

Oneness vs. Trinitarian Theology

A Frank Discussion by James K. Roberts

Why does the United Pentecostal Church stress the Oneness of God?

What problems do Oneness people see with Trinitarian thinking?

What problems do Trinitarians see with Oneness thinking?

Which system of thinking is the most consistent with the Bible and with itself?

First, let's look at all the things that Trinitarians and Oneness people believe in common. After all, we are both reading from the same Bible, so there are bound to be many things with which we do not differ. Here are many of them:

1. There is only one God
2. Jesus Christ is the Son of God
3. Jesus Christ is also God
4. The Father is God
5. The Holy Spirit is God
6. God is a Spirit
7. God is omnipresent (present everywhere)
8. God is omniscient (knows all things)
9. God is omnipotent (has all power)
10. God is eternal
11. God is immutable (unchanging)
12. God has individuality, personality and rationality
13. God is love
14. God is light to our world
15. God is holy
16. God is merciful
17. God is gentle
18. God is righteous
19. God is good
20. God is perfect
21. God is just
22. God is faithful
23. God is truth
24. God is a God of grace
25. Jesus Christ was both God and man

The Trinitarian / Oneness debate centers on whether the Father, Son and Holy Spirit should be viewed as:

1. Separate "persons" of the Godhead (the Trinitarian position)
2. Or as "manifestations" or "roles" that God has played (the Oneness position)

Trinitarians claim that their position is the orthodox or original one because they can trace a clear description of their position all the way back to the late 4th century and because most denominations hold to this position.

As viewed by Pastor James Roberts
Westland United Pentecostal Church

Oneness vs. Trinitarian Theology

A Frank Discussion by James K. Roberts

The Oneness position likewise claims for itself the status of orthodoxy, going back to the Bible and noting that:

1. The word “Trinity” is not found any place in the Scriptures
2. Nor is the phrase “three persons in the Godhead”
3. The Old Testament is clearly and emphatically dedicated to God being One.
4. The New Testament can be interpreted in a more consistent way both internally and with the Old Testament by viewing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as One God in various roles rather than One God eternally existent as three Persons.

Trinitarians sometime charge that Oneness people “deny the Father and the Holy Spirit” and label them as “Jesus Only.” This unfairly implies that Oneness people disregard the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, Oneness people honor God as our heavenly Father just as Trinitarians do, and most Oneness people are Pentecostal, placing great emphasis on the need for the Holy Spirit in one’s life.

On the other hand, Oneness people sometimes charge Trinitarians with having “three Gods.” This also is a false accusation as Trinitarian theology specifically states that there is only one God.

The United Pentecostal Church stands on the Oneness side of the argument. Here is why:

1. Because the Bible teaches not only that there is One God ... but that God is One. (Deuteronomy 6:4)
2. Because viewing Father, Son and Holy Spirit as titles God uses for Himself, revealing Himself in different roles, stays true to and does not confuse the fact that God is One.
3. Because the Trinitarian view that God is Three Persons does begin to dilute the concept of God’s Oneness. Admittedly, Trinitarian doctrine states that there is only one God, but by turning around and then stating that He exists eternally as three co-existent Persons is to logically become inconsistent with itself!
4. Because the New Testament, the apostles and their way of describing our God is more trustworthy and authoritative than the theologians of later centuries. Post-apostolic church history has proven very clearly that the clergy have made many mistakes in their representation and practice of the true gospel. The Bible is sacred and is the sole authority for church doctrine. Later church council decisions may or may not adequately reflect the scriptures themselves. The simple fact is that the apostles themselves did not describe God as a “trinity”, nor did they use such concepts as “three persons”, “co-eternal”, “co-existent”, or “God the Son”. This is all language that developed hundreds of years after the apostles were gone. Hence, the doctrine of the Trinity is up for review. It carries no weight of its own. Its merits rise or fall on how the apostles viewed our God. Oneness people find that without the language of Trinity, there are excellent ways to interpret the New Testament, still staying consistent with God’s Oneness.

As viewed by Pastor James Roberts
Westland United Pentecostal Church

Oneness vs. Trinitarian Theology

A Frank Discussion by James K. Roberts

The next reasonable question, then, is just how does Oneness theology better explain the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, preserving this sacred concept that “God is One”? The answer is by taking a close look at the dual nature of Christ.

Both Trinitarian and Oneness theology acknowledge the Biblical teaching that Jesus Christ had a dual nature: he was both God and man:

1. He was God because the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she conceived without knowing a man. Jesus Christ was God because he received the nature of his Father, who was God, not Joseph or any other man.
2. He was also man because he received his human nature from Mary, his mother.

