

Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity

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We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of all things both visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten son of the Father, that is of the same substance of the Father; God from God, light from light, true God from true God; begotten, not created, consubstantial with the Father...And we believe in the Holy Spirit.¹ (The Nicene Creed)

Ever since those words above were hammered out, they have been heralded by orthodox Christianity as the truth concerning the nature of God. However, this belief in the Trinity has been one of, if not *the* most violently attacked doctrines of the church. Of course, the Nicene Creed was formulated to define the church's stance on the deity of Jesus Christ, in response Arius, who taught that Jesus Christ was neither eternal nor God.

Arianism was a formidable adversary to Christian doctrine; but it has, for the most part, been recognized as false. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are the most well-known proponents of this view today, but almost universally orthodox Christians are aware of the fact that they are a cult. Christian bookstores carry a plethora of books that combat the heresy of Watchtower theology, thereby defusing the threat considerably.

However, unknown to many orthodox Christians today, there is another heresy circulating today, which is just as serious as Arianism and also denies the Trinity. This heresy is quite widespread and believed in many Christian circles today—despite being questioned by the church in the third century and officially condemned in the fourth. However, evangelical Christians today by and large do not recognize proponents of this view as fostering a cult, and the particular sect that teaches this heresy is not classified as a cult by the majority of contemporary American Christians. Still, if presented with the facts, few Christians would disagree that this heresy is more malignant than Arianism ever was.

¹Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972).

Such is the case with the Oneness Pentecostal Church. I like to refer to it as “the stealth bomber” of the cults, because by using the name *Pentecostal*, it flies in under the radar and is not recognized as a cult. In addition to their view of the Godhead, Oneness Pentecostals have many reasons to be labeled a cult; but in this article, the aim will be to expose that particular doctrine which is known as modalism or Sabellianism. The discussion will start with a definition of modalism, cover the history of the heresy, and then move to an apologetic against the doctrine of modalism.

Modalism Defined

The essential idea of this school of thought is that there is one God, which may be variously designated as Father, Son, or Spirit. The terms do not stand for real distinctions, but are merely names that are appropriate and applicable at different times.²

In other words, in this view, the designations *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* are merely titles that refer to the One God—namely Jesus. Hence, this view is also sometimes called the *Jesus Only* movement.³ Dr. Ergun Caner aptly refers to this as the “Jesus is Superman” view because according to Oneness Pentecostals, Jesus changes from the Father to the Spirit and back to the Son. Staunch Oneness Pentecostals even go to the point of saying that Jesus was the Father in the Old Testament, the Son in the New Testament, and the Holy Spirit now during the church age.

One Oneness pastor that I consulted as a source for this article explained his group’s belief as follows: “I’m a brother, a son, and a dad, all while being the same person. I’m not three different people; I just fulfill three different roles or offices”⁴. Their lack of distinction between the persons of the Trinity reveals the danger behind their position on the godhead. However, is it

² Millard Erickson, *Christian Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998.)

³ Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *The Christian Trinity in History*, trans. Edmund J. Fortman, S.J. (Still River: St. Bede’s Publications, 1975), pg 73.

⁴ Wayne Lawhorne Interview, Bible Truth Tabernacle in Bedford Va.

true that the early church believed and taught this doctrine, as is claimed by Oneness Pentecostals? Was the early church modalist, while the concept of the Trinity was unknown until the third and fourth centuries? The next section of the article will address this specific issue.

The History of Modalism

Oneness Pentecostals honestly believe that their view of the Godhead is the true doctrine and the only one that is faithful to the teachings of the apostles. Furthermore, they refer to the Trinity as “a deception of old Satan”⁵ and to people who teach the Trinity as false prophets. However, when one examines church history, these conclusions soon prove false to the core.

Apparently, the first time modalism as a concept came on the scene was in the early third century, by a man named Praxeus, who is known from Tertullian’s *Against Praxeus*. Praxeus taught a doctrine known as *patripassionism*—a belief that says that the Father died on the cross.⁶ One would have to accept this paradox if modalism were true because the Father and the Son would be the same person. Tertullian, who was the first to use the word *Trinity*, strongly disagreed with this teaching and stressed in his letters that the persons of the godhead were separate and distinct; however, far from declaring that there are three gods, he said that “[t]he Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in substance.”⁷ This statement is perhaps the earliest mention of anything in history that addresses the issue which later gave rise to modalism, which already rules out Oneness Pentecostalism’s claim that the apostles taught it.

