

The Other Pentecostals

There are 17 million of them in the world, but Oneness Pentecostals are not even considered Christians by some in the church. Who are these people, and why have they been labeled heretics for more than 80 years?

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If you love vibrant worship, the place to be on a Sunday night in Alexandria, Louisiana, is Anthony Mangun's church, The Pentecostals of Alexandria. These people know how to praise the Lord the old-fashioned way.

The volume is loud, the atmosphere is electric, and everyone is excited when they enter the 2,700-seat sanctuary--one of the largest in central Louisiana. Although the congregation is mostly white, their singing has a distinctive black gospel sound. Choir members wearing bright teal and black robes sway side to side while an organist and a drummer pump the audience with an infectious beat.

People in the crowd stand and shout as they sing "Send It on Down." Later in the service, Mangun preaches an emotion-packed message on his favorite topic, the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Eloquent yet folksy, his pulpit manner reflects the style he inherited from the itinerant camp-meeting preachers who organized the United Pentecostal Church in rural American communities years ago.

Congregants jam the altar after the sermon. They kneel, some weeping, while others gather around and lay hands on those who want a touch from God.

Because of the upbeat praise, the hand-clapping, the shouting, the fiery preaching and the ever-present practice of speaking in tongues, a casual observer might assume these people are typical Pentecostals. Much of what they believe and how they worship resembles the style of the Assemblies of God or other classical Pentecostal denominations.

But regardless of the similarities, these folks are a world apart from other Pentecostals. They have lived in a parallel universe for more than 80 years, separated from their brethren by a nasty doctrinal feud that split families and churches and spawned decades of hateful name-calling.

Labeled heretics in 1916, these people have lived in isolation ever since. In many cases they hurled cruel insults back at their accusers, often condemning people to hell for not agreeing with their view of Scripture.

Yet today, some younger leaders in this movement are wondering if there is any chance this lingering feud might end. Tired of being treated like the weird

cousins in a dysfunctional family and aware that they are at least partly responsible for creating one of the most monstrous divisions in modern Christianity, they quietly are hoping to lead their movement into the mainstream church.

A House Divided

They are called "Oneness" Pentecostals, and they have worn that label as a badge of honor for decades, priding themselves as distinct from all other churches. Sometimes called "Jesus only" Pentecostals by their critics (they object to that label themselves), Oneness believers were ousted from the Assemblies of God for refusing to adopt the term "Trinity" to describe the Godhead.

Although they acknowledge that God manifests Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the founders of Oneness Pentecostalism objected so adamantly to trinitarian language that they decided to build a distinct Christian movement emphasizing the unity or "oneness" of God. To split doctrinal hairs even further, they insisted that new converts be baptized "in the name of Jesus," not according to the trinitarian formula.

Today there are an estimated 17 million Oneness Pentecostals worldwide. In the United States, there are some 2.1 million of them divided into numerous denominations and splinter groups that all trace their roots to the Azusa Street Revival of 1906. The largest Oneness organization, the United Pentecostal Church (UPC), has grown to 700,000 in this country; several black and Hispanic Oneness groups, often called "apostolic" churches, are also experiencing growth in the 1990s.

Though Oneness Pentecostals believe in the deity of Christ and the authority of Scripture (see related article on page 66), their rejection of trinitarian terminology and their rigid position on baptism have put them in an awkward position: They are too orthodox to be compared with Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, yet they are too sectarian to mix with other evangelicals. So no one really knows what to do with them. Some theologians have branded them a cult not only because of their doctrinal quirks but also because of their radical isolationism. And trinitarian Pentecostals are waiting for Oneness leaders to publicly admit that their position on the Godhead is heretical. Gregory A. Boyd, a professor at Bethel College in Minnesota, wrote a stinging critique of Oneness doctrine in 1992, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity*. He says Oneness theology is nothing more than recrafted modalism--an ancient heresy that implied the distinctions between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are illusions.

"If you deny the eternality of the three personal ways God is God, you undermine the very essence of Christianity," states Boyd, who spent several years in the UPC before abandoning it to become a charismatic Baptist.

Stalwart leaders in the UPC say they don't understand what the fuss is all about. Respected UPC leader T.F. Tenney, 63, a denominational superintendent in Louisiana, insists Oneness doctrine does not contradict the Bible.

"You can't call us 'Jesus only,' as some have. We do not deny the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit," Tenney told Charisma. "We believe Jesus Christ is wholly, fully, absolutely and completely God. But no one is going to put us in the position of saying there are three Gods."

The argument over whether God is three-in-one or one-in-three is a moot point for the average layman, who tends to view the doctrine of the Trinity as an unexplainable mystery.

