

## Onlyism

One of the diseases that inflicts the church is "Onlyism"—man-made rules only by which one can be saved or be considered a Christian (which are, in reality, the same thing). In this issue of *ET&N*, I'd like to take a look at three examples on Onlyism: (1) Sacramental Onlyism, (2) KJV Onlyism, and (3) Gifts Onlyism. Before discussing those in the "Now" section, I'll look at Onlyism in the early church.

### Then

#### Biblical Onlyism

In discussing Onlyism, we should first recognize that Christianity itself is an **exclusive** faith in that it suggests that reconciliation with Father God is only possible through Christ Jesus. Jesus Himself made this statement to His disciples: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6). Peter affirmed this provocative doctrine shortly after Christ's resurrection in a hearing before the religious leaders and scholars of Jerusalem. "By what power or by what name did you (heal)?" they ask (Acts 4:7).

*"Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:10-12).*

This is the fundamental principle of Christian—that Christ Jesus is the **only** way to salvation.

Second, we should recognize that Christianity is an **inclusive** faith in that everyone is invited freely to sit at God's table and experience the joy of adoption as sons and daughters. God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4) and is "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Christianity is inclusive in its availability to anyone, regardless of his or her past. A person has only to put his or her faith in Jesus and reach out to God in order to accept the grace God offers, but human beings often cannot accept that such an incomparable gift can come at such a seemingly low price, so we all-too-often add layer after layer of requirements—manmade onlys that serve only as obstacles. They begin perhaps as personal convictions which become well-meant guidance for others, but inevitably many devolve into perverse -isms. It is as if parents on Christmas Eve, having laid out brightly-colored packages around the tree, descend from their bedroom in the morning only to find someone has covered their gifts with soiled rags, laid them in a field of shattered glass, and surrounded them with a barrier of barbed wire.

We simply cannot seem to grasp that the price was not low at all. In condescending to become human in the form of Jesus, allowing Himself to be made the innocent

scapegoat for the sins of humanity, and suffering a hideous execution, God paid the infinite price.

## Early Orthodox Onlyism

The early church continued to echo the biblical principles of an exclusive savior offering an inclusive grace, but it was not immune from early symptoms of human onlyism. The first -ism to infect the church was the insistence by some that Christians must continue to observe the Mosaic Law. Even after the Jerusalem Council in AD 47, where some Christian Pharisees said, "*It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses*" (Acts 15:5). Paul's argument, but perhaps even more the evidence of his evangelistic success with Gentiles, convinced James, the brother of Jesus and the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church, to release such requirements. Even so, Judaizing Christians continued to dog Paul throughout most of his ministry.

After the Apostolic Age (about AD 100), the church quickly became more hierarchical and authoritative. While there is really no authorization for exclusive and coercive authority for church leaders, it wasn't long after the death of the last Apostle that humans assumed it anyway. To be charitable, I ascribe the motives of most to be well meaning. I have previously written ([ET&N 10](#)) about the identity of the elder (Greek, **presbuteros**, *an old man*), bishop (Greek, **episkopos**, *overseer or guardian*), and pastor (Greek, **poimen**, *shepherd*) role in the New Testament. Paul clearly uses them interchangeably in Acts 20:17-28. Furthermore, Paul does not imbue this role with a worldly type of authority. Elders are to be servants of the church, watching over the flock with care, presiding over meetings, and applying the wisdom gained with age.

Even so, by early in the second century, church leadership began to transform into something strikingly akin to Roman civil government. The documents primarily responsible for suggesting this unbiblical change was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, although there is some doubt about the authenticity of his letters. Ignatius will be the subject of a forthcoming installment in the Early Church Fathers series (scheduled for *ET&N 77* (July 11), so I will not discuss him in depth here. It will suffice to point out that in the eight Ignatian letters (ca AD 110) generally thought to be genuine, he insists on the division of the bishopric and the presbytery and the monarchical authority of the bishop, going so far as to compare the bishop with Christ Himself:

In like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and the bishop as Jesus Christ, who is the Son of the Father, and the presbyters as the Sanhedrin of God, and assembly of the apostles. Apart from these, there is no Church" (*Ignatius to the Thrallians III*).

