# **United Pentecostal Church International**

## History, Beliefs, Practices

**Identity:** The United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) was founded in 1945 with the merger of

the Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ (PAJC) and the Pentecostal Church Incorporated (PCI). The UPC is distinguished from other mainstream Pentecostal denominations by its anti-

Trinitarian beliefs and teaching on the oneness of the nature of God.

Founders: Leaders from both the PAJC and the UPCI met and together formed the UPCI. Officers were

elected from both organizations. The first General Superintendent was Howard Goss and the

assistant General Secretary was W.T. Witherspoon.

**Statistics:** Approximately 3,900 congregations, 8200 ministers, and 600,000 members in the United

States and Canada.

**History:** In 1913 R.E. McAlister preached a sermon on Acts 2:38 in which he emphasized that God is

known only in the name of Jesus Christ. Shortly thereafter, the practice of re-baptizing in the name of Jesus only, not in the Trinitarian name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, became common as "oneness" teaching spread. Tensions arose between the Trinitarians and the new Oneness believers, setting in motion a split. Numerous mergers, unions and splits followed, leading eventually to a merger in 1945 forming the United Pentecostal Church. The word "International" was later added to he name of the church body. Originally located in the city of St. Louis, in 1970 the denomination moved to Hazelwood, MO, a suburb, where it also operates its Gateway College of Evangelism. Today the UPCI is extremely active in foreign

mission activities.

**Sacred Text:** The Bible

#### **Beliefs and Practices:**

- Oneness Pentecostals teach that baptism "in the name of Jesus" is the only correct formula for water baptism. The UPCI bases this view on Acts 2:38 where Peter commands repentance and baptism in the "name of Jesus Christ." UPCI rejects the historic doctrine of the Trinity and hence also the use of the Trinitarian formula used in Christian Baptisms (Matt. 28:19). The UPCI belief is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are really all manifestations of the one God who became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. In the words of an UPCI statement of faith, the historic doctrine of the Trinity is "inadequate and a departure from the consistent and emphatic biblical revelation of God being one" (<a href="https://www.upci.org/about/">www.upci.org/about/</a>). UPCI theologians and pastors argue that Jesus' use of the singular word "name" in Matt. 28:19 reflects the view that the Father and the Holy Spirit are manifestations of the "one name" in the text Jesus Christ. To further substantiate their claim, they also point to John 14:7-11 where Jesus prays that He and the Father are One.
- Baptismal practice reflects UPCI understandings of God. Previous Trinitarian baptisms are regarded as invalid. Coupled with this teaching is the belief that baptism by immersion only is the sole correct mode of baptism. Sprinkling does not constitute a correct baptism. The UPCI does not baptize infants.
- Oneness Pentecostals also believe in a "baptism in the Holy Spirit" today evidenced by the gift of speaking in tongues (glossalalia).
- Salvation is believed to be "by grace through faith" apart from works. The Lord's Supper is practiced as a memorial feast. The holiness codes prevalent in most of the Holiness churches are also practiced in the UPCI. Dancing, movies, the wearing of jewelry, immodest dress and the like are forbidden. The polity of the UPCI is congregational with some degree of leadership and representation from its headquarters in Hazelwood, MO.

#### A Lutheran Response

Oneness Pentecostalism is basically a modern form of the ancient Christological heresy known as Modalism and Modalistic Monarchianism which taught that the oneness of God is manifested in the three different "modes" of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at different times in the history of salvation. Lutherans oppose UPCI Oneness doctrine—which is a form of Unitarianism—on the grounds that the Scriptures clearly teach concerning God what was later confessed at the Council of Nicea, "that there is one divine essence which is named God and truly is God. But there are three persons in the same one essence, equally powerful, equally eternal: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit" (Augsburg Confession I, 2-3). Matthew 28:19, Lutherans hold, summarizes the unanimous testimony of the New Testament concerning the historic doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Lutherans accept Baptism in the name of Jesus provided that the underlying theology is Trinitarian. Lutherans reject as invalid non-Trinitarian baptisms (e.g., Unitarian baptisms)—hence also Oneness Pentecostal baptisms—and practice re-baptism in such a case. This is done on the grounds that, contrary to the Word of God, Oneness Pentecostalism's understanding of God is anti-Trinitarian. Lutherans hold that the Bible knows only "one Baptism" (Eph. 4:5) and that is the Baptism that the Risen Christ instituted in Matt. 28:19.

Lutherans hold that it is contrary to the Scriptures to teach as scriptural doctrine the opinion that God desires every Christian, following Baptism, to have a "second experience" such as the "baptism with the Spirit," and that He promises every Christian a gift such as speaking in tongues as a part of a "full" or "complete Gospel."

Lutherans appreciate the UPCI statement "that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works" (<a href="www.upci.org/about/">www.upci.org/about/</a>) –the central biblical truth (Eph. 2:8-9) confessed and taught in the Lutheran church. Lutherans would hold, however, that it is not scriptural to reject the biblical doctrine of God, and at the same time regard Him as the true subject of the sentence affirming the revelation of His grace in the person of His Son, by whose death and resurrection we are declared righteous before God. Further, it may also be legitimately asked whether the strict holiness codes observed in UPCI circles, in practice if not in theory, negate or confuse Law and Gospel, contributing to the errant notion that personal holiness in some way effects or completes one's salvation.

Lutherans teach and believe that the Lord's Supper is truly a "means of grace," not merely a memorial feast having only symbolic significance.

### For Further Reading

Bernard, David K. The Oneness of God. Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1997.

Burgess, Stanley M. and Gary M. McGee, eds. *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988. S.v. "Oneness Pentecostalism" and "United Pentecostal Church International."

Melton, J. Gordon. Encyclopedia of American Religions. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999, 417-18.

#### Links and Websites

www.upci.org

www.prairienet.org/community/religion/fire/meet.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 1977 Resolution 3-10A "To Clarify the Synod's Position Regarding Charismatic Teaching," *Convention Proceedings*, 131-32. See also the two reports of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations on the charismatic movement at: www.lcms.org/ctcr/.