It is very important to understand Jesus Christ’s dual nature. He was the only begotten Son of God – there has never been anyone like him before or since. One of the strong points of Trinitarian doctrine is its easy explanation of Christ’s relationship with his Father. From the Trinitarian view, this is just two Persons of the Godhead interacting. Since this view defines the Father and the Son as two different Persons of the Godhead, it is easy to accept the interaction of two persons when we read of Jesus praying to the Father or speaking of Him. That is just the way any other two persons would interact, and it makes the Trinitarian explanation seem very plausible. But Jesus was not just exactly like every other person. We are born with just a human nature, but Jesus had both a human and a Divine nature. This being so, another explanation is very possible and the Trinitarian view makes no use of it whatsoever. On the other hand, Oneness theology says that Jesus prayed as a human; he spoke as human when he referred to having a Father and a mother. God does not have parents – He is self-existent, but the man Christ Jesus had a Father and mother. Jesus prayed because as a human he needed to pray. His Deity did not need to pray. We never see the Father praying to the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Spirit praying to the Father, or either the Holy Spirit or the Father praying to the Son. Why? Two reasons:

1. The Father and Holy Spirit are not separate Persons as Trinitarian theory postulates. There is no need for communication between “Them” because God is a Spirit and He is holy – and so He is sometimes referred to as the Holy Spirit. These are not two Persons – these are two titles for the same One. By the way, did you notice that it was the Holy Spirit that overshadowed Mary and caused her to conceive? That would make the Holy Spirit identical with the Father.
2. The Father, the Holy Spirit and the Deity nature of Christ are identical. There is no need for communication between the Deity of Christ and the Father or the Holy Spirit. John 14 makes it quite clear that the Deity in Christ was the Father. Also, in Jesus’ predictions of the coming of the gift of the Holy Spirit into believers, he says, “I will come to you”. The Holy Spirit and the Deity of Christ are identical.

So when Jesus prayed or spoke of his heavenly Father, he was speaking from his humanity.

As viewed by Pastor James Roberts
Westland United Pentecostal Church

Oneness vs. Trinitarian Theology

A Frank Discussion by James K. Roberts

The Oneness explanation of Christ's references to and interactions with the Father, while depending on his dual nature are not as natural to us as the Trinitarian explanation. That is because, as human beings only, we do not have a Divine nature that Christ had. One might argue that it's better to take the simpler, more obvious explanation. That might be true if we did not have to accept all the baggage that comes along with dividing God into three persons. As it stands, Oneness people find Christ's dual nature a very Biblical and adequate explanation for what we read in the New Testament.

Some people ask – and it is a good question – “Does this issue really matter, or is this just more useless arguing?” Well, there are some practical implications:

1. First, one has to decide from Scripture if doctrine matters or not. There are plenty of reasons to believe that doctrine is important. Paul even pronounced a curse on anyone who came preaching anything other than what the apostles had delivered to the church. (Galatians 1)
2. Secondly, the issue of how to be baptized is very clear and consistent from the Oneness interpretation of the New Testament – and very inconsistent from the Trinitarian view. Matthew 28:19 records Jesus' instructions to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”. Yet, everywhere the early church went, they baptized in the name of Jesus.
 - a. From the Oneness view, this is explained very reasonably by noting that Father, Son (which includes both Deity and humanity) and Holy Spirit have a name (singular). Oneness people can easily answer that the name is Jesus. We know intuitively that the Son's name is Jesus – and since the Deity of Jesus was identical with the Father and the Holy Spirit, it is reasonable to conclude that the name Jesus was not just the name of the Son, but applies to the Father and Holy Spirit as well. The name “Jesus” comes from the Hebrew “Jehoshua” which means “Jehovah, our salvation”. So Jesus is just another one of the compound names of God like Jehovah-rapha, Jehovah, our healer.
 - b. From the Trinitarian view, there is no good explanation as to why the early church used the name of Jesus in baptism. The Trinitarian view insists that the baptism formula should be a repetition of the command in Matthew 28:19 – repeating the phrase “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Their thinking is that each Person of the Godhead needs to be honored in the baptism. To defend this practice as opposed to what the early church did, many Trinitarians have said, “I would rather take the words of Jesus than the words of Peter”. This argument is paramount to admitting that the early church disobeyed Jesus, and that there is no consistency between what Jesus commanded and what the early church did.

As viewed by Pastor James Roberts
Westland United Pentecostal Church

Oneness vs. Trinitarian Theology

A Frank Discussion by James K. Roberts

Ultimately, we must choose one of two viewpoints:

1. We can see Jesus' dual nature clearly and recognize the human portion of that at work in his interactions with the Father and not compromise God's Oneness in any way. The positives for this position are:
 - a. It is an excellent way not to complicate or stretch a major doctrine of the Bible, God's Oneness.
 - b. It is internally more consistent on the issue of the baptism formula
2. Or we can somehow view God as being three Persons and yet still being only One and never have to think about Christ's dual nature. The positives for this argument are:
 - a. You do not have to strain with the logic of the pros and cons, you just live with the contradiction that there is one God and yet He is three – a confessed “mystery” by proponents of this position.
 - b. You don't have to debate with many people because most Christians have inherited or accepted this position and it is more comfortable to be in the majority.

Are Oneness people divisive and harming the body of Christ by not going along with the majority on this issue? I do not think that has to be the case, though that is a concern that should not be just dismissed without thought. It has been my experience that Trinitarians have been more openly vocal and critical of Oneness groups than the other way around. This doesn't surprise me too much since Trinitarians hold a strong majority, and feeling secure in that position find it easy to castigate the minority. The opposite might be true if the tables were turned. It seems to me that the issue is important enough that it merits earnest dialogue and thoughtful consideration of both positions.

There will never be an eradication of either side so how should we deal with each other? The answer is that we ought to all teach the Bible as clearly and honestly as we can, and we ought to be willing to admit that we are only human and capable of error. We ought to love one another, pray for one another, be willing to discuss the issues with one another without rancor, and learn as much as we can from one another. In short, we should each humbly serve the Lord, keep a reasonable openness to a better understanding of the Scriptures and keep growing!

As viewed by Pastor James Roberts
Westland United Pentecostal Church