

Oneness or Trinity?

There is occasionally controversy in some churches over the trinity and how to baptize. These issues are raised by followers of the late William Branham and others from the Oneness churches, such as United Pentecostals and the Apostolic churches. Some of these questions are discussed in the paragraphs below for your use and study. May God bless your study of His word.

Must I be baptized in the name of Jesus only to be saved?

Some Christians say you must be baptized in the name of Jesus -- and only in the name of Jesus -- to be saved. They base this on Acts 2:38, where Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins." To add further support to this position, they point out that every baptism in the book of Acts is referred to as "in the name of Jesus."

Accordingly, supporters of this viewpoint say being baptized "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost" is wrong. But if this is true, then why did Jesus say we should baptize in the name of "the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19)?

"Jesus only" baptism advocates argue that this is because the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are just titles used by Jesus. They say Jesus is the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, and baptizing in his name therefore fulfills Matt. 28:19. So which is right?

First note that only a very small percentage of born again believers today or in the past have been baptized in the name of Jesus only. If it is true that no one can be saved unless they are baptized in the name of Jesus only, then the millions baptized from 30 A.D. until 1921 A.D., (when the Oneness doctrine first appeared) will go to hell.

Second, the book of Acts does not record the actual wording used at the moment someone was baptized. Accordingly, being baptized in the name of Jesus could mean in the way Jesus taught and under his authority; the way he taught was, of course, Matt. 28:19 -- in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost.

Support for this is found in Acts 19:1-6, which is perhaps the only passage in the Bible other than Matt. 28:19 that gives some indication of the literal wording used in baptisms by the early church. Here Paul asks some Ephesian disciples if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed: "They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied."

Why was Paul surprised that they were baptized but had never heard of the Holy Spirit? It seems clear that was because Paul naturally expected that they would have heard the minister who baptized them say, "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" at their baptism. This shows, therefore, that when Paul baptized in the name of Jesus it meant he baptized the way Jesus taught -- in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

By saying "in the name of Jesus," the Bible sets Christian baptism apart from the many kinds of baptism done in that time. Not only was there Jesus' baptism and John's baptism, there were also Jewish ritual baptisms, and that of the Essenes, a non-Christian Jewish sect. Even some idolatrous religions practiced baptism.

Unger's Bible Dictionary says, "baptisms, or ceremonial purifications, were common among the Jews." These ceremonial baptisms are referred to in Lev. 8:6, Heb. 9:10 and Mark 7:3-4. All proselytes (converts) to Judaism had to be baptized (ibid).

Lastly, would God really send someone to hell if the minister baptizing them had his wording wrong? God looks on the heart and not on the outward appearance (I Samuel 16:7).

Note that the thief who was crucified with Jesus was allowed to go to heaven and he hadn't been baptized at all! (Luke 23:39-43) Jesus knew the man's heart was right.

That is not to say that water baptism is unimportant. The Lord commanded us to be baptized in Mark 16:16.

Is there really a trinity, or are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit just titles that Jesus used?

Some Christians say there is no trinity. They believe that Jesus Christ is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This "Oneness" view is one reason why many are baptized in the name of Jesus only. Supporters of the Oneness view point to Isaiah 9:6, where the Son is called "everlasting father," and in John 10:30, where Jesus says, "I and the Father are one."

Most Christians disagree, and support the concept of the trinity -- that God is three and yet one.

They point out that the word "God" in Hebrew ("Elohim") is plural and literally translated as "Gods."

Another scripture supporting the trinity is John 17:5 (see also John 17:24): "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." This scripture shows the Son existed before creation. (Oneness doctrine says the Son began with the incarnation, when Jesus was born.)

Another scripture supporting the trinity is Heb. 7:3: "Without Father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever."

Here the Father says Jesus is a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4), with no beginning and no end, contrary to the Oneness teaching that the Son had a beginning in Bethlehem and will end in the future.

The trinitarian position is also supported by John 5:23-24, which says: "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him."