Ignatius also claims that no Christian activity is valid without the participation or approval of the bishop:

"For, since ye are subject to the bishop [Polybius in this case] as to Jesus Christ, ye appear to me to live not after the manner of men, but according to Jesus Christ, who died for us, in order, by believing in His death, ye may escape from death. It is therefore necessary that, as ye indeed do, so **without the bishop ye should do nothing**, but should also be subject to the presbytery, as to the apostle of Jesus Christ" (*Ignatius to the Thrallians II*, emphasis added).

"Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it...It is **not lawful without the bishop** either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast..." (*Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans VIII*, emphasis added).

While Ignatius' letters are indications of an early **onlyism** that would eventually overspread the church, there is no real evidence that Ignatius' attitudes pervaded the church of the early second century. Even among those who consider his letters genuine, some suggest that his obsession with episcopal authority say more about his own difficulties as bishop of Antioch than they do about the state of church hierarchy in general.

## Gnostic Onlyism

The Gnostic branch of Christianity that emerged in the second century practiced its own elitist brand of **onlyism**, claiming the Jesus passed "secret" Knowledge (Greek, **gnosis**) along to certain disciples, most notably [Mary Magdalene](#) and Thomas. Salvation, the Gnostics claimed, came only through initiation—sometimes involving bizarre rites—into this secret knowledge. I discuss this in somewhat more depth in the [New Testament Apocrypha](#) series.



It therefore should be clear that onlyism is not a recent phenomenon, and that it has took a variety of forms from the early centuries of the church. Today, there are almost infinite expressions of onlyism in the broad Christian community—far more than I could ever discuss here. Consequently, I'm going to limit my "Now" comments to three specific onlyisms that infect the church: sacramental, KJV, and gifts.

## Sacramental Onlyism

Sacramental onlyism is practiced by the so-called "high" religions such as Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, each of which practice highly ritualized rites that tend to obscure the more important moral aspects of the gospel. Focusing on such practices is reminiscent of Jesus' criticism of first century Pharisees: "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others*" (Matthew 23:23).

The Roman Catholic sacramental system is viewed as a necessity for obtaining God's grace. While there is no question that God instituted certain ceremonies in conjunction with His church, the nature and purpose of these ceremonies is one of the major points of division between Catholicism and Protestantism. The seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist (Communion), Penance (Reconciliation), Extreme Unction (Anointing the Sick), Orders, and Matrimony.

The Catholic Church views baptism as "an essential condition for the valid reception of any other sacrament" (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, [newadvent.org](#), "[Sacraments](#)"). Catholic doctrine therefore agrees with many in my own specific fellowship, the churches of Christ, although the details are quite different. Catholics, and many Protestant denominations, practice infant baptism by sprinkling, whereas the churches of Christ practice adult baptism by immersion (see [ET&N 26](#), Water

Baptism). The source of infant baptism practices really resides in the doctrine of original sin, most authoritatively propounded by Augustine (354-430).

Catholic doctrine insists that all of the sacraments except Baptism and Matrimony must be performed by someone who is ordained (has undergone the sacrament of Orders). It is interesting that Catholic doctrine holds that Baptism, the entry point in the church, can be performed by anyone "provided that he use the proper matter and pronounce the words of the essential form, with the intention of doing what the Church does" (*ibid*).

It is important to recognize that while the Roman Catholic Church teaches that God's grace is distributed through the sacraments, this is viewed as a convenience for God:

"Almighty God can and does give grace to men in answer to their internal aspirations and prayers without the use of any external sign or ceremony. This will always be possible, because God, grace, and the soul are spiritual beings. God is not restricted to the use of material, visible symbols in dealing with men; the sacraments are not necessary in the sense that they could not have been dispensed with. But, if it is known that God has appointed external, visible ceremonies as the means by which certain graces are to be conferred on men, then in order to obtain those graces it will be necessary for men to make use of those Divinely appointed means" (*ibid*).