People who have had negative encounters with Oneness Pentecostals usually complain about:

- Legalism. Oneness groups insist people who are not baptized "in Jesus' name" are not saved--thus implying that the gift of God's grace can be forfeited on a technicality. People who have left the UPC say this teaching about baptism caused them to believe their admittance into heaven would be determined by their own performance rather than by simple faith in Christ's atonement.
- Elitism. Although attitudes are changing, mean-spirited hard-liners in many Oneness churches believe they have a corner on the truth because of their supposedly superior doctrines and strict holiness standards.
- Judgmentalism. In hard-line UPC churches, believers are taught that other Christians are hell-bound because they watch television or wear jewelry.

The UPC's official holiness code, which offers a long list of dos and don'ts for its membership, has been a stumbling block for many of its pastors. While the organization is growing (a record number of ministers were ordained in 1996), a steady stream of pastors are leaving through the back door because they can't stomach what they consider to be hypocrisy.

"Many UPC pastors preach against television, but they have TVs at their homes on the lake. I can't live like that," says Tommy Tenney, 41, a UPC evangelist whose exit in 1992 was difficult because his father is so prominent in the denomination. The younger Tenney says that when he left the UPC, his eyes were opened to "how big the body of Christ really is."

Prominent leaders have broken ranks with the UPC over the years, including charismatic pastors Charles Green of Word of Faith Christian Fellowship in New Orleans and L.H. Hardwick of Christ Church in Nashville, Tenn. Last year, UPC pastor C.G. "Jabo" Green of Houston was elected to lead a network of dissident UPC leaders who wanted more grace and less sectarianism. The organization represents 430 U.S. ministers.

Green, 57, says even though most pastors in his network affirm the Oneness position on the Godhead, they don't require new members to be rebaptized in Jesus' name or expect compliance to a set of holiness standards. And they don't teach that other Christians aren't saved.

"I have no stones to throw at the UPC," Green says. "But I can't go along with the narrow-minded idea that everyone has to believe exactly like us to be saved."

Changing Attitudes

Though Green decided that the only way to change the UPC was to vote with his feet, a larger number of progressive pastors--some of whom did not want their names used in this article--have decided to work quietly for reform from within. While they remain intensely loyal to their church, they desperately want to steer the UPC out of the murky backwater where it has been mired for decades.

One pastor says he wept recently when he realized how judgmental his denomination had acted toward other Christians. He now fears the UPC will forfeit God's blessing because of denominational pride.

"I was taught in the UPC that we were the body of Christ--that we had the whole gospel and everyone else just had a part," says the pastor, who asked to remain anonymous. "No one actually came out and said that other Christians aren't going to heaven, but that attitude was implied."

Michael Williams, a successful UPC pastor in Orlando, Florida, says not everyone in his denomination is so rigid. "People have looked at our horror stories and tried to make us all look bad," says Williams. "But you can't paint us with a broad brush. We are not a monolithic movement."

Many UPC leaders--even some at the denomination's headquarters in Hazelwood, Missouri--say they see reformation coming. But they expect a gradual changing of the guard as older, more hard-line leaders relinquish control.

"There are some zealots in our church," admits Jack Cunningham, 39, director of home missions for the group. "But our leaders do not think they are the only people who are saved. We are just a fingernail on the little finger of the body of Christ."

That refreshing viewpoint is shared by Anthony Mangun, whose church in Alexandria, Louisiana, is considered one of the most progressive in the denomination. By encouraging pastors to develop an attitude of acceptance

toward other Christians, Mangun is leading the effort to take the UPC into the 21st century.

In February he gathered more than 1,500 UPC leaders at his church to hear John Maxwell, an evangelical who specializes in leadership training. Ten years ago it would have been unheard of to see someone like Maxwell at a UPC event.

Maxwell finds UPC leaders to be "more open and more hungry for God all the time." Rather than trying to "fix" the UPC theologically, he says he simply embraces them as Christians and offers his seminars to help them grow in Christ, adding: "I don't draw lines. I have a great appreciation for the hearts of these people."

Can We Repair the Breach?

Maxwell's eagerness to build relationships with Oneness Pentecostals is not shared by top executives in the Assemblies of God (AG). No one at AG headquarters seems interested in building a bridge--even midway.

AG official George Wood said his denomination's policy on Oneness Pentecostals would discourage any reconciliation effort. "The Godhead issue is what stands in the way. It would be difficult to dialogue with them unless they rethink that position," Wood explains.

The UPC's top official, Nathaniel Urshan, 76, says the AG snubbed him when he tried to initiate dialogue in the 1960s and 1980s. "We are really not as far apart as many people think," Urshan says. "But [the AG] says we don't believe in the Father and the Holy Ghost--which is not true."

