

David K. Bernard



The Oneness View of Jesus Christ

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by David K. Bernard

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1

The Oneness View of Jesus Christ

The doctrine known as Oneness can be stated in two affirmations: (1) There is one God with no distinction of persons; (2) Jesus Christ is all the fullness of the Godhead incarnate.

According to one estimate, approximately one-fourth of American Pentecostals adhere to the Oneness view of God.¹ Moreover, throughout church history and even today many people have independently arrived at essentially the same formulation.² Despite the evident significance of the Oneness doctrine, however, relatively few historians or theologians have given it adequate attention.

This chapter presents the basic tenets of Oneness, focusing particularly on the Oneness view of Jesus. It seeks to present a unified, internally consistent Oneness theology that is characteristic of the movement as a whole

and that specifically reflects the position expressed in the publications of the United Pentecostal Church International, the largest Oneness Pentecostal body.

I. The Oneness of God

One of the clearest themes of Scripture is an uncompromising monotheism. Simply stated, God is absolutely and indivisibly one. There are no essential distinctions in His eternal nature. All names and titles of the Deity—such as Elohim, Yahweh, Lord, Father, Word, and Holy Spirit—refer to one and the same being. Any plurality associated with God merely relates to attributes, titles, roles, manifestations, modes of activity, relationships to humanity, or aspects of God’s self-revelation.

This monotheistic view is the historic position of Judaism. Both Oneness and Jewish believers find the classic expression of this belief in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.” Jesus emphasized the importance of this teaching, calling it “the first of all the commandments” (Mark 12:29), and in His conversation with a Samaritan woman He endorsed the Jewish concept of God: “Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22).

Many other biblical passages affirm strict monotheism, excluding any concept of plurality in the Deity; therefore, Oneness theology holds that it is biblically incorrect to speak of God as a trinity of persons.³

Neither the Old Testament writers nor their audiences thought of God as a trinity. If God were essentially three, He did not reveal this concept to Israel, His chosen people, and Abraham, the father of the faithful of all ages,

did not comprehend the fundamental nature of his God.

It is also important to note that the New Testament speakers and writers were monotheistic Jews who expressed no thought of introducing a dramatic new revelation of a plurality in God. Neither the writers nor the readers thought in trinitarian categories; essential trinitarian terms and ideas were not formulated in New Testament times.⁴

Neither testament uses the word *trinity* or associates the words *three* or *persons* with God in any significant way.⁵ No passage says God is a holy two, holy three, or holy trinity, but over fifty verses call God the “Holy One” (Isaiah 54:5). The only New Testament passage to use the word *person* (*hupostasis*) in relation to God is Hebrews 1:3, which says the Son is the image of God’s own person (substance). Thus the terms and concepts necessary to construct the trinitarian dogma do not appear in Scripture.

Trinitarianism is not pure monotheism; rather, it tends toward tritheism. For example, the Cappadocian fathers said that the three divine persons were one God in the same way that Peter, James, and John were all human, and this analogy is frequently used today.⁶ Trinitarian art often depicts the three divine persons as three men, or as an old man, a young man, and a dove.

Many trinitarian Pentecostals are theological tritheists. Finis Dake spoke of God as “three separate persons,” each one being an “individual” with his “own personal spirit body, personal soul, and personal spirit in the same sense each human being, angel or any other being has his own body, soul, and spirit. . . . The word *God* is used either as a singular or a plural word, like *sheep*.”⁷