentecostalism refers to a movement or denomination that places special emphasis on a direct personal experience of God through the baptism with the Holy Spirit. “Pentecostal” is derived from Pentecost, which is the coming of the Spirit at the beginning of the Church (Acts 2). Pentecostals tend to see their movement as reflecting the same kind of spiritual power and teachings that were found in the Apostolic Age of the early church. For this reason, some Pentecostals also use the term “Apostolic” or “full gospel” to describe their movement.

The modern Pentecostal movement is generally regarded to have begun in 1901 in a chapel prayer meeting in Topeka, Kansas, led by Charles Parham, a teacher at Bethel Bible College. In 1906, the Pentecostal experience of “speaking in tongues” burst on the scene during a revival in an African-American Baptist church on Azusa Street in LA. Following these beginnings, Pentecostal preachers and churches spread rapidly coalescing into various denominations and factions.

In 1913, one popular teacher, R.E. McAlister of Toronto, Ontario, began teaching that the Trinity doctrine was untrue and that baptism should be done correctly in Jesus’ name only—not in the traditional Trinitarian formula. This theology is called “oneness” which teaches that God is a single person who was manifested as Father in creation and as the Father of the Son, in the Son for our redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in our regeneration. It is called modalism.

By 1916, “oneness” views were being expounded by some ministers in the Assemblies of God (AOG) denomination. They were strongly rejected by the denomination’s council that year, and the AOG adopted a strong Trinitarian stance in its statement of faith. More than 160 oneness ministers who were expelled from the AOG quickly formed their own alliances to promote their doctrines. After that time, a number of oneness sects formed, most of which were predominately African-American. The largest oneness movements today are the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW). The UPCI was organized in 1945 with the union of two predominately white groups started earlier in the century. The PAW formed in 1918, but split along racial lines in 1924. Today it is predominately African-American. T. D. Jakes is a well-known tele-preacher.

Source of authority

The Oneness Pentecostalism believes that the Bible is the inspired word of God and the ultimate source of authority. However, their specific interpretations are considered correct over other interpretations.

The Nature of God Including the Trinity

Oneness Pentecostal theology affirms that there exists only one God. It affirms the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. However, Oneness theology denies the Trinity and teaches that God is a single person who was "manifested as Father in creation and as the Father of the Son, in the Son for our redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in our regeneration." Another way of looking at it is that God revealed himself in three separate appearances at points in time: as Father in the OT, as the Son in Jesus during Christ’s ministry on earth, and now as the Holy Spirit after Christ’s ascension.

Biblical Response

There is one God (Deut. 6:4). He is Creator and Lord of everything that exists (Gen 1-3). He is infinite (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 17:28), transcendent (yet personal), eternal (Gen 21:33; Psa 90:2), unchangeable (James 1:17), omnipresent (Psa 139:7-12), sovereign (Eph 1), omniscient (Matt 11:21), and omnipotent (Rev 19:6). He eternally exists as Triune God: three persons – Father (John 6:27, Eph 4:6), Son (Col 1:16-19; Heb 1:8), Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4) – each equal; having the same attributes; and equally worthy of adoration, worship, and faith.

The Threeness of God

God exists eternally as three: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The first indication of the plurality of Persons within the Godhead comes in Genesis 1 where God speaks of Himself in a plural sense (Gen 1:26-27 cf. Gen 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8). In context, the plural name for God, Elohim, speaks of God's supremacy more than the Trinity. However, the plural opens the door for plurality. In addition, the plural sense in Hebrew is three or more, further implying the Trinity.

The threeness of God is developed in the NT as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all recognized as God. This observation of the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is foundation to Trinitarianism. Importantly, the threeness of God does not contradict the oneness of God because the threeness is in respect to *persons* and oneness is in respect to *essence*. The term "person" is somewhat inadequate because it connotes some things that are true of God and some things that are not. By using the term "person," Christians do not mean that God has a physical body or that there are three distinct beings. We have only known one person as equaling one being. The concept of three persons in one being is unfamiliar to us.

The Distinction of Persons

In the OT, God the Father is distinguished within the Godhead in several ways.

- God is set apart from the Lord (Gen 19:24; Hos 1:7).
- The Lord is set apart from the Redeemer (Isa 59:20).
- The Lord is set apart from the Spirit (Isa 48:16; 59:21; 63:9-10).
- The Lord is set apart from the Angel of the Lord (Gen 16:7-13; Mal 3:1).

In the NT, God the Father is distinguished from the Son in that they relate with each other (Matt 17:5; 27:46). In addition, the Son and the Spirit are distinct from each other (John 16:13-14).