The AG does not encourage its members to label the UPC or other Oneness groups as cults, nor have AG pastors been directed to shun Oneness believers, Wood says. But many AG leaders treat Oneness Pentecostals as an invisible fringe group they wish would fade away.

Such treatment seems odd in light of the influence Oneness Pentecostals have had on the mainstream church particularly through music. Many of the most popular praise anthems sung in charismatic and evangelical churches today were composed by Oneness believers.

Dottie Rambo, who was raised in a Oneness church, wrote "Behold the Lamb" and other stirring songs. Joel Hemphill, a Southern gospel artist, wrote "He's Still Working on Me." Lanny Wolfe, affiliated with an independent Oneness church, wrote "Greater Is He That Is in Me."

More recently, UPC songwriter Geron Davis wrote "Holy Ground" and "In the Presence of Jehovah"--worship choruses that have broad popular appeal. The contemporary Christian recording group Phillips, Craig and Dean is composed of three Oneness ministers. And the song "Mercy Seat," which is sung nightly at

the Brownsville Assembly of God revival in Pensacola, Florida, was penned by UPC worship leader Mark Carouthers.

"Our music is heart music. It's emotional," says Dan Davis, a UPC music director from Louisiana who laughs when he points out that even rock legend Elvis Presley attended a Oneness Pentecostal church in his early years.

If Oneness Pentecostals are heretics, should we stop singing their songs? Observers say it would be absurd to come to such a conclusion. And, they add, it is becoming increasingly difficult to know who is Oneness and who isn't.

Because of recent upheaval in the UPC, many pastors have left to establish prominent independent Oneness churches. And many popular preachers in the black charismatic community--most notably T.D. Jakes of Dallas--have Oneness roots.

All this begs the question: Are we entering an era when the historic dividing line between Oneness and trinitarian Pentecostals will become so blurred that it is irrelevant? And will apologies soon be offered from both sides of this debate?

Theologian Mel Roebeck hopes so.

"We've been calling each other names since 1916," says the Fuller Theological Seminary professor who carries AG credentials. "It may take years, but we need to start arguing out our differences."

What would it take to bring reconciliation? If Oneness Pentecostals would acknowledge that their trinitarian rivals are indeed Christians, and if trinitarians could admit the same about Oneness believers, then we could make significant strides in healing this division. And Roebeck thinks the Godhead dilemma could be resolved if both sides would sign the Lausanne Covenant, a statement of evangelical faith that affirms belief in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If that doesn't happen, and if leaders on both sides remain unwilling to change, then the Pentecostal movement will remain a house divided against itself.

President Clinton's Pentecostal Connection

Anthony Mangun hasn't offered any campaign contributions, but he calls Bill Clinton a friend.

Bill Clinton's friends may come and go depending on the latest White House scandal. But regardless of the Whitewater investigation or the current uproar in Washington over campaign fund raising, the president knows he can always count on Anthony Mangun, a Oneness Pentecostal pastor who has offered the president unconditional friendship for 21 years.

The two men met in Arkansas when then-governor Clinton began paying annual visits to a Pentecostal camp meeting near Little Rock. Clinton went there to win votes, but he responded genuinely to the spirited music and preaching that always characterize United Pentecostal Church (UPC) gatherings.

According to Mangun, Clinton has had a soft spot for Pentecostals ever since.

"He loves our music. He loves connecting with Spirit-filled people," says Mangun, 47, now pastor of one of the largest UPC churches in the country, The Pentecostals of Alexandria in Alexandria, Louisiana.

Clinton's fondness for UPC music surfaced during his 1992 presidential campaign, when a reporter asked the saxophone-playing candidate about musical influences in his life. Clinton told Rolling Stone magazine: "I have a lot of friends in Pentecostal services, and a lot of their church music is some of the most awesome music I've ever heard. You just gasp when you hear it."

Clinton likes Mangun's music so much, in fact, that he asked his church's choir to perform at Inauguration Day events in 1993 and 1997. This year they sang "Lift Up Holy Hands" and "He's Faithful," led by Mangun's wife, Mickey, a popular UPC soloist.

Since Clinton's election, the Mangun family has visited the White House; Mangun has jogged and played golf with Bill; and his wife has had chances to chat with Hillary about the challenges of raising a teen-ager. Unlike some of Clinton's wealthy Asian visitors, the Manguns didn't pay a dime to the Democratic Party in exchange for their White House sleep-over. But Mangun has resolved to offer spiritual support even though he disagrees with some of Clinton's policies.

"The book of Romans says we are to support our leaders in prayer," the pastor told Charisma. "I feel I must stand with Bill Clinton and show love to him personally. If you are going to bash him, then stick with the issues--don't attack the individual."