The question about sacramentalism is whether God gave the church the exclusive right to dispense His grace. While Catholic doctrine points weakly to a view verses to "prove" the Catholic position, it is not biblically clear that God delegated dispensation of His grace to the church. More to the point, why would God create such a magnificent portal to a relationship with Him, only to put it in the hands of fallible human beings? To do so would be to compromise His own sovereignty and allow humans to place obstacles in the paths of seekers.

Are the sacraments sacred? Mysterious? Absolutely! Are they the **only** means by which an individual can merit God's grace? No, because no one can merit God's grace. It is a gift freely given to those who genuinely ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:9, see also Revelation 3:20).

### **KJV Onlyism**

Everyone who peruses bookshelves at Borders, Barnes and Noble, or Christian bookstores knows that there are many versions of the Bible. These take three basic forms: word-for-word translations (e.g., King James Version, New American Standard Bible), thought-for-thought translations (New International Version), and paraphrases (The Message). The question that must confront every seeker is, "Which of these is the true Word of God?" The answer is that none of them are.

The true word of God is that which was handed down to His prophets, apostles, and others in unwritten form. These individuals wrote down what God told them and over the centuries, those words have been copied and translated by hundreds of others. The simple fact is that we have no manuscripts of the original writers. The earliest New Testament manuscripts date to no earlier than about 125 AD. Many of the literally thousands of biblical manuscripts contain discrepancies in the text, brought about by both errors and interpretations. How then can people trust that the Bible they pick up to communicate God's word?

Despite the discrepancies in version, **no fundamental doctrine of Christianity is in any way affected or compromised**. All major Bible versions contain the essential elements of Christianity, but there are some who insist that **only** one version, the King James Version (KJV), is the true Word of God. Many others have argued the merits of the KJV in minute detail (the best of the websites I found was at "Darkness to Light," <http://www.dtl.org/versions/subject/kjv-onlyism.htm>).

The debate often centers on differences in specific verses or the omission of certain verses. Disagreements range from respectful exchanges to outrageous name-calling. The basic premise of KJV onlyism is that God is faithful to his children and therefore preserved His word throughout the centuries in the eventual form of the *Textus Receptus*, from which the King James Version was translated in 1611. The KJV therefore became the standard for all English translations and any departure from the KJV is viewed as corrupted or even satanic. Some KJV onlyists, such as one my wife and I encountered recently, even believe that the KJV has some form of magical power that others lack—by simply reading from the KJV, miraculous events occur in the life of the reader. While admitting that miraculous things can indeed happen when one encounters God's Word, there is no evidence of anything particularly special about the KJV.

KJV Onlyism is a man-made doctrine that has no basis in Scripture. No where are we told that God would inspire a group of translators (and the original KJV translators even specifically denied inspiration). Those who read the KJV and other versions know that there are places that KJV language is beautifully poetic (e.g., 23rd Psalm) and other places where it is hopelessly archaic (e.g., James 1:21). To understand parts of the KJV requires a dictionary of Old English at one's disposal. Furthermore, if the KJV is the only inspired word of God, why did the translators include extensive margin notes offering alternate translations?

I do not wish, however, to argue the merits or demerits of the KJV or any other Bible version. My point is that KJV onlyism stands as an unbiblical obstacle to those who seek God. To insist that **only** the KJV can communicate God's will to people is really no better than insisting that one must read Greek.

To those who would inhibit others from exploring the Bible by insisting that **only** the King James Version is the true Word of God, I offer the following quotes from the KJV translators themselves (from the 1611 preface):

"(H)ow shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue?"

The KJV translators comment that the efforts of previous Bible translators "deserve to be had of us and of posterity in everlasting remembrance."

Concerning margin notes on disputable translations, the KJV translators comment: "Some peradventure would have no variety of senses to be set in the margin, lest the authority of the Scriptures for deciding of controversies by that show of uncertainty should somewhat be shaken. But we hold their judgment not to be so sound in this point...Therefore as St. Augustine saith, that variety of translations is profitable for the finding out of the sense of the Scriptures [S. Aug. 2. De doct. Christian. cap. 14.]; so diversity of signification and sense in the margin, where the text is not so clear, must needs do good--yea, is necessary, as we are persuaded."

And finally, in a powerfully simple question, the KJV translators summed up their defense of their efforts: "(I)s the kingdom of God become words or syllables?"