If someone sends you, they must separate themselves from you. The fact that Jesus could be sent away from the Father shows that He could not have been the Father, but that he is the Son.

Another scripture supporting the trinity is Daniel 7:13-14. Here you see "the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days, and was led into His presence." The Ancient of Days is the father (Daniel 7:9, 7:22), and the Son of Man is Jesus (Matt. 8:20). If Jesus is the Father, how could He be led into His own presence? This is possible only if God has more than one part.

Can God, however, really exist in three parts and yet be one? The Holy Spirit is one, and yet Rev. 1:4 and 5:6 says even the Holy Spirit has seven parts. You yourself are a body, a soul and a spirit. Yet there aren't three of you -- just one.

An egg has a shell, a white and a yolk, yet it is one egg. In the same way God exists as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but He is one God.

Must I speak in tongues to be saved?

Some Christians from the Oneness churches (a small part) say that if you don't speak in tongues, you aren't really saved. They base this on John 3:5, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." They say that "born of the spirit" means baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Since speaking in tongues is evidence of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they therefore conclude that if you don't speak in tongues you aren't "born of the Spirit" and are not saved. They also point to Mark 16:17, where Jesus says, "these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues."

This is an apparently logical conclusion, but its consequences are enormous. Most persons who attend church and consider themselves Christians don't speak in tongues. This includes great men and women of God, past and present, such as Billy Graham, Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, and Mother Teresa. Millions of Baptists, Methodists, Adventists and Lutherans don't speak in tongues. If this teaching is true, all these people will go to hell after death.

Opponents of this teaching point to examples in the Bible of people who were saved but didn't speak in tongues.

For instance, in John 20:22 shows the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit -- but not the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They were already saved and had the Holy Spirit in their hearts, but they didn't speak in tongues.

Only later after Jesus' ascension into heaven, did they receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues (Acts 1-2).

Salvation without the gift of tongues is also shown in Acts 8:4. When Philip preached the gospel to the Samaritans, they believed, were baptized and were saved. Only several days later did they get the baptism of the Holy Spirit (v. 14-17). It is clear the Samaritans were saved before they received the baptism of the Holy Spirit because Acts 8:12 says, "they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (and) they were baptized, both men and women."

Jesus defined salvation in Mark 16:16 when he said that "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." He didn't say "whoever believes and is baptized and speaks in tongues will be saved."

Mark 16:17-18 does not require speaking in tongues to be saved, because if it did, all Christians would have to cast out a demon, speak in tongues, pick up snakes, drink deadly poison and heal the sick to be saved, as the rest of the passage shows: "they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

Not all Christians heal the sick and cast out demons, and not all Christians speak in tongues.

For instance, the apostle Paul told the Corinthian church "I wish you all spoke in tongues" in I Cor. 14:5. Paul had already called them Christians (see I Cor. 1:2) but not all of them spoke in tongues or else he would not have wished that they did. So speaking in tongues is not required to be a Christian.

What then, did Jesus mean by, "born of the Spirit" in John 3:5?

In answer, note that Jesus spoke of the baptism of the Spirit in Acts 1:5. But in John 3:5, Jesus used the phrase "born of the spirit". He could have said "baptized in the Spirit" but chose not to. This is because Jesus is talking about salvation in John 3, not the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He told Nicodemus, "You must be born again." He doesn't mention either the baptism of the Holy Spirit or speaking in tongues.

When Jesus says born of the Spirit, he is referring to the deposit or guarantee of the Holy Spirit that all Christians receive at salvation, not the baptism of the spirit received later. He "put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Cor. 1:22). Christians who aren't yet baptized in the Holy Spirit have the Holy Spirit in their hearts much as a glass holds water. But they haven't been baptized in the Holy Spirit, which is like putting the glass of water into a bucket of water.

Part of the confusion may be due to the fact that many assume that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs at salvation. Some people receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit soon after salvation, but many do not. It's a second act of grace, as is shown in the many cases described above of people who were saved and later got the baptism of the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues.

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