

Article: DO147

## ONENESS PENTECOSTALISM: HERESY, NOT HAIRSPLITTING

### Far From a “Moot Point,” the Nature of the Trinity is Essential Christian Doctrine

This article first appeared in CRI's newsletter *Christian Research REPORT*, volume 11, number 1 (1998). For further information or to subscribe to CRI's current newsletter go to: <http://www.equip.org>

The June 1997 issue of *Charisma* features an article by executive editor J. Lee Grady entitled, “The Other Pentecostals,”<sup>1</sup> reporting on the estimated 17 million Oneness Pentecostals worldwide with 2.1 million in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Grady calls Pentecostalism a “house divided.”<sup>3</sup> While Trinitarian and Oneness Pentecostals alike trace their roots back to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906,<sup>4</sup> Oneness Pentecostals have been “separated from their brethren by a nasty doctrinal feud that split families and churches.”<sup>5</sup> Today younger leaders in the Oneness movement hope to end the feud and lead their movement into the mainstream church.<sup>6</sup>

It is disturbing enough to read that 17 million Oneness believers are following a theology that rejects the biblical doctrine of the trinity.<sup>7</sup> Even more troubling is the article's suggestion that among many evangelicals this Oneness error is not terribly significant!”

#### PAPERING OVER DIFFERENCES

After discussing the Oneness rejection of Trinitarian language, Grady uses the phrase, “To split doctrinal hairs even further,...” to introduce Oneness' insistence on baptism in Jesus' name only.<sup>9</sup> While Oneness Pentecostals may be “too sectarian to mix with other evangelicals,” he writes, “they are too orthodox to be compared with Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses.” Grady concludes, “No one really knows what to do with them.”<sup>10</sup>

He proceeds to juxtapose striking comments by two leaders, one from each camp. Trinitarian scholar and ex-Oneness follower Gregory Boyd is quoted as saying, “If you deny the eternity of the three personal ways God is God, you undermine the very essence of Christianity.”<sup>11</sup>

Oneness leader T. F. Tenney states, “We do not deny the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit.... We believe Jesus Christ is wholly, fully, absolutely, and completely God. But no one is going to put us in the position of saying that there are three Gods.”<sup>12</sup>

Grady then offers an observation on our times, seemingly without recognizing its devastating ramifications: “The argument over whether God is three-in-one or one-in-three is a moot point for the average layman, who tends to view the doctrine of the trinity as an unexplainable mystery.”<sup>13</sup> Grady implies that the Church should be more concerned with other issues.

Concerning the baptismal view of the most rigid Oneness Pentecostals, he states, “It is on this issue, theologians say, that Oneness Pentecostals have drifted dangerously toward spiritual elitism and heresy.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Oneness view of baptism is lethally flawed.

## ONENESS VIEW SERIOUSLY FLAWED

Even to remotely imply, however, that corrections to the Oneness understanding of baptism would rescue Oneness theology is wholly misleading.

Grady expresses cavalier confidence that a prominent leader within the largest Oneness denomination, the United Pentecostal Church (UPC), has a right relationship with the Holy Spirit. Referring to Anthony Mangun, a friend of President Clinton, Grady writes: "A good friend who has the Holy Ghost. That might be the best friend any president could have."<sup>15</sup>

The problem is that a group's denial of an essential biblical teaching excludes that group from Christianity. While there may be some Christians in Oneness churches, the movement as a whole is non-Christian. As CRI president Hank Hanegraaff has said, "It would be inappropriate to argue that Jehovah's Witnesses or various other groups are non-Christian because they deny the doctrine of the Trinity, but that the United Pentecostal Church can reject the Trinity and still be considered Christian."<sup>16</sup>

1. J. Lee Grady, "The Other Pentecostals," *Charisma*, June 1997, 62-68.
2. *Ibid.*, 63.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 62.
6. *Ibid.*, 62-63.
7. The Trinitarian view of God teaches that within the nature of the one true God there are three eternally distinct persons. Oneness theology denies the eternal distinctions among the three persons, insisting there is only one actual person in the Godhead (see CRI's *The Biblical Basis for the Doctrine of the Trinity (DT16O)*). The historic Christian church has always affirmed Trinitarian theology, while condemning Oneness models during the early centuries after Christ.
8. E.g., Paul Crouch, President of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, has asserted that the debate over the nature of God as Triune or Oneness is merely a semantic one, and has encouraged affirmations of the United Pentecostal Church International (*Praise the Lord, TBN*, September 5, 1991).
9. *Charisma*, 63.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.* A similar quote can be found in Gregory Boyd's book *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 196. CRI recommends Boyd's book as an effective biblical refutation of the Oneness view and defense of the Trinitarian view of God.
12. *Ibid.*, 63. Tenney's criticism confuses tritheism, the belief in three separate gods, with Trinitarianism.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, "President Clinton's Pentecostal Connection." 63.
16. Hank Hanegraaff, "Is the United Pentecostal Church a Christian Church?" *CRI Perspective* (Rancho Santa Margarita, CA: CRI, 1994) (CP0603)

The Oneness denial of the true nature of God is heretical. Additional false teachings only compound their error. If you want to know more about the dangerous heresy known as Oneness Pentecostalism, please refer to our Resource Catalog Listing or call our Resource Center toll-free at (888)7000-CRI.