

## Article: DJ902

## T. D. JAKES RESPONDS TO THE JOURNAL

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Although he has not directly corresponded with the JOURNAL, T. D. Jakes has publicly responded to last issue's cover article, "The Man, His Ministry, and His Movement: Concerns about the Teachings of T. D. Jakes" by Jerry L. Buckner. He did so in an "op-ed" piece written for *Christianity Today*, which saw three somewhat different incarnations.<sup>1</sup> While we are unable to reproduce his reply in full, the following points warrant consideration:

*Both [Baptist and Oneness Pentecostal] chapters of my early spiritual journey contributed volumes to my faith and walk with God, helping to hone my character. I was shaped by and appreciate both denominations, but am controlled by neither. My association with Oneness people does not constitute assimilation into their ranks any more than my association with the homeless in our city makes me one of them....*

*I believe in one God who is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I believe these three have distinct and separate functions — so separate each has individual attributes, yet are one. I do not believe in three Gods.*

*Many things can be said about the Son that cannot be said about the Father. The Son was born of a virgin; the Father created the virgin from whom He was born. The Son slept (Luke 8:23), but the Father never sleeps (Psalm 121:3—5). The Son took on the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3), but God is a spirit (John 4:24). Likewise, several characteristics are distinctive to the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit alone empowers (Acts 1:8), indwells (2 Timothy 1:15), and guides the believer (John 16:14).*

*In spite of all the distinctives, God is one in His essence. Though no human illustration perfectly fits the Divine, it is similar to ice, water and steam: three separate forms, yet all H<sub>2</sub>O. Each element can co-exist, each has distinguishing characteristics and functions, but all have sameness....*

*The language in the doctrinal statement of our ministry that refers to the Trinity of the Godhead as "manifestations" does not derive from modalism. The Apostle Paul himself used this term referring to the Godhead in 1 Timothy 3:15, 1 Corinthians 12:7, and 1 John 3:5—8. Peter also used the term in 1 Peter 1:20. Can this word now be heresy when it is a direct quote from the Pauline epistles and used elsewhere in the New Testament?...<sup>2</sup>*

*Christians will never agree on every theological issue any more than the colors of our skin will all suddenly match. Finite minds cannot wrap around an infinite God, or the limitless revelation of his wisdom and beauty. But we can all agree on Whom we worship: He is the Great I AM.*

*I look forward to the day when Christians do not judge one another by the diversity of our associates, nor the distinctives of semantics. Rather by the love of Christ we reflect, the integrity of our personal convictions, and the sweet fruit of both in our lives.*

*There are a few things I would die for; a few more I would argue strongly; after that I am too busy trying to preach the Gospel to split hairs. People in my generation are lost, hungry, in prison, wounded, and alone.... Many of our generation are dying without knowing God — not dying for the lack of theology, but for lack of love.<sup>3</sup>*

The rationale Jakes uses in his defense no doubt strikes a chord with many evangelicals who are weary of division among Christians. Indeed, if the Pentecostals he were referring to were Trinitarian Pentecostals, his language might well be appropriate. But when he protests that Christians will never agree on every theological issue and should not judge one another by the diversity of their associates, he begs the following question: Is Oneness theology (historically known as modalism) a permissible doctrine for genuine Christians to hold?

To put the question in clearer perspective, imagine if Jakes's background had been with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Would Christians be sympathetic were he to say, "My association with Baptists and Jehovah's

Witnesses contributed volumes to my faith and walk with God, helping to hone my character. I was shaped by and appreciate both Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, but am controlled by neither. My association with the Watchtower does not constitute assimilation into their ranks"? No, virtually all evangelicals recognize that Jehovah's Witnesses (and Mormons, Christian Scientists, etc.) lie outside the pale of biblical Christianity.

Why should it be different with Oneness believers? In the third century, orthodox Christians rejected modalism (also known as Sabellianism, after Sabellius, its most influential teacher) — the teaching that the Son and Holy Spirit are the same Person as the Father — as a denial of the faith.<sup>4</sup> Early in the twentieth century when Oneness Pentecostalism reared its head, the Assemblies of God rejected it as heresy. Yet, in our own day of nebulous, experience-driven theology, many charismatic Christian leaders are strongly inclined to accept Oneness Pentecostals as brothers and sisters in Christ simply because they speak in tongues, engage in rousing Pentecostal-style worship, and write ardent hymns. Since these "Trinitarians" themselves do not have a firm commitment to credal Christianity, they are willing to compromise even on doctrines as historically sacrosanct as the Trinity for the sake of "unity in the Spirit."<sup>5</sup>

Oneness believers have historically labeled the Trinity a pagan doctrine and counted Trinitarian believers as lost. In recent years, however, a new Oneness approach to orthodoxy has emerged — paralleling a recent movement in Mormonism — that seeks to downplay the differences and sell Oneness as an acceptable Christian alternative. *Charisma* magazine quotes Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan as observing, "Many people consider this a matter of semantics.... And there is a sincere desire — especially on the part of Oneness Pentecostals — to bridge the gap on this issue."