The person who is noted as the father of modalism is Sabellius, and, consequently, modalism is sometimes called Sabellianism. Sabellius was a teacher in the third century, who adopted patripassionism and made it famous. Lonergan recounts, “Sabellius was

⁵ Wilbur King, *Let us Make Man in Our Image, After Our Likeness* tract (Salem Oregon: n.d.), pp. 1

⁶ Millard Erickson, *Christian Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998.)

⁷ William G. Rusch *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1980) Pp. 10

excommunicated by Pope Callistus. He became influential, either directly or indirectly, in the Pentapolis of Libya, and his influence provoked the intervention of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria.”⁸ Thus, modalism clearly draws its origins from Praxeus and Sabellius. However, one should note that Sabellius, Praxeus, and other ancient modalists differ from modern modalists in that they believed “it was the Father who was the one true person of the Godhead and who also expressed himself in the modes of Father, Son, and Spirit.”⁹ Modalists today almost universally accept Jesus as the only person in the Godhead.

No one knows exactly when this shift in belief happened, but it is clear that by the time modalism resurfaced in the twentieth century, it was advocated by followers of Oneness theology. This resurgence is believed to have been started by “R.E. McAlister, during a 1913 Pentecostal camp meeting.”¹⁰ Apparently, this issue sprang to life again around the first part of the twentieth century when “some pioneer Pentecostal preachers began administering water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, believing this to be the Biblical formula.”¹¹

These practices soon gave rise to a huge debate that threatened to split the Pentecostal Church at its very seams. The debate raged on as some Pentecostals appealed to Jesus’ words in Matthew 28:19, while Oneness proponents kept going back to Acts 2:38, in which Peter commands his Jewish listeners to “be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.” Eventually, an explanation was given by the Oneness side that the *name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—which Jesus mentions in Matthew 28:19—is Jesus. This supposed revelation was accepted and is still held to by Oneness churches.

⁸ Bernard Lonergan *The Way to Nicea*, trans. Conn O’Donovan (Philadelphia Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1976.) pg 38

⁹ John Ankerberg, John Weldon. *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*. (Eugene Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1999.) Pg. 368

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 366

¹¹ Carl Brumback. *God in Three Persons*. (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1959.) Pg. 11

Therefore, modalism clearly was not taught by the early church in any manner. This fact in itself is evidence that Oneness Pentecostalism is at its very core wrong and heretical. Nonetheless, at this point in the paper I will move forward and directly challenge claims made by Oneness theology. What about verses like Acts 2:38, Deuteronomy 6:4, and any number of others which seem to support modalism? And what about their claims that orthodox Christianity's belief in the Trinity is tantamount to polytheism?

The Claims Of Oneness Pentecostals

The first claim that this paper will address is the claim that many cults make—that the Trinity is a confusing and self-contradictory doctrine. First, one should note that just because a doctrine or a truth is confusing, that observation does not imply that it is any less true or valid. The human body serves as an example. Should one claim that all the complexities of the eye and brain are not confusing or hard to understand? Of course not. Unless one is an expert in anatomy and physiology, the human body is a very hard thing to comprehend. Thus, one should not say that because the Trinity is a complex doctrine, it may not be true. That charge does absolutely nothing to harm Trinitarian theology.

Second, the Trinity is not self-contradictory. Oneness Pentecostals assert that the idea that God is both three and one is obviously incoherent. However, as Peter Van Inwagen writes: “When the doctrine is stated . . . it can be *shown* not to be self contradictory.”¹² There are two ways to approach this matter. First, as Millard Erickson says, God is one in a different way than He is three.

¹² Peter Van Inwagen, “Three Persons in One Being: On attempts to show that the doctrine of the trinity is self-contradictory” *The Trinity: East/West Dialogue*. Ed. Melville Y. Stewart. (Boston, Mass: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003.) 83.

The threeness and oneness of God are not in the same respect...The contradiction is not real, but only apparent. A contradiction exists when something is A and not A at the same time and in the same respect...Maintaining His unity as well, orthodoxy deals with the problem by suggesting that the way in which God is three is in some respect different from the way in which He is one.¹³

Thus, it can be shown that the doctrine of the Trinity is truly not self contradictory. What Erickson so clearly points out is that it is not a contradiction for a human to be one, but yet be plural when it comes to the spirit, soul, and body, anymore than it is not a contradiction for the Bible to be one book, yet be plural in that it is made up of many books. God indeed does not contradict himself in his nature; therefore He must be three in a different manner from which He is one.