The Relationship of Persons

Jesus Christ is uniquely described as God's "only begotten Son" (John 3:16). He is also described as "the only begotten God" in John 1:18. The Holy Spirit is uniquely described as "proceeding from the Father" in John 15:26. The Father sent the Son (John 5:36-37; 6:44; 1 John 4:14) and the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 1 Peter 1:12) in Christ's name. Due to the eternity of Jesus Christ, "begotten" must be understood in the sense of generation not creation. From this we can deduce that the Father begat the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father. The difference between "begat" and "proceed" is a fine point indeed. The more common word "sent" is perhaps the safest place to focus the relationship within the members of the Trinity.

There is clearly an initiating role that God the Father has in the Trinity. The Father sent the Son with authority (Matt 28:20; John 5:26-27, 30) and also sent the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). The Son clearly has the initiating role with the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). John 15:26 and 16:7 say that the Son will send the Holy Spirit.

The relationship within the Trinity never describes the Father in a subordinate role and never describes the Holy Spirit in an initiating role. While there is a functional order within the Trinity, this does not lead us to conclude there is a subordinate nature. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in nature as God. The nature of God's immutability leads us to believe, with historical Christianity, that the ordering of the relationships within the Trinity is eternal.

As there is a functional order within the roles of the Trinity, there is an order of emphasis that the Father, Son and, Holy Spirit serving in relation to creation. For example, in salvation we find the Father in the role of electing (1 Pet 1:2), the Son in the role of redeeming (1 Pet 1:18), and the Holy Spirit in the role of regenerating (Titus 3:5).

Trinity Conclusion

Because God is uniquely three Persons in one Being, there are no analogies that can completely communicate the Trinity. Because the concept of three Persons dwelling in one Divine Being is unfamiliar to mankind, it is difficult to communicate this doctrine. The difficulty of man's understanding does not negate the importance of the Trinity. God is complex and what more important undertaking exists than to focus our attention on God's Being? The practical importance of the doctrine of the Trinity is that it requires us to pay equal attention, and give equal honor, to all three persons.

The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

Oneness Pentecostals agrees with historical, Biblical Christianity that Jesus was born of a virgin and that He had two natures. However, they deny the doctrine of the Trinity and believe that Jesus is God the Father, Jesus is the Holy Spirit, and the name of God is "Jesus." They also deny the pre-existence of the Word as the Son and teach that He existed as the Father.

Biblical Response

As with the study of the Trinity, there are multitudes of passages that speak of the Father, Son, and Spirit as separate persons. One particularly convincing passage recounts Jesus' baptism.

¹⁶ After being baptized, **Jesus came up immediately from the water**; and behold, the heavens were opened, and **he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him**,¹⁷ and behold, **a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."** Matt 3:16-17

Jesus had a pre-incarnate existence. Pre-incarnate simply means existence prior to the incarnation i.e. His existence as the Second Person of the Godhead prior to His incarnation at the virgin birth.

Positively Stated: In His essential being, Jesus Christ never began to be; He existed from eternity as the Second Person of the Triune Godhead.

Negatively Stated: In His essential being, Jesus Christ did not begin to exist when He was conceived in the womb of His mother, Mary.

Practically Stated: The Second Person of the Triune Godhead made a conscious and gracious decision to lay aside the glories and reputation of deity to take upon Himself the nature of man and the form of a servant (Phil 2:5-11).

Christ's preexistence is shown in passages in the NT (John 1:1; 1:14; 3:13; 3:31; 6:33; 6:35; 6:41; 6:62; 8:23; 8:58; 17:5; Heb 1:8; Col 1:17) as well as the OT (Mic 5:2, Isa 9:6). Jesus was active prior to His incarnation primarily as Creator and the Angel of the Lord.

The Nature of Man

Oneness Pentecostals are Arminian in soteriology, therefore, they believe that man inherited weakness from Adam and although is far removed from perfect righteousness is still free to do spiritual good.

Biblical Response

Sin can be defined as anything contrary to the character of God (Rom 3:23) either by commission or omission transgressing God's word (Rom 5:15), lawlessness or rebellion (1 John 3:4), and missing the mark of perfect righteousness (Matt 5:48). Every person has a sin nature. It is the sinful state in which people are born. We inherit the sin nature from Adam (Rom 5:12). The sin nature is the corruption of our whole nature and is that which inclines us to sin. The result of the sin nature is "total depravity" – where the corruption of sin extends to every aspect of our being (Rom. 1:18–3:20) including intellect (2 Cor. 4:4), conscience (1 Tim. 4:2), will (Rom. 1:28), and heart (Eph. 4:18).

The Means of Salvation

Oneness Pentecostals agrees with historical, Biblical Christianity that through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, sins can be forgiven and humanity reconciled with God. However, Oneness Pentecostals add to the saving work of Christ works needed for salvation.

Oneness theology also maintains that baptism is a necessary part of salvation; that is, in order to be saved, one must be baptized, by immersion. Not only must baptism be by immersion, it must also be administered with the formula "In Jesus' name" rather than the formula "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit". Finally, this baptism must be administered by a duly ordained minister of a church that maintains oneness theology.