As we have seen, one of these "many people" is Jakes himself. If the differences between Oneness and Trinitarian believers were "a matter of semantics," it would mean that they use different language but believe the same thing. But Oneness Pentecostals have articulately expounded their belief that there is only one person in the Godhead: For Trinitarians, a defining feature of the biblical God is a subject-object love relationship eternally existing within His own Being. For Unitarians (of all stripes, not just the sect by that name), until He created the angels and the world, God was one solitary Subject — absolutely alone. Such radically different conceptions of God cannot be harmonized. Whether it is the Arian god of Jehovah's Witnesses or the Sabellian god of Oneness Pentecostals, a Unitarian god is not the biblical God (e.g., John 17:5; 24). Since the attributes of God include both love (1 John 4:16) and self-sufficiency (e.g., John 5:26), it follows that His loving nature must be fulfilled within His own Being. The biblical revelation of the Trinity explains how this is so.

Some Christians assume that because Oneness believers confess that Jesus is God, their error is less lethal than that of Jehovah's Witnesses or other pseudo-Christian cults that deny His deity. The opposite can be true! Modalism is no less false than Arianism but not so *obviously* false, and therefore it is potentially *more* lethal. Just as a godhead that is not defined by the selflessly loving relationship of three eternal Persons is not the Godhead of the Bible, so a Jesus whose very existence is not defined by a subject-object relationship with His Father bears no resemblance to the Jesus of the Bible (e.g., Matt. 26:39; John 4:34; 6:38). And there is no biblical basis for believing that those who trust in a "different Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:3—4, 13—14) can be saved (especially when one adds the "different gospel" that typically accompanies him — as with the common Oneness teaching that one must both be baptized in Jesus' name alone and speak in tongues in order to be saved).

No doubt some Oneness Pentecostals are saved, due to earlier biblical influences in their lives. With his Baptist upbringing, this is easy to imagine in the case of Jakes. But this would be *despite* and not *because of* Oneness teaching.

The only remaining question should then be: Does T. D. Jakes believe in a Oneness or Trinitarian view of God? Theologically untrained readers of Jakes's response to our article may have had their minds set at ease. In reality, Jakes said nothing to relieve their concerns.

Christians should understand that there are two ways heretics can deny the Trinity. The first is to outright deny it, as do Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and classic Oneness Pentecostals. The second is to claim that one believes in the Trinity while redefining it to mean something entirely different than what the church has historically believed, as do Mormons, Christian Scientists, and the new breed of Oneness Pentecostals that Jakes apparently represents.

It also needs to be pointed out that nothing Jakes said contradicts modalism or commits him to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Theologians recognize two distinct conceptions of the Trinity: the *ontological* Trinity, which refers to the existence of three distinct Persons within the Godhead apart from any relationship to the creation, and the *economic* Trinity, which refers to the distinct roles the three Persons assume in relation to creation. Modalism essentially teaches that the economic Trinity is the only Trinity there is. Their God, who ontologically is *not* Triune, assumes three distinct modes or roles in relation to creation. They are convinced that to confess God is three Persons is to confess the existence of three Gods — even though that's not what the doctrine of the Trinity states (this is their main stumbling block in approaching orthodoxy).

In his rebuttal Jakes never affirms an ontological Trinity but only an economic one. He speaks of different functions the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit perform, but then he clarifies that he does not believe in three Gods, by which it is fairly clear he means Persons. Even the illustration of H<sub>2</sub>O taking the forms of ice, water, and steam says nothing about three persons, only three manifestations, and is in fact a *common* illustration used by modalists to explain their view.

The key tip-off that Jakes is a dyed-in-the-wool modalist is his unwavering insistence — both before our article was published and even in response to our article — on using the word *manifestations* rather than *persons* in regard to the Trinity. Sabellius consistently avoided the use of the term “persons” (Greek: *hypostasis*) in favor of the term “manifestations.”<sup>8</sup> Louis Berkhof explains that “he distinguished between the unity of the divine essence and the plurality of its manifestations....According to him the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are simply designations of three different phases under which the one divine essence manifests itself. God reveals Himself as Father in creation and in the giving of the law, as Son in the incarnation, and as Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification.”<sup>9</sup> By contrast “Oneness Pentecostalism is a form of simultaneous modalism that, unlike Sabellianism, regards all three manifestations as present at the same time, not in successive revelatory periods.”<sup>10</sup> Hence Jakes is able to affirm the coexistence of Father, Son, and Spirit without in any way betraying his Oneness allegiances.

