



STATEMENT DO-077-1

WITNESSING TIPS

Sharing Your Faith with a Oneness Pentecostal (Part 1)

by Gregory A. Boyd

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when dialoguing with Oneness Pentecostals is to demonstrate to them the unconditional love and acceptance of Jesus Christ. The most problematic aspect of my theology when I was a Oneness Pentecostal was the belief that no one other than us Oneness Pentecostals was going to heaven. Trinitarian Christians simply were not saved! So every time I met Trinitarian Christians who clearly reflected the loving presence of Jesus in their lives by the way they related to me, I confronted more strong evidence that my theology could not be true.

A second vitally important component of witnessing to Oneness Pentecostals is to confront their misunderstandings of what Trinitarians believe. Like most Oneness Pentecostals, I was firmly convinced that Trinitarians worshipped three separate gods and that they didn't "really" believe that Jesus Christ was Himself the Lord God Almighty. This is how Oneness Pentecostals are indoctrinated to perceive Trinitarians. Hence, when dialoguing with Oneness Pentecostals it is vitally important to be utterly empathic about your own belief that there is *only one God* — not three — and that Jesus Christ is *the incarnation of this one God!*

If need be, explain to them that the Trinitarian creedal language about God existing in "three persons" does not literally mean that there are three "people" who are God. It is rather simply a shorthand way of saying that God eternally exists in three personally distinct ways (who would deny that God is *capable* of that?).

Most importantly, emphasize as strongly as possible that Jesus Christ is the very center of your faith and life. Oneness Pentecostals honestly believe that *they* are the only ones for whom this is true. When I as a Oneness Pentecostal first confronted some informed Trinitarians who successfully conveyed this to me, it effectively loosened the grip which my elitist theology had on me.

The third important ingredient in a witness to Oneness Pentecostals is confronting their theology on its weakest points. Like other authoritarian doctrinal systems, Oneness Pentecostal theology pretty much stands or falls as a whole in the minds of its followers. If you can show it to be in error at all, even on a peripheral point, you have gone a long way toward undermining their trust in the entire doctrinal system which holds them in bondage.

Among the erroneous beliefs which Oneness Pentecostals hold, there are four that are especially weak and open to effective refutation: (1) their belief that tongues is the necessary sign of salvation; (2) their denial of the pre-existence of Christ; (3) their belief that Jesus was Himself the Father; and (4) their belief that baptism "in Jesus' name" is necessary for salvation. In the remainder of this article I will briefly discuss how one might refute the first of these beliefs. In Part Two (next issue) I will discuss effective approaches to the latter three beliefs.

Oneness Pentecostals believe that unless one has spoken in tongues, one does not *have* the Holy Spirit (not just the *fullness* of the Holy Spirit, as certain other Pentecostals hold). And, since a person cannot be saved without the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), it follows that only those who have spoken in tongues are truly saved. This belief is (loosely) based on the fact that speaking in tongues is mentioned in three of the four accounts of people receiving the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts (2:4; 10:46; 19:6). What follows are some of the considerations which were most effective

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in changing my views on this matter and which I have in turn found effective in helping other Oneness Pentecostals out of their misguided theology.

1. The Oneness Pentecostal position frequently results in sincere believers "seeking for the Holy Ghost" for days, weeks, and even years (I've seen some die yet seeking!). These poor souls are literally begging God to save them. The reason they do not receive the Holy Spirit, and hence salvation, is presumably because they lack sufficient faith, or they have unacknowledged sin in their lives.

In a loving way, ask Oneness Pentecostals if they have ever wondered why there is no biblical precedent for this sad phenomenon (I assure you, they have!). Why is salvation so "easy" in the Bible? And if sinners must first believe "sufficiently" and cleanse themselves "sufficiently" in order to receive (as a reward?) the Holy Spirit, why does the New Testament portray faith and sanctification as the *result*, not the basis, of receiving the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 15:16; 2 Thess. 2:13)?

2. The "tongues" doctrine of Oneness Pentecostalism is a doctrine based entirely on a historical record, not on an explicit teaching. Explain to your Oneness friend that by all recognized scholarly standards this constitutes very unsound hermeneutics (Bible interpretation). One can no more base a doctrine about the necessity of tongues on a historical report about tongues than one can base a doctrine about the necessity of communal sharing of property in the church on Luke's historical report about it in the early church (Acts 4:32-37). To say *that* something occurred is very different from saying that this something *should always* occur. Luke tells us the former but not the latter. His purpose is simply to provide an "orderly account" of what happened in the early church so that Theophilus, his reader, will be convinced of the truth of the Gospel message (Luke 1:1-4). This is very different from teaching doctrine.

Ask the Oneness Pentecostal why — if it is in fact so clearly taught in the Bible that salvation itself hangs on believing it — no one throughout church history has ever arrived at the Oneness Pentecostal position on tongues until the twentieth century?

3. If your Oneness Pentecostal friend persists in maintaining that Acts is a blueprint for all church history, ask him to show you where in the Book of Acts does one find *individuals seeking* for the Holy Spirit and *expecting to receive tongues* as the sign that He's come? This is the standard way the "baptism of the Spirit" occurs among Oneness Pentecostals, but it has no parallel in Acts. In Acts, the Holy Spirit always falls on entire groups who are not expecting tongues (or any other sign). So the Oneness Pentecostals do not even follow their own (misguided) hermeneutic. This insight was a wound to my pride as a Oneness Pentecostal, for the belief that "we alone do it *just like the Bible says*" (!) is the essence of the Oneness Pentecostal position.

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