But what about the claim that the Trinity is pagan in origin and is a “doctrine of devils,” as is said by Oneness pastors and writers? This paper has already explained the origins of Oneness doctrine concerning the Trinity and has shown it to be the case that modalism appeared later in time than the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, the first time modalism was suggested, the early church reacted against it and treated it as a heresy.

It seems logical to me that if the doctrine of the Trinity were so evil and satanic in origin, then modalism would predate it, and the roles would be reversed. Had the early church been modalists, they would have reacted against Trinitarian doctrine; however, that was not the sequence in which it happened. Thus, the burden of proof is on the shoulders of Oneness adherents to prove that the Trinity stems from paganism. The evidence is simply not there to prove what they so vehemently declare to be true. William J. Hill has us consider the fact that the earliest statements involving a triad do not even mention the three persons separately: “Early Christian confessions were triadic—but they were confessions of God, Son, and the Spirit rather

¹³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998.)

than Father, Son, and Spirit”¹⁴. The fact that God and the Son are mentioned separately does not repudiate the idea of the deity of Christ, but it certainly rules out the sublimation of God into the Son.

The fact is that the Trinity is highly favored when it comes to the testimony of church history. However, the teachings of the church should be based on the Bible, and Oneness Pentecostals have more than a few Bible verses for which they claim to be the only ones who have the correct interpretation. Could it be true that they have had some sort of revelation from God that the rest of Christianity throughout all of church history missed out on?

Oneness Pentecostals and the Bible

Oneness Pentecostals appear to trust more in what their pastors and leaders say than in God’s Word itself. In conversations I have had with Oneness Pentecostals, they constantly made the appeal that one must have “the revelation” in order to see the real modalistic truth that is contained in the Scriptures. This aforementioned special “revelation” comes very close to gnosticism, as it claims that one must have secret knowledge when interpreting the Scriptures, and that more often than not, their pastors are the only ones to have that “knowledge.” But what about the explicit appeals to certain biblical texts by Oneness proponents? Let us examine the treatment of some of Oneness Pentecostalism’s key texts when they try to disprove the Trinity.

Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38

Matthew 28:19 is known to all of Christianity as the Great Commission. In that commission, Jesus instructs the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, which most Christians consider to be strong evidence for the Trinity.

¹⁴ William J. Hill. *The Three Personed God*, (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982.) pg 29.

This book is very fascinating, as the author explores the doctrine of the Trinity throughout the history of the church. It is a good resource to be consulted when defeating the erroneous claims of Oneness Pentecostals about the origins of Trinitarian doctrine.

However, Oneness Pentecostals, in trying to reconcile this verse with Acts 2:38, in which Peter instructs believers to be baptized in Jesus' name, have said that *Jesus* is the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Indeed, is this a plausible answer to the question? While it is an honest attempt to try to reconcile these two apparently contradicting passages, it is nonetheless wrong. One scholar observes that “[t]he Jews had many baptisms or washings. Among these were the baptism of the proselyte which was to be done in the name of God. . . . You have the expressions, ‘baptized into Moses’ (Greek of 1 Cor. 10:2 and ‘into one baptism of John’ (Greek of Acts 19:3)”¹⁵.

This variety would imply that the Jews were familiar with many different baptisms, but as Dr. Heydt concludes, “[t]he expression in Acts 2:38 is not the baptismal formula itself, but it indicates the type of baptism they needed.”¹⁶ It is true also that the construction of the Greek grammar in both passages is not the same. The word used for *in* in Matthew 28:19 is the Greek word *eis*, which literally means “into,”¹⁷ whereas the Greek word translated *in* in Acts 2:38 is the Greek word *epi*, which is literally translated as “*on or upon*.”¹⁸ Upon doing a word study and following the uses of *epi* throughout the Greek New Testament, one thing sticks out: Whenever the word *epi* is translated into English as *in*, the idea always has to do with doing something on the authority of a person.

Hence, what Peter is saying in Acts 2:38 is not that one must be baptized in Jesus' name as the mode of the baptism, but instead that one must be baptized on the authority of Jesus Christ. This interpretation makes sense because the Jewish audience that Peter was speaking to

¹⁵ Henry J. Heydt, *The Chosen People Question Box 2* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: American Board of Missions to the Jews 1976), pp. 18-19

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Louw and Nida *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Broadway, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989.) pg. 723

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 723

would have needed to hear him emphasize that the baptism that was being commanded was not John's baptism, but the baptism that Jesus commanded, thus making it on the authority of Jesus Christ.