When Jakes cites 1 Timothy 3:16 (he mistakenly cited 3:15) to justify his use of the term manifestations, he simply falls back on the classic prooftext Oneness Pentecostals have always used to argue for their view, as the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* explains: “The threefold divine reality is defined as ‘three manifestations’ of the one Spirit in the person of Jesus. Taken from the Christological hymn in 1 Timothy 3:16, the term ‘manifestation’ bars the threeness from God’s nature and restricts it to his self-revelation. As a form of modalism, it preserves the radical monarchy of God and affirms the triune revelation.”<sup>11</sup>

Actually, all of the passages Jakes cites that use the term “manifestation” refer to the Incarnation of Christ (the “manifestation” of the Second Person of the Trinity in human form), except 1 Corinthians 12:7, which speaks of the “manifestation” of the Spirit; that is, the charismatic gifts. None of them are concerned with the doctrine of the Trinity per se, and therefore they do not use the word “manifestations” in the way that Jakes and Oneness teachers use it.

In light of all this, it is hard to believe Jakes when he says that the language in his ministry’s doctrinal statement does not derive from modalism. If in fact he believes in the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, then he can clear this controversy up and satisfy all Trinitarians by simply affirming in his doctrinal statement and in all of his ministry’s teachings that not only does he believe in the Trinity, but he also believes the Trinity comprises three eternally distinct Persons, who together are the one and only Almighty God. If he cannot bring himself to do that and yet *still* insists that he holds to the Trinity, then

evangelicals should understand that it is he, and not his critics, who uses clever semantics to obfuscate the truth. Indeed, if he is so intent on holding to modalism because he believes it is the truth, to be consistently truthful he should openly identify himself as a modalist. Then, as the price of his convictions, he should willingly relinquish any claim to leadership in the contemporary evangelical church, where belief in the Trinity (properly defined) is not, and should never be, considered optional.

Jakes's sentiment that "there are a few things I would die for; a few more I would argue strongly; after that I am too busy trying to preach the Gospel to split hairs" would be admirable if only he correctly identified the things for which it is worth dying. The courageous church father Athanasius would have certainly advised him that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of those things, since he fought against seemingly the entire world to establish it permanently in the church. Thanks in no small part to his efforts the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) has been preserved for the past 16 centuries so that untold billions of souls could believe unto salvation. In our own generation, contrary to Jakes, many "are dying without knowing God" not only for "lack of love," but also for "lack of theology" — the essential doctrines of the Christian faith that are inseparable from the gospel of salvation.

— Elliot Miller

1. Bishop T. D. Jakes, "My Views on the Godhead — Jakes Responds to *Christianity Today* Article," *Apologetics Journal Criticizes Jakes*," *CHRISTIANITYTODAY.COM*, 21 February 2000 (<http://www.christianityonline.com/ct/current/0221/0221c.html>); Bishop T. D. Jakes, "Hearsay, Not Heresy — Op-ed Submission to 'Christianity Today,'" *Religion Today*, 28 February 2000 ([http://www.religiontoday.com/Addendum/hearsay\\_not\\_heresy.html](http://www.religiontoday.com/Addendum/hearsay_not_heresy.html)); "Bishop Jakes Responds: Hearsay, Not Heresy," *Christianity Today*, 3 April 2000, 11.
2. Jakes, "My Views on the Godhead."
3. Jakes, "Hearsay, Not Heresy — Op-ed Submission."
4. See, e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition — A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), ch. 4.
5. See, e.g., J. Lee Grady, "The Other Pentecostals," *Charisma*, June 1997 (<http://www.charisma.net/strang/cm/stories/cu197105.html>), in which Grady and other Trinitarian Pentecostals/charismatic leaders reason that as long as Oneness Pentecostals affirm belief in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — even without specifying that these three are eternally distinct Persons — there is no excuse for continuing division between them and orthodox believers.
6. Valerie G. Lowe and J. Lee Grady, "Hanegraaff Accuses Jakes of Heresy," *Charisma*, April 2000, 31.
7. See, e.g., David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1983).
8. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), s.v. "Monarchianism."
9. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1937), 79.
10. Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, eds., Patrick H. Alexander, assoc. ed., *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988) s.v. "Oneness Pentecostalism."
11. *Ibid.*