[Note: [click here](#) to read the entire text of the 1611 Preface to the King James Version.]

God's Word, which is found both in creation and in the book we know as The Bible, is inspired, but no translator has ever claimed inspiration. The KJV translators specified denied inspiration. To those who would deny other access to Scripture except as it exists in the King James Version, I would ask, "If the translators of the KJV were inspired, how could they be so uninspired as not to know they were inspired?"

## Gifts Onlyism

There is a doctrine among some Pentecostal and charismatic groups know as "evidential tongues." The concept of evidential tongues is inexorably entwined with "Spirit Baptism." Robert P. Menzies, in an interesting academic article entitled, "[Evidential Tongues: An Essay on Theological Method](#)," affirms the following four statements to be "valid and defensible" (from a biblical perspective):

1. Baptism in the Spirit (i.e., the Pentecostal gift) is an empowering experience logically distinct from conversion.
2. Tongues is a gift available to every Christian.
3. Tongues is a gift which is desirable for every Christian.
4. Tongues is evidence or proof that one has been baptized in the Spirit

Again, I do not wish to debate whether or not tongue—or any other miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit—is active today, but the concept of evidential tongues inevitably create "classes" of Christians based on an extension of the logic in Menzies' affirmations; that is, one who has not spoken in tongues is not baptized in the Spirit and is therefore a lower form of Christian than one who has (or, according to some, not a Christian at all).

In my view, the proofs of the Pentecostal argument consist of unrelated Scriptures cobbled together out of context and fail to serve as sound evidence ([see here](#), for example). That is not to say that I deny the existence of modern day glossolalia, but rather to deny the contention that one has only fully submitted to the presence of the Holy Spirit if one has spoken in tongues. Yet this violates the Scriptural testimony that God is sovereign in the distribution of gifts which are, Paul writes, "*empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*" (1 Corinthians 12:11).

Again, however, the point here is not to prove or disprove Pentecostal claims. Rather, it is merely to point out another example of **onlyism** that serves to divide Christians and ultimately make us a mockery before the world.

## Conclusions

These are but three manifestations of Christian Onlyism. I'm sure any of you could describe many more you have encountered. In my church of Christ tradition, for example, there exists an A Cappella Onlyism, which suggests that musical instruments are inappropriate (or even evil) for Christian worship assemblies. Few of the A Cappella Onlyists admit that this is a salvation issue, but they will refuse to fellowship in instrumental churches or even with individuals who are members of

instrumental churches. Music is a subject for a future *ET&N*, but let me suggest for now that by refusing fellowship with someone, these Onlyists are, in fact, suggesting that those who use instruments are not Christians, for how else could anyone justify a refusal to fellowship?

The problem of **onlyism** lies not in the beliefs themselves but in the binding of others to such beliefs. Paul addressed just such an issue in his letter to the church in Rome. In this case, the onlyism was apparently a manifestation of Judaizing—food restrictions and feast observations. Paul's words are instructive and unequivocal:

*"Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand... Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind... For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. or to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother" (Romans 14: 4/13).*

**Onlyism is a form of passing judgment and I urge us all to never put sacramentalism, KVJism, giftism, or any other form of onlyism as a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of any Christian.**

If you have other examples of Onlyism you have encountered, [please share](#) them with me.

## Discussion

While I do not want to limit discussion, I should point out that I am not inclined to become embroiled in debates with KJV onlyist or evidential tongues advocates. If you want to comment, please do, but I am unlikely to respond at length because I see the argument itself as the problem, not the underlying issues.

My conversation with Rudy continued from the [previous ET&N](#). Here is our exchange:

[Rudy] Once again, I have to differ with you...  
Being saved and being a Christian are NOT in reality the same thing. Demas, for example, was a Christian. As long, however, as he stayed "in the present world" he would NOT be saved...  
That, and I guess you did not get the drift of my comments on your previous missive. Paul was definitely talking about a unity (sameness) of faith to the Philippians, as he did to the Ephesians (till we all come to the unity of faith...). Jude speaks of "the faith, once delivered..." - not our personal interpretations of that faith.

