



STATEMENT DO-077-2

WITNESSING TIPS

Sharing Your Faith with a Oneness Pentecostal (Part 2)

by Gregory A. Boyd

In the previous issue of the Christian Research Journal I offered three suggestions on how to witness to Oneness Pentecostals. One must demonstrate to them Christlike love; one must correct their tritheistic misunderstandings about the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity; and one must confront their theology on its weakest points. We concluded by discussing the first of the four weakest points of Oneness theology: their belief that tongues is a necessary sign of salvation. I will now conclude this two-part series by discussing the remaining three weakest aspects of Oneness theology: (1) the Oneness denial of the preexistence of Christ; (2) their belief that Jesus was the Father as well as the Son; and (3) their belief that one must be baptized "in Jesus' name" in order to be saved.

(1) Unlike orthodox Christianity, members of the United Pentecostal Church and other Oneness groups do not believe that Jesus existed as the Son of God from all eternity. Since they deny that there are three eternal persons in the Godhead, the only sense in which Jesus could have existed prior to His human birth in Bethlehem is either as God the Father or as an idea in the Father's mind (viz., as an aspect of God's foreknowledge).

This position is central to Oneness theology, but it is easily refuted by pointing out to Oneness believers that there are many places in Scripture that clearly speak of Jesus as existing *with* (not *as*) God the Father prior to His earthly existence, and *not* as a mere idea in God's mind! For example, John 1:1 explicitly identifies "the Word" (Jesus Christ, v. 14) who is God and who from eternity is *with* God. This could not refer to a mere idea in God's mind since the Word *is* God (and God is certainly no mere idea). Moreover, the same one who was "in the beginning" and who is creator (can a mere idea create?) is said to have come to His own world and to have been rejected by it -- an unambiguous reference to the *real* Jesus Christ (vv. 10-14).

In this same context we find John the Baptist referring to Christ's real preexistence (John 1:15, 31), as well as Jesus Himself making reference to the same thing. Jesus notes how He shall ascend up to the Father where He was "before" (6:62). He says, numerous times, that He has "come forth" from the Father, is "going back" to the Father, has "come down from heaven" and "come into the world" — all statements which clearly presuppose that He *really* existed with the Father prior to His earthly birth (John 3:13, 31; 6:33, 38, 41, 46, 51, 57-58; 8:42; 13:3; 16:27-28).

In conjunction with these verses one should lead the Oneness believer through a careful reading of such passages as Colossians 1:16-17, 1 Corinthians 8:6, and Hebrews 1:2-10 which clearly speak of Jesus as the Son of God creating the world. From my own experience as a Oneness believer, I can assure you that these verses are extremely troublesome to the Oneness position.

(2) The most forceful response to the Oneness claim that Jesus is the Father as well as the Son is to simply point out how contrary this belief is to the general teaching of the New Testament. Help your Oneness friend to see that, while Jesus is never once explicitly called "Father" in the New Testament, He is explicitly referred to as "the Son" (of God, of man, etc.) over 200 times. What is more, the Father is referred to as distinct from Jesus the Son throughout the New Testament over 200 times. And over 50 times, Jesus the Son and the Father are juxtaposed within the same verse. Ask your Oneness friend why there is this overwhelming (indeed, unanimous) emphasis on Jesus being the

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

Son of God and being distinct from the Father if in fact Scripture also wants to teach us that Jesus is *Himself* the Father? Why is Scripture so clear on the first point and yet so silent on the second?

It is also helpful to point out to a Oneness believer why the arguments they have for the "Fatherhood" of Jesus simply do not hold water. Oneness believers have splendid arguments for the *deity* of Christ, and this they believe also proves that Jesus is the Father. Reassure your Oneness friends that you fully accept the position that Jesus is Himself God Almighty, but remind them that this does not itself prove that He is therefore God the Father. What is more, the verses that Oneness believers misuse to demonstrate that Christ is the Father simply speak either of His parental ("fatherly") love (Isa. 9:6; John 14:18), or of Christ's unity with the Father, not His identity as the Father (e.g., John 10:30; 14:7-9).

(3) The Oneness belief that baptism must be "in Jesus name for the remission of sins" can be refuted by four brief considerations. First, at least 60 times the New Testament speaks of salvation by faith alone without mentioning baptism. If baptism is in fact necessary for salvation, why is there this emphasis on faith for salvation but not on baptism in Scripture? Second, the phrase "for the remission of sins," used by Peter in Acts 2:38, is also used to describe John the Baptist's baptism (Luke 3:3; Mark 1:4), but no one supposes that his baptism literally washed away people's sins (why would they need to later be rebaptized? Cf. Acts 19:1-6). The word "for" in the Greek (*eis*) need only mean "with a view toward," for we know that the Jews baptized people "for" such things as "freedom," "God's justice," etc.

Third, the Oneness insistence that the words "in Jesus name" have to be said over a person while he or she is being baptized is also without scriptural justification. When this phrase is used in Acts (e. g., 10:45-48), it only means "in the authority of" or "for the sake of." It is not a formula (which is why it never occurs the exact same way twice in Acts). We are commanded to do all things "in the name of Jesus," but this obviously does not mean we have to say "in Jesus name" before we do anything (Col. 3:17). Again, the Jews baptized people "in the name of" many things (Mt. Gerizim, a rabbi, etc.), but they placed no significance on saying these words while performing the ceremony.

Finally, Jesus tells us to baptize "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19), and there is simply no reason to think that Jesus was here cryptically referring to Himself. The fact that next to no one throughout history has understood Jesus to be doing this itself shows that either the Oneness interpretation is wrong, or Jesus is a very poor communicator (and on a point which supposedly affects our salvation!).

It was arguments such as these that led me out of Oneness Pentecostalism, and — when combined with a loving, nondefensive approach — I have found them to be very effective in helping other Oneness believers as well.