

SESSION 7 | WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE "ONENESS" RATHER THAN TRINITARIAN?

Previously, we examined Unitarian beliefs about God's nature. Now we turn to Oneness theology, another distinct view of the Godhead.

While "Unitarian" and "Oneness" may sound similar, they represent separate theological positions. Both reject Trinitarianism, but differ in their understanding of God's nature.

Unitarians believe in God's absolute unity and reject the Trinity. Oneness theology, however, views the Godhead differently from both Unitarianism and Trinitarianism. We'll explore Oneness theology and its appeal to some believers.

DEFINITION OF ONENESS THEOLOGY

Oneness theology rejects the Trinity, asserting instead the oneness of God. In this view, God is one person who manifests in different modes or roles, rather than as three distinct, co-equal persons.

Central to Oneness theology is the belief that Jesus Christ fully embodies God. God, who is Father in creation and Holy Spirit in action, fully reveals Himself in the person of Jesus. For Oneness believers, Jesus is not a separate person of the Godhead but God Himself in the flesh. The titles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, therefore, refer to different ways God reveals Himself, not distinct persons. Jesus encompasses all these roles.

While Oneness theology rejects the Trinity like Unitarianism, it diverges sharply by exalting Jesus as fully divine, in contrast to the Unitarian view that sees Jesus as a moral teacher or prophet, but not God.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

Understanding Oneness theology is important because it significantly departs from mainstream Christian teachings on the nature of God. Oneness theology is found largely within the Pentecostal movement, particularly in denominations like the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) and the Apostolic Assembly of the Faith in Christ Jesus. These groups differ from both Trinitarians and Unitarians in their beliefs about baptism, salvation, and Christian life.

Baptism is especially crucial in Oneness theology. They teach that it must be performed in the name of Jesus Christ, not using the Trinitarian formula ("in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"). Oneness believers argue that baptism in Jesus' name is essential for salvation, alongside repentance and receiving the Holy Spirit, often evidenced by speaking in tongues. This view creates a theological divide between Oneness adherents and other Christian traditions, which view baptism as symbolic or allow for the Trinitarian formula.

Understanding the Oneness perspective not only clarifies why some Christians hold to it but also enriches broader theological discussions about God, salvation, and the relationship between Jesus and the Father.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF ONENESS THEOLOGY

EARLY CHURCH ROOTS

The roots of Oneness theology trace back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries, especially through Modalism (or Sabellianism), which emphasized the oneness of God while rejecting the emerging doctrine of the Trinity.

Modalism taught that God is a single, indivisible being who manifests in different modes—Father in creation, Son in redemption, and Holy Spirit in sanctification. These are seen as different ways God interacts with the world, not distinct persons.

Early Christians believed in the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, but there was no consensus on how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit related to one another. This ambiguity left room for interpretations like Modalism.

KEY EARLY FIGURES

Sabellius (3rd Century): An influential Christian priest, Sabellius advocated for Modalism, emphasizing God's unity. His teachings spread widely but were later condemned by church leaders like Hippolytus and Tertullian.

Praxeas (Late 2nd Century): A theologian who opposed Trinitarian views, Praxeas argued that the Trinity introduced polytheism. His ideas laid the groundwork for later Modalists like Sabellius.

THEOLOGICAL REACTIONS

The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. condemned Modalism and established the doctrine of the Trinity as orthodox Christian teaching. Though Modalism faded, its ideas resurfaced later, influencing modern Oneness theology.

While the councils and creeds played a role in shaping Christian theology, we should prioritize Scripture as the ultimate authority, like the Bereans in Acts 17:11, who diligently examined the Word.

THE MODERN MOVEMENT

Oeness theology reemerged in the early 20th century during a time of Pentecostal revival. New doctrines and practices related to baptism, the Holy Spirit, and speaking in tongues set the stage for the rise of Oeness theology.