Mangun has challenged Clinton on at least one occasion--when he urged him to reconsider his 1996 decision to allow partial-birth abortions. But the Louisiana preacher--with his boyish charm and Louisiana drawl--offers the president spiritual encouragement regularly. He won't divulge details about such conversations, but he says Clinton is a more spiritual man than most Christians imagine.

One evening in 1993, for example, the Manguns and the Clintons prayed and worshiped together around a White House piano. "Bill listens to our music tapes, and he asked Mickey to play some of our deep, worshipful songs," Mangun said. "I've seen him get very emotional."

Mangun thinks Clinton's interest in spiritual things began in the Arkansas camp-meeting days, when Clinton was known to spend long hours conversing with Robert Baehr, a UPC preacher. When Clinton was voted out as governor in 1980, UPC ministers, including Mickey's father, James Lumpkin, "reached out to him when other people in Little Rock would deliberately cross the street to avoid him," Mangun says.

Apparently Clinton doesn't forget a kindness. When he defeated George Bush in 1992, he invited the Manguns to Little Rock for a victory celebration.

And Clinton has made more than one stop at Mangun's church to catch a performance of The Messiah, an elaborate Easter pageant performed each year to sell-out crowds. Clinton and several White House staffers, including former Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, flew to Alexandria on Air Force One for a private performance in 1996.

Mangun says Clinton wept during the musical drama, which depicts the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and includes a cast of 500 people and live animals. After the performance, UPC minister T.F. Tenney laid hands on the president and prayed for him.

Some ministers in central Louisiana have criticized Mangun for his chumminess with a president who favors abortion rights. But Mangun believes Clinton could use a friend who won't turn and run when the political favors run out.

"I didn't tell my congregation to vote for Bill Clinton. I didn't campaign for him. He knows I'm a conservative pastor," Mangun says. "But he also knows I'm a good friend."

A good friend who has the Holy Ghost. That might be the best friend any president could have. --J. Lee Grady

What Oneness Pentecostals Believe...about the deity of Christ: Oneness Pentecostals believe that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, that He came to earth as God incarnate, and that He died on the cross and rose from the dead to purchase redemption for all mankind.

About the Bible:

Like all evangelical Christians, Oneness Pentecostals believe the Bible is the supreme authority in the life of the believer and that the Old and New Testaments are the infallible and inerrant revelation of God's will to man.

About the Trinity:

Often quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one (NKJV)," Oneness Pentecostals emphasize the "oneness" or unity of God. Although they acknowledge the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three manifestations of God, they object to the term Trinity because: (1) it is not in the Bible; and (2) it can be misunderstood to suggest that God is actually three separate beings.

Since 1916, Oneness and trinitarian Pentecostals have been at odds over the doctrine of the Godhead. Tragically, some Oneness believers have argued so stridently against trinitarian terminology they have suggested that other Christians who don't share their views aren't genuinely saved. Likewise, trinitarian Pentecostals have shunned Oneness believers and labeled them heretics.

About water baptism:

Oneness Pentecostals insist that new converts be baptized "in the name of Jesus," the formula used by the apostles in the book of Acts (see Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). They vehemently reject the trinitarian baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"), arguing that Jesus is the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is why Oneness Pentecostals are often labeled "Jesus only."

Although some trinitarian Pentecostals are comfortable using the "Jesus' name" formula, Oneness Pentecostals would never baptize using the trinitarian model. They insist on rebaptism when counseling those who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In fact, the most rigid Oneness Pentecostals teach that baptism in Jesus' name is a prerequisite for salvation--thus encouraging a flawed theology of salvation by works rather than grace. It is on this issue, theologians say, that Oneness Pentecostals have drifted dangerously toward spiritual elitism and heresy.

About personal holiness:

At the beginning of this century all Pentecostals developed strict standards of dress and conduct to separate themselves from the world. As times changed most trinitarian Pentecostals relaxed their codes of appearance and behavior.

However, because Oneness Pentecostals have been so isolated from other denominations, they still, in the 1990s, adhere to strict holiness standards. Members of the United Pentecostal Church, for example, are urged not to watch television or go to movie theaters or sports events, and women are instructed not to wear makeup, jewelry, pants or short hairstyles.

About other Christians:

Today some Oneness Pentecostals have encouraged an open attitude toward other Christians in an effort to break from the isolation and elitism of the past.

However, because Oneness Pentecostals have zealously insisted that the infilling of the Holy Spirit must be accompanied by speaking in tongues, some have gone so far as to teach that Christians who don't speak in tongues aren't saved. This kind of spiritual pride has prevented Oneness groups from building healthy relationships with other Christian denominations.