

Oneness Pentecostalism

Interfaith Evangelism

BELIEF BULLETIN

Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements

Official Names and Membership (estimates): Apostolic Overcoming Holy Church of God (AOHCG)—13,000; Assemblies of the Lord Jesus, Inc. (ALJI)—50,000; Bible Way Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ World Wide, Inc. (Bible Way)—250,000; Church of Our Lord Jesus of the Apostolic Faith (COLJF)—30,000; Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW)—1,000,000 reported; Pentecostal Church of Apostolic Faith (PCAF)—25,000; United Church of Jesus Christ (Apostolic) (UCJC-A)—100,000; United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI)—500,000 (1.5 million worldwide)

Other Designations: “Jesus Only” churches; “Apostolic Pentecostals”; The “Oneness Movement”; The “Jesus Name” Movement

Key Publications: *Pentecostal Herald* (UPCI), *The Global Witness* (UPCI), *The Bible Way News Voice* (Bible Way), *The People’s Mouthpiece* (AOHCG), *The Contender for the Faith* (COLJF), *Christian Outlook* (PAW)

Educational Institutions:

AOHCG:	Berean Christian Bible College—Birmingham, Ala.
PAW:	Aenon Bible School—Indianapolis, Ind.
UCJC:	Institute of Biblical Studies—Baltimore, Md.
UPCI:	Apostolic Bible Institute—St. Paul, Minn. Apostolic Missionary Institute—Oshawa, Ont. Christian Life College—Stockton, Calif. Indiana Bible College—Seymour, Ind. Texas Bible College—Houston, Texas

This Belief Bulletin presents basic Oneness Pentecostal history and doctrines and provides a biblical analysis and response.

History

The modern Pentecostal movement is generally regarded to have begun in 1901 in a chapel prayer meeting in Topeka, Kan., 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 Azuza Street in Los Angeles, Calif. 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, Ont., 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. Other preachers, such as Frank J. Ewart and John G. Scheppe, joined McAlister in his non-trinitarian perspective.

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. Its headquarters and publishing firm, the Pentecostal Publishing House, is located at 8855 Dunn Road, Hazelwood, MO 63042.

The PAW formed in 1918, but split along racial lines in 1924. Today it is predominately African-American and is headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Doctrinal Beliefs

Oneness Pentecostal Sources of Authority

Oneness Pentecostals of all branches affirm the authority of the Bible for doctrine. Many, however, utilize only the King James Version to proof text their unique doctrines. In addition, many Oneness advocates rely on the unbiblical revelations received by various Oneness leaders whom they regard as divinely inspired or anointed interpreters of the Bible. For example, many in UPCI consider the writings of Frank Ewart and John G. Scheppe as authoritative.

Biblical Response: The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). It is the final authority for the Christian on all matters of faith and doctrine. No single translation or human interpretation can be regarded as infallible. All modern writings or “revelations” must be analyzed in light of sound principles of biblical interpretation.

Only One God

Oneness Pentecostals declare that the Godhead consists of only one Person and deny the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. They maintain that the only real “person” in the Godhead is Jesus. Thus, they are often referred to as the “Jesus Only” Movement. They maintain that God exists in two modes, as the Father in heaven, and as Jesus the Son on earth. Nevertheless, they are the same person, not two separate persons. The Holy Spirit is not regarded as a person at all, merely a manifestation of Jesus’ power or a synonym for Him. Several verses are quoted to establish this view, such as Colossians 2:9 (NKJV), “For in Him (Jesus) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” Oneness theologians would argue that if the Father and the Son were separate, then the Godhead could not fully dwell in Christ. Matthew 28:19 also affirms their views that Jesus commanded His disciples to baptize in the “name” (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is said to have two natures: human and divine. Thus, when He died, only His human nature died. Also, when Jesus prayed, it was His human nature praying to His divine nature—not to a separate Father in heaven.

Biblical Response: The Oneness Pentecostal view of God is similar to the ancient heresy of Modalism. Modalism is the belief that one God existed in time in three distinct modes of being: first as the Father in heaven; second, bodily as the Son on earth; and finally as the Holy Spirit.

The Bible indeed teaches the existence of only one God (Deut. 6:4). Nonetheless, historic Christianity maintains that the doctrine of the Trinity (or tri-unity of God) is taught in Scripture. The Bible teaches that the one God exists eternally in three separate and distinct Persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Colossians 2:9 does not teach that the totality of the Godhead was in the body of Jesus, but rather that Jesus

embodied the totality of the divine nature and God is totally revealed in Him. If the Father and the Son are the same person, then the Oneness teachers have a difficult job explaining how the Father and the Son can love each other (See Matt. 3:17; 17:5; John 3:35; 5:20; 2 Pet. 1:17), talk to each other (see John 11:41-42; 12:28; 17:1-26), and know each other (see Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 7:29).