THE 1913 LOS ANGELES CAMP MEETING

At a Pentecostal camp meeting in 1913, preacher R.E. McAlister argued for baptism in the name of Jesus instead of the Trinitarian formula. This idea sparked controversy and led to a formal theological split within the Pentecostal movement by 1916.

FOUNDING OF ONENESS PENTECOSTAL DENOMINATIONS

After the split, Oeness believers formed their own denominations, including the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI). Today, millions of Oeness adherents practice baptism in Jesus' name and emphasize the necessity of receiving the Holy Spirit, often evidenced by speaking in tongues.

ONENESS VIEW OF GOD: SINGULAR OR UNIFIED?

Oeness theology emphasizes the absolute oneness of God, citing Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD."

DOES DEUTERONOMY 6:4 TEACH UNITY OR SINGULARITY?

The Hebrew word "echad" can mean singular or unified. While some argue it allows for a compound unity, Oeness adherents believe "echad" in this context stresses God's absolute oneness—without division or plurality.

THE HEBREW WORD "YACHID" AND WHY IT WASN'T USED

Some argue the more direct term for absolute singularity, "yachid", could have been used in Deuteronomy 6:4 if the intent was to emphasize God's singularity. Oeness proponents respond that "echad" sufficiently conveys the oneness of God in this context, without implying a compound unity.

"ECHAD" AND THE TRINITARIAN VIEW OF GOD

Trinitarians interpret "echad" as allowing for a unified Godhead of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—while still affirming monotheism. Oeness adherents, however, reject this idea of plurality within God's nature.

ONENESS CHRISTOLOGY: JESUS AS THE FULLNESS OF GOD

Oeness theology holds that Jesus Christ is the full manifestation of God, fully embodying the divine nature in human form.

JESUS AS BOTH FULLY GOD AND FULLY MAN

Oeness believers point to Colossians 2:9: "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." They believe Jesus fully contains the Godhead within Himself, as the Father in His divine nature and the Son in His human nature.

ADDRESSING CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

Oeness theology explains conversations between Jesus and the Father, such as His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, as reflecting His dual nature. Jesus' human nature (the Son) communicates with His divine nature (the Father). These interactions are seen as functional, not personal distinctions within the Godhead.

TEMPORARY ROLE OF THE SON

Oeness theology teaches that the Sonship began with the incarnation and is temporary, serving a role in redemption. After Christ's redemptive work is completed, the Sonship will cease, and God will be revealed as all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

ONENESS THEOLOGY AND BAPTISM

Baptism in Jesus' name is central to Oeness theology. They believe that baptism in the name of Jesus Christ is essential for salvation and receiving the Holy Spirit.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR BAPTISM IN JESUS' NAME

Oeness believers point to the apostolic practice of baptizing in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5) as the scriptural foundation for this practice.

COMPARISON WITH TRINITARIAN BAPTISM

While Trinitarians use the formula from Matthew 28:19 ("in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"), Oneness believers argue that this verse should be understood as referring to the name of Jesus, which encompasses the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM IN JESUS' NAME

Oneness theology holds that baptism in Jesus' name is not merely symbolic but essential for remission of sins and salvation. They view it as a spiritual act of obedience that enables a believer to enter into covenant with God.

THE BIGGER PROBLEM: MY VIEW

The debate over the nature of God highlights deep theological differences. While Trinitarianism has become the standard

, we must recognize that the nature of the Godhead is ultimately incomprehensible. What matters most is our relationship with Jesus Christ and our reliance on Him for salvation.

For Oneness Pentecostals, the bigger issue isn't their non-Trinitarian stance, but their view of salvation. They emphasize works—such as repentance and baptism—as necessary for salvation, whereas a rightly divided understanding of Scripture shows that salvation is by grace through faith alone. If Oneness believers applied this principle, they would revise their doctrine of salvation, which is far more consequential than their terminology regarding the Godhead.

In conclusion, while theological discussions are important, the focus should remain on fostering a living relationship with Christ and understanding salvation as a gift of grace, rather than becoming overly entangled in debates over the incomprehensible nature of God.