Biblical Response

Look at Lesson 8 – The International Church of Christ for a more detailed look at refuting the belief that baptism is required for salvation.

Baptism is the first step in obedience of the new believer (Acts 8:36-38) and the outward testimony to the world that the believer is identifying himself with Christ in death and resurrection to new life (Rom 6:1-11) and with the Body of Christ (Acts 2:41). Baptism pictures outwardly what the Holy Spirit has accomplished inwardly by placing the believer into union with Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-4) and into Christ's spiritual body, which is the church (1 Cor 12:13).

³⁶As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷[And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] ³⁸And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. Acts 8:36-38

³Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. Rom 6:3-4

¹³For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Cor 12:13

Oneness churches also teach that speaking in tongues is a necessary manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Since a person cannot be saved without the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9), it follows that only those who have spoken in tongues are really saved. There is, therefore, an emphasis that Oneness church members speak in tongues to "demonstrate" that they are saved and have the truth: no tongues means no salvation. This has placed tremendous socio-psychological pressure on adherents to conjure up the gift of tongues. Those who do not speak in tongues are thought to be lacking in faith or even to be entirely unrepentant.

Biblical Response

All spiritual gifts are distributed sovereignly by the Holy Spirit to those He wills for the equipping and edification of the whole body of Christ (1 Cor 12-14). There is no indication that any spiritual gift is required to receive God's gift of salvation by grace or to be filled with His Holy Spirit.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is not accompanied by charismatic signs. Unfortunately, in the last century many from the Charismatic churches have misapplied Acts 2 and have taught that the gift of speaking in tongues or some other experiential sign must accompany the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They have deemed that the absence of such signs suggest that one has not truly been baptized by the Spirit. However, the gift of tongues in Acts 2 is a foundational ministry of the Holy Spirit in starting the church and the church age (1 Cor 13:8-12). The giving of speaking and serving gifts were for the edification of the body of Christ, but the sign gifts were given to authenticate the early messengers of Scripture as being from God (Cf. 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:2-3).

Oneness groups are decidedly Arminian in the doctrine of salvation. They deny the total depravity of man, the sovereignty of God, man can choose to believe in God on his own free will, God's call in the heart of a sinner can be rejected, and salvation can be lost.

Biblical Response

The Scriptures are clear that every person is totally depraved (Rom 5:12; Rom 1:18-3:20; 2 Cor 4:4; 1 Tim 4:2; Rom 1:28; Eph 4:18). The idea of Total Depravity is not that man displays as much evil as he possibly could, nor that he cannot do any good, or even feign a love for God, but that his entire nature is affected by sin and as such he is totally incapable of moving on his own toward God (Psa 51:5; Rom 3:10-18; Rom 3:23; Gen 6:5; Jer 17:9; Eph 2:1-3; John 3:19-20; John 6:44; John 6:65; John 8:33).

The Scriptures are also clear that God chooses those whom He will save. Unconditional Election is God's unconditioned choice before the foundation of the world of those individuals whom He would save (Matt 22:1-14; Rom 3:10-13; 8:27-30; 9:6-24; 1 Cor 1:18-19; Eph 1:3-11; 2:8-9; 2; Acts 13:48; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 2:10; 1 Pet 1:1-2; 2 Pet 1:10; 2:13;). Since man is dead, blind, held captive, etc., the remedy must come from outside himself. The dead cannot cause themselves to be alive. The Scriptures declare that we have been "made alive" (Eph 2:4-6) and "born again" (1 Pet 1:3) by God (from outside ourselves). God's choice cannot be resisted; and even if it could, the touched heart would not desire to resist.

The Scriptures also teach that a true believer cannot lose their salvation for the Scriptures declare that nothing can separate the believer from Christ (Rom 8:28-39). All true believers once saved are kept by God's power and are always saved (John 5:24; 6:37-40; 10:27-30; Rom 5:9-10; 8:1, 31-39; 1 Cor 1:4-8; Eph 4:30; Heb 7:25; 13:5; 1 Pet 1:5; Jude 24).

Oneness Pentecostals have an unbiblical view of God, an unbiblical doctrine of Jesus Christ, an unbiblical understanding of man's position before God, and unbiblical requirements for salvation (water baptism in Jesus' name, speaking in tongues, and human effort or works). Oneness Pentecostalism, therefore, must be viewed as a Christian cult.

Witnessing Strategies

Let's remember some of our general strategies:

1. Sanctify your heart. (1 Pet 3:15)
2. Pray – this is a spiritual battle for the truth. (2 Cor 10:3-5)
3. Be ready with a good understanding of the Scriptures.
4. Do not argue. Do not attack the person. (2 Tim 2:24-26)
5. Make sure you define words.
6. Do not get off on tangents. The important points are the source of authority, the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus, the nature of man, and the means of salvation.
7. Avoid Christian jargon – it has no meaning for the unchurched.
8. Share your testimony and your assurance of eternal life through Christ.