So in reality, Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38 do not contradict one another. And most importantly, one sees that Acts 2:38 clearly does not contradict Trinitarian theology.

Another verse that Oneness Pentecostals hold high as their banner is Deut. 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." At first glance this pronouncement does seem to speak against the idea that God exists in three persons. However, when one examines the Hebrew used, this can no longer be the case.¹⁹ The word used for God here is *elohim*, which is singular, but plural in ending. This verse should not be used as proof of the Trinity either, as it does not necessarily mean *three*, but just plurality²⁰. However, it can and should be used as evidence that it at least allows for the Trinity. Even more importantly though, it does not contradict the doctrine of the Trinity, as is claimed by Oneness apologists.

Since the questions and claims of modalism have been answered, it is time now to ask some questions of modalists. If one were to ignore the passages that seem to prove their doctrine; what about all the passages that go against their doctrine of the Godhead?

Questions to Oneness Pentecostals

John 1:1 states that the Word existed with God, and the Word was also God. This verse implicitly states that there is more than one person in the godhead. However, in order for modalism to be true, this could not be! How does a modalist treat this passage? One commentator observes that "[t]he use of the Greek preposition *with* the accusative case denotes

¹⁹ W. E. Vine. *Vines Expository Dictionary* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996.) Pg. 97

²⁰ Millard Erickson. *God in Three Persons* 9Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995.)

motion toward a particular direction. This grammatical structure is used to represent intimacy and communion and implies that the Word and God were in face to face relationship”²¹.

A question also exists concerning prayer. Numerous times in Scripture, Jesus is said to have prayed to the Father. Now, unless Jesus was praying to Himself and thus a schizophrenic, this description also provides testimony to the fact that a distinction exists between the persons of the Trinity. Jesus had to have been praying to Someone. After all, during the Lord’s prayer, he did say, “Our Father who art in heaven,” meaning that the location of the Father is not on earth (which would be the case if Jesus was the Father as modalism teaches) but *in heaven*.

Did not Jesus promise in John 14 to go back to the Father’s house to prepare a place for Christians, where they would someday join Him? But if Jesus and the Father are the same person, how would this be possible? If modalism were true, this text would make no sense. And while the topic of the second coming is on hand, if modalism were true and Jesus were presently in “Holy Spirit mode,” how would he return to earth with great power and glory, if he was already here in the form of the Holy Spirit?

Likewise, how would His words be true about going away and sending “another comforter” to be with the disciples? If Jesus were the Holy Spirit, He would have been lying about going away, because the Holy Spirit was to come and stay with them forever. Also, if this logic were completely followed through, a Oneness Pentecostal would have to say that the Second Coming of Christ happened at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to indwell the church.

Moreover, how does modalism make sense when placed alongside a passage such as John 17:20-21, in which Jesus prays that future Christians will be one, “just as He is in the Father and the Father is in Him”? Jesus prayed that Christians would be one, “just as” He and the Father are

²¹ Elmer Towns *John: Believe and Live*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2002.) pg. 2

one. Herein lies, in my opinion, one of the best arguments against modalism in Scripture. When Jesus prayed this prayer, He implied that while Christians are both individually distinct and still part of the same body, He and the Father are different persons but One in substance.

Certainly, it follows through that if Jesus and the Father were the same person, and Jesus prayed for Christians to be one in the same way, then all Christians would have to be the same person as well, which makes no sense. However, if the Trinitarian doctrine is applied here, the passage makes perfect sense. Christians are one in spirit and one in the body of Christ, but they do not lose their distinction as individuals—and so it is with the Trinity.

Conclusion

Therefore, Oneness Pentecostalism's charges against the doctrine of the Trinity don't hold water. When one looks at modalism in depth, while comparing it to Scripture, it falls apart. From a historical standpoint, the church never accepted modalism, but labeled it as heresy. From a biblical standpoint, it fails in comparison to the manifold evidences that point toward the existence of the Trinity. Finally, modalism fails the test of logic, as the doctrine becomes incoherent once one takes it to its logical conclusions.

So is the Trinity important? Without a doubt! Is it viable as an explanation of the Godhead? Absolutely! Is it hard to understand? Yes; but as one scholar puts it,

What we learn of God's analogous characteristics in his unity and Trinity inflames our longing for eternal union with this God of infinite and simple being, goodness, wisdom, and love; who is Creator, Sustainer of every aspect of creaturely being, and Redeemer; who is personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Word, Image, Love, and Gift; who is three and one perichoretically, as a mystical dance.²²

²² Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*. (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.) Pg. 240

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