

Sects and Cults

Pentecostalism has bred "Jesus Only" movement

A university student had a large "K" printed on his T-shirt. When someone asked him what the "K" stood for, he said, "Confused". "But", the questioner replied, "you don't spell 'confused' with a 'K'". The student answered, "You don't know how confused I am."

Our age is an age of tremendous change. Socially, politically, ideologically and religiously, our world presents a confusing picture. Even in Christianity, we find disintegration of established values and a Babel of opinions and theologies.

Consider the Pentecostal movement. At the turn of this century, very few Christians were known as Pentecostals. Today, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing segment of Protestantism in the Western hemisphere, where approximately one of three Latin American Protestants is Pentecostal.

In the U.S.A. there are approximately 200 Pentecostal denominations. Nearly all of the major denominations have been affected by the charismatic movement, including the Roman Catholic Church. One of the leaders of the Pentecostal movement has called it "the greatest ecstatic movement in the history of the Christian church".

From its early beginning in this century until 1960, Pentecostalism was a movement outside the mainstream of the Protestant church. It was very sectarian, and many churches looked upon Pentecostals as a divisive type of religious fanaticism. Today Pentecostals are considered as part of the mainstream of theological orthodoxy.

Most Pentecostal churches accept the great doctrines of the historic church. They hold without question that the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God. With few exceptions, Pentecostals believe in one God existing in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The deity of Christ is accepted, including the Virgin Birth, the substitutionary atonement, the resurrection and the ascension.

Pentecostals believe that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is their distinguishing mark. Because glossalia (speaking in tongues) is viewed as an initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, some believe that the main message of Pentecostalism is the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues. The questions I want to raise are: "How must we consider those Pentecostals who deny the doctrine of the Trinity? Why do we find glossalia in movements and sects, which deny the Trinity?"

Jesus Only

In the early stages of their history, the Pentecostals were reluctant to form separate churches, hoping to transform existing churches. As early as 1914, however, Pentecostal leaders agreed to form a simple fellowship of churches with the name "Assemblies of God". It is now the largest white Pentecostal denomination in the U.S.A.

The first controversy in this denomination arose when a considerable number of pastors declared the trinitarian baptism in accordance with Matthew 28:19 as invalid and prescribed re-baptism in the name of Jesus only in accordance with Acts 2:38. This "Jesus Only" movement originated with John G. Schaefer, an immigrant from Danzig, Germany.

In 1913, as he participated in a Pentecostal camp meeting in Arroyo Seco, California, he so rejoiced in the name of Jesus, which had worked miracles in that meeting, that he spent a night in prayer, and in the early morning experienced a revelation of the power of Jesus.

Schaefer and his followers took special note of such passages as Matthew 17:8; John 10:30; 14:13; Philippians 2:9; Colossians 3:17. They concluded that preachers baptized with the trinitarian formula of baptism had less authority, for they should have accepted the formula of baptism given to them by the apostles.

New baptism services were conducted, in which baptism was "in the name of Jesus". Schaefer and his followers went beyond just the change of wording. Their "Jesus Only" formula for baptism also included the denial of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. They taught that there is only one God, who has revealed Himself in three different forms. Jesus manifested Himself in the offices of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Assemblies of God took action against the innovators of doctrine. In 1915 the following doctrines were rejected as false: the use of wine in the Lord's Supper, the identification of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The last point was directed against the views of the "Jesus Only" group. When the "Jesus Only" doctrine was rejected over 150 preachers left the Assemblies of God, to form their own organizations.

Today, such denominations as the United Pentecostal Church, the Apostolic Church, International Ministerial Association, General Assembly Church of Jesus, and others adhere to the basic teaching of the "Jesus Only" movement.

The most important group is the United Pentecostal Church, which has 2,800 churches and a membership of 440,000. The position of the United Pentecostal Church on "Jesus: The Unipersonality of God" is clearly stated.

Nathaniel A. Urshan, speaker on "Harvestime", the radio program of the United Pentecostal Church, states: "My friend, many of those who do not understand the interpretation of what we are representing, make a terrible mistake when they say we deny the Fatherhood of God. They do not understand the great truths we are trying to resurrect in this hour. I want to tell you what the great truth is. We do not believe in three separate personalities in the Godhead, but we believe in three offices which are filled by one person."

Pentecostalism's "Jesus Only" movement denies trinity

Can we believe that the Holy Spirit inspires different truths in different Christians, even to the point of contradicting with one another from the dogmatic point of view? Since the Pentecostal movement is strongly individualistic and subjective, especially in the interpretation of the Bible, doctrinal deformations of the Christian message are not uncommon.

The "Jesus Only" move is such a serious deviation* from orthodoxy. It fails to do justice to Scripture. If Jesus alone is God, and the Father and the Holy Spirit are only manifestations of Jesus, many New Testament passages are totally void of meaning.

How can one explain the Father speaking to the Son in Matthew 3:17? Where was the Son, when the Father said: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."? (Matthew 17:5). Where was the Father when the Son said: "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."? (John 17:4). Jesus' final words on the cross were addressed to his Father: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Was Jesus talking to himself or to the Father?

The many references in the New Testament are also proof that the Holy Spirit is a person distinct from the Father and the Son. (John 16:7-8, 13-14, Acts 5:3,4). Neither the Father nor the Son are "modes" or "manifestations" of Jesus as the "Jesus Only" movement maintains.

No one who believes the Bible questions the importance and validity of religious experiences, the place of genuine heart religion. The great hymns of the faith are testimonies of the Christian's intimate and experiential walk with the Lord. However, the foundation of the Christian faith is the Bible alone and not experience.

A Christian cannot say: "If it has been experienced, the Bible must teach it." Experience must be tested by the Word. John Calvin wrote: "... if any spirit passing over the wisdom of God's Word, foists another doctrine upon us, he justly deserves to be suspected of vanity and lying (Gal. 1:6-9)."

The Gospel proclaims a salvation that is based on concrete historical events; the life, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is not centred in the worshipper's own experiences but in the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ.

The "Jesus Only" movement demonstrates the inherent danger of basing theology on experience and not on the objective reality of the Gospel. It has run aground on the rocks of subjectivism. This modern Sabellianism is as heretical as the old. The "Jesus Only" movement with its non-Trinitarian position has placed itself outside the historic Christian faith.

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