Matthew 28:19 clearly reflects the trinitarian concept that the “name” (authority and characteristics) of the one God is incorporated in the three Persons of the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2). (See the following verses affirming the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit: Luke 12:12; John 15:26; Acts 5:3-10; 13:2-4; 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:30; Heb. 3:7.)

Salvation—Four-fold Legal Requirement

The Oneness Pentecostal movements generally teach that to receive and maintain salvation, a person must adhere to four essential requirements.

1. Faith in Jesus Only

Oneness teachers would agree that salvation requires putting one’s full faith in the Jesus of Oneness doctrine, that is the Jesus who is the totality of the Godhead, who died on the cross as an atonement for sin, and who rose again from the dead.

2. Repentance and Baptism in the “Name of Jesus”

Acts 2:38 is used as evidence that the early church baptized only in the name of Jesus. They maintain that baptism in the trinitarian formula is invalid since it implies belief in three gods. They claim Matthew 28:19 is not to be taken as a command to baptize in that formula.

3. Speaking in Tongues

Like most traditional Pentecostals and charismatics, Oneness Pentecostals teach that speaking in tongues is a gift to be exercised today. However, unlike most traditionalists, the Oneness movements maintain that speaking in tongues is not just a post-conversion indicator of the filling or baptism of the Holy Spirit, but an essential ingredient in the salvation experience itself.

4. Adherence to Holiness Standards

Most Oneness Pentecostals teach that once salvation is gained initially by the preceding ingredients, it must be maintained by daily adherence to legalistic codes of personal behavior. Alcohol and tobacco are prohibited. Women are not allowed to cut their hair, wear short dresses or slacks, use make-up, or wear jewelry. Men are expected to dress conservatively (white shirts and dark slacks), be clean shaven, and have short haircuts. Violations of these codes may result in a loss of salvation and exclusion from church fellowship.

Some small Oneness groups also practice handling poisonous snakes or drinking poison to demonstrate their faith and holiness based on Mark 16:18 in the King James Version.

Biblical Response: Salvation is “by grace through faith” in Jesus Christ alone (see Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

Baptism is not essential to one’s reception of salvation. It is a symbol of one’s identification with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The proper mode is immersion in the triune name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:38 must be read in context and in light of Jesus’ clear command in Matthew 28:19.

Speaking in tongues, like all other gifts, is distributed sovereignly by the Holy Spirit to those He wills for the equipping and edification of the whole body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12—14). There is no indication that it, or any other spiritual gift, is required to receive God’s gift of salvation by grace or to be filled with His Holy Spirit (see Eph. 5:18).

Oneness movements’ emphases on personal holiness and healthy lifestyles are commendable. Nevertheless, the requirements for outward adherence to a strict moral code in order to maintain salvation inevitably leads to legalism and a lack of assurance of eternal life.

No amount of good works, moral living, or church membership guarantees salvation. Salvation is entirely based on grace through faith in Christ. Good works and holy living are the natural responses of salvation already received—not its cause (see Eph. 2:10). Salvation is eternally assured for those who have accepted Christ as personal Lord and Savior (see John 1:12; 5:24; 1 John 5:13).

Mark 16:18 is part of a disputed portion of Mark’s text. Regardless, handling snakes or drinking poison is a misuse of that Scripture and has resulted in the deaths of many practitioners.

Conclusions: Oneness Pentecostals have an anti-trinitarian view of God, an unbiblical doctrine of Jesus Christ, and unbiblical requirements for salvation (speaking in tongues, water baptism in “Jesus’ name,” and a legalistic moral code). Thus, those churches adhering to its basic doctrines cannot be regarded as authentically Christian. Any group or church that claims to be Christian yet deviates at any point from historical Christian faith is, by definition, a cult. Oneness Pentecostal churches are, therefore, cultic in nature and outside the theological parameters of historic Christianity.

Witnessing to Oneness Pentecostals

1. Have a clear understanding of your faith and the Bible.
2. Acquire a basic knowledge of Oneness Pentecostals’ beliefs and practices.
3. Seek to build a personal and respectful relationship with the Oneness Pentecostal.
4. Focus the discussion on the essential elements of the Christian faith. Do not get sidetracked defending your denomination.
5. Be prepared to cite (in context) and explain specific biblical passages supporting Christian doctrines,

particularly the biblical basis for the Trinity, the historic understanding of the nature and work of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith.

6. Share your personal testimony of God’s grace and your faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.
7. The Oneness Pentecostal may try to convince you that you need to speak in tongues, be baptized in Jesus’ name, and live according to their strict moral code. Be prepared to explain biblically why you do not believe these are necessary ingredients for salvation or eternal security.
8. Present the basic plan of salvation and encourage the Oneness Pentecostal to receive Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior.
9. Pray and trust the Holy Spirit to lead you as you share.

Resources

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Dictionary of Christianity in America. Edited by Daniel G. Reid. Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

Scripture quotation marked NKJV is from The New King James Version. Copyright 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.

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