[Dick] I guess we'll just have to disagree. I believe faith is, by its very nature, both personal and interpretive. God gave humans reasoning ability so that we could have faith. Creatures who do not reason, question, interpret, etc. CANNOT have faith any more than a stone can.  
But I'll ask this--just what, precisely, is this unified faith you believe everyone has to have to be saved?

[Rudy] It is not what I believe, it is what Paul and others have written about. Of course, human interpretation causes us numerous problems (like your onlyism-list). But to say that unity of faith/doctrine is something we should not worry about is the opposite of what is found! Shelly, a number of years ago, suggested that, as long as we all agree on the "one" passage in Ephesians 4, we should be okay. Yet, each of those "ones" is open for debate, so that did not help much, either.

I will be the last one to say that it is an easy feat, but that does not mean we should not strive towards that unity. But again, to dismiss that need is incorrect...

[Dick] I've never suggested that there is nothing around which we need to be unified. The problem is that if that is to be the case, we need to define what that something is. While I'm not a fan of ecumenicalism because it tends to reduce faith to the lowest common denominator, it is ironic that to be unified, we have to forget almost all our differences. Hence, the only valid unifying theme has to be the person of Christ Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection--faith in Christ's willingness and ability to allow us to approach a Holy God is the highest common multiple, if you will, of unity. Anything beyond that becomes something that inevitably works to divide us. Even those things specifically designed to unify us (baptism, communion, assemblies) have become bones of contention, and it is not absolutely clear what is called for in any of these (or a myriad of other) cases.

Consequently, we should strive toward unity in faith in Christ Jesus, but probably nothing else. For me (and probably for you), there are other things in our beliefs and practices that we hold dear, but to insist that others must agree in order to have unity contradicts Jesus' message, even if we're somehow "right."

I have never suggested that unity is "something we should not worry about." I will say, however, that uniformity is something we can never attain, nor is it even desirable to try to do so. We can each learn the beauty of faith in Christ Jesus by observing and appreciating expressions of that faith that center on that single unifying theme.

So, that's my opinion. Is there anything in that which you find heretical? :-)

I haven't heard back from Rudy since (Feb 22), but looking back at his last response, I have one additional observation. He says "It is not what I believe, it is what Paul and others have written about," but I don't see how it's possible to separate the two. Yes, I can read what Paul and others have written, but I still have to decide whether or not to believe it (or simply to decide to believe everything the Bible says). Furthermore, in many cases, where the meaning is not clear or may, for example, be obscured by first century cultural issues, I must decide what I believe it means.

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Several other comments came in about the "Onlyism" issue, including this one from Rob in Georgia:

Excellent! I hope you are doing well. How's the book coming along?

I don't pass that along because of the compliment, but because of the question about "the book." Rob is referring to my latest work-in-progress, *The Whole is Greater*, which is a bio-tech thriller. The book remains about 80% complete, but I put it aside for a couple of months while I try to get ahead on *ET&N*. I can always use a couple of readers for the manuscript, so if you're interested, drop me a note. [Click here](#) to learn more about *The Whole is Greater*.

Finally, I learned of another Bible study group using some of my material as fodder for discussion and was forwarded this response from a subscriber:

As one studies the article by Dick Soule on "Only-isms," some concerns arise.

First, we should understand that the term "Only-isms" is a human term and not a biblical term. As we study some of the issues this term is applied to, they need to be studied individually and carefully in the light of the scriptures and not under the curtain of a human term. Some have written concerning the seemingly incomplete flow of the article. To the best of my knowledge, this is how the author wrote it. The author states, " I'd like to take a look at four examples on Onlyism: (1) One True Church Onlyism, (2) KJV Onlyism, (3) Gifts Onlyism, and (4) Baptism Onlyism." The author did not include number four "Baptism Only -ism."

[Dick] As I acknowledged, I erred in not revising the introduction after I changed the content of the article, but this reader obviously did not see the correction.

The author agrees with "only -ism," with reference to salvation being exclusive through Jesus Christ and inclusive on the conditions of placing faith in Jesus Christ and reaching out to accept the grace God offers. However, the conclusion copied below does not explain or conclude the article, but supposes that the Musical Instrument issue is not a doctrