

Is the United Pentecostal Church a Christian Church?

In recent years a small but vocal group have sought to label the United Pentecostal Church (UPCI) as a cult, or as a non Christian church.

1. This charge stems from a small segment of the evangelical community inspired by "ministries" who garner their financial support by making charges of this nature and who take their cue from the late Walter Martin, founder of Christian Research Institute and self-styled "Bible Answer Man." In many cases the charge is repeated by people *who have had no personal knowledge of, or contact with* the UPCI, and who have an inaccurate concept of the UPCI's beliefs. It does not come from mainline Christian organization, nor is it the official position of any evangelical denomination. Trinitarian Pentecostal groups, who have the most contact with us, consider our views of the Godhead erroneous but still regard us as saved.

The National Religious Broadcasters, an arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, has accepted Oneness individuals and groups as members. The Society for Pentecostal Studies, an interdenominational organization of Pentecostal and charismatic scholars, also accepts Oneness believers as members, and one recently served as its president. Major evangelical and charismatic publishers publish and market books and music by United Pentecostals. Evangelical radio stations worldwide routinely carry programs by United Pentecostals, including for many years, Harvestime, formerly the UPCI's longtime official radio broadcast. They now carry MyHope Radio which has replaced the Harvestime broadcast.

2. This labeling is tactic designed to prejudice people against the United Pentecostal Church, not to open dialog regarding scriptural truth. To the general public, the word cult means a group that is sociologically aberrant and even dangerous, typically characterized by authoritative leadership, exotic beliefs, manipulative methods, financial exploitation, mind control, and rebellion against government. Our critics do not use the word in this sense, however, for sociologically and organizationally we are quite similar to most other evangelical and Pentecostal churches. They actually mean that they differ with us theologically. To be honest and fair, they should explain their differences of biblical interpretation with us, and let people examine the issues for themselves.

An editorial by Terry Muck in the February 5, 1990, issue of Christianity Today, the leading evangelical periodical, gave three reasons why Christians should not use the pejorative label of cult:

- (1) "The spirit of fair play suggests it is best to refer to groups of people as they refer to themselves."
- (2) "There is also a theological reason for avoiding" the label, for it wrongly implies that certain sinners "are the worst kind."
- (3) "It simply does not work well to use disparaging terms to describe the people whom we hope will come to faith in Christ. . . . In fact we are commanded to love them as ourselves."

An editorial in the August 1993 issue of Charisma magazine specifically rebuked Hank Hannegraaff, successor as president of Christian Research Institute and "Bible Answer Man." Editor and publisher Stephen Strang said, "*The heresy hunters are still with us. Only now, instead of stakes., they use their books and radio programs to destroy those they consider heretics. . . . I'm concerned that heresy hunting may be turning into leukemia because some cult-watchers seem more intent on destroying parts of the body than healing the body. . . . Hanegraaff goes way too far [in attacking independent charismatics]. . . . It's time he shows as much respect to fellow Christians with whom he disagrees as he does to those outside the faith.*"

3. The critics rely on the authority of "historic Christianity" or "orthodoxy" **instead of the Bible**, even though they claim that the Bible is their only authority and denounce the use of extra biblical authority as cultic. For instance, they say we are a cult because we do not accept the doctrine of the trinity as defined by creeds developed from the fourth to eighth centuries. If by "orthodoxy" they mean anything more than the doctrines of the Bible, then they have an extra biblical authority. If they do not mean anything else, however, why do they not simply appeal to the Scripture?

Moreover, they are inconsistent and selective in their appeal to "historic orthodoxy." For example, they denounce our teaching that baptism is part of the

salvation experience, even though this has always been the majority view in professing Christianity. Not only have Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and the theologians of the first five centuries consistently held this view, but the founder of Protestantism, Martin Luther, did so as well. Yet these critics, who are Protestant, do not label Luther as a cultist. The Nicene Creed, to which they often appeal for its doctrine of the trinity, also proclaims that there is "one baptism for the remission of sins," yet they reject its teaching on this subject. The catholic encyclopedia in paper calls for the Baptism practiced by the UPCI, but in actions rejects it. Quoting from the Catholic Encyclopedia:

The remission of all sin, original and actual

This is clearly contained in the Bible. Thus we read (Acts 2:38): "Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins; and you shall receive the Holy Ghost. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, whomsoever the Lord our God shall call."

See: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02258b.htm>

When trying to prove that their doctrine of the trinity is the only orthodox view in history, the critics appeal to early writers such as Justin, Tertullian, and Origen, yet these men's definition of the trinity is considered heretical by orthodox Trinitarians today because they subordinated the second and third persons of the trinity to the first. Ironically, Walter Martin was heretical according to the ancient creeds, because he denied the eternal generation of the Son. In short, our critics determine what is "orthodox" not by the not by the Bible or even by the historic creeds, but by their personal theologies.

4. Many Christians in major denominations hold similar or the same views. Southern Baptist seminary professor Frank Stagg taught a doctrine of God that he acknowledged to be essentially the same as Oneness. W.A. Criswell, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, stated in his commentary on Revelation that the only God we will see is Jesus, and described Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the same terms that Oneness believers do.

Calvin Beisner, an ally of Walter Martin, conceded in his book *God in Three Persons*, "Monarchianism is represented today by the United ('Jesus Only') Pentecostals. . . . As the differences between modalism and pure Trinitarianism are rather minute, it is not surprising that a great number of Christians in mainline

denominations, including Roman Catholicism, hold a modalistic conception of the Trinity, at least unconsciously" (p.18). Noted Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner similarly stated in *The Trinity*, "**Despite their orthodox confess of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'**" (p. 10). Many ministers and lay persons of various Trinitarian denominations have similarly stated to United Pentecostals that they accept the Oneness view of the Godhead.

A number of charismatic scholars, including Larry Christenson, Kilian McDonnell, and David Pawson, teach that water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are part of Christian initiation and not subsequent to it. Evangelical writers such as Leighton Ford and James Dunn have argued essentially the same thing, but without associating the baptism of the Holy Spirit with tongues. Many Trinitarian Pentecostal and charismatics agree that water baptism should be performed in the name of Jesus. Many theologians and scholars, including Martin Luther and F.F. Bruce, have acknowledged that this was the formula of the apostles.

Our critics do not attack these teachers, because they belong to major denominations or use traditional theological terminology. It is not fair, however, to single us out for views that many other professing Christians also hold, just because we have formed our own group or refuse to use the non biblical terminology treasured by so many.

5. The attack on us is inconsistent with the critics' doctrine of salvation. They commonly say they believe in salvation in "grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." How does this doctrine negate the salvation experience of the typical United Pentecostal convert? Most United Pentecostals do not decide to join the UPCI after an intellectual study of the Oneness doctrine. Some come to God as children. Others come from no church background, or a nominal church background. Typically they hear a simple evangelistic message about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, believe that Jesus is their Savior, decide to accept the offer of salvation, and come to the altar of repentance.

For example, I repented of my sins, believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and received the Holy Spirit at age 22. At that point my understanding was not to the

place where I could not debate Oneness versus trinitarianism, but I knew that Jesus was God manifested in the flesh to be my Savior, that he loved me, that I was trusting in Him for salvation, and that I was devoting my life to Him as my Lord.

If someone were to make the identical response in a Baptist church, our critics would not hesitate to pronounce him saved, and many would argue that he could not lose his salvation under any circumstances. How, then, could his subsequent baptism in the name of Jesus, reception of the Holy Spirit, and acceptance of the Oneness doctrine annul this genuine experience with God?

If someone professes to believe in salvation by grace through faith but denies that our converts are saved, then actually he must believe in salvation by faith plus a creed, a denomination, or intellectualism. Such a position is more exclusive than that of the UPCI, for we readily acknowledge that people of various denominations can have genuine faith in God and a genuine relationship with God, even before receiving the full Acts 2:38 experience.

On the other hand, if our critics concede that we are saved, what justification do they have for attacking us so vehemently and uncharitably?

Several years ago, Robert Bowman, one of Walter Martin's chief researchers, acknowledged to me in a telephone conversation that most UPCI converts truly have faith in Christ and receive salvation, but when they progress in doctrinal study and consciously embrace the Oneness view then they lose salvation. It is an unusual cult indeed that leads people to salvation but then gradually takes it away from them! Would he say the same of any other group he considers cultic, such as Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses?

Martin not only believed that some UPCI members are saved but also that once a person is saved he can never lose his salvation. This means he attacked those he considered fellow Christians and sought to destroy their churches. It would seem more appropriate to let the Lord of these people decide how to judge these churches and deal with them as He wills, rather than appointing oneself to that role. *"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand"* (Romans 14:4).

6. The critics do not recognize that we are involved in ministry. While our critics raise money by attacking us and feel that their "ministry" is to label us, our ministers and churches are busy leading people to a saving and transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. We are restoring broken marriages and homes, strengthening families, freeing people from sinful habits and addictions, training people in morality, and helping them to be productive citizens and saints. We do not fulfill our ministry by name calling, denunciations, and anathemas, but seek to share with the world God's great gift of salvation that He has made available in Jesus Christ.

We invite everyone to open their hearts and their Bibles, for we believe that truth is its own best defense. The Bereans exemplified the "more noble" course of action, *"in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so"* (Acts 17:11).

With the apostle Paul, we say, *"After the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers. believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets"* (Acts 24:14). We remember that Jesus said, *"Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake"* (Matthew 10:22). Nevertheless, like the apostles, we can go our way *"rejoicing [to be] counted worthy to suffer shame for his name"* (Acts 5:41). Despite unjust opposition and unfair accusations, we *"rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory"* (1 Peter 1:8).

You have taken the time to read this article and let me encourage you to adopt a Bereans spirit and search *"the scriptures daily, whether those things were so"* (Acts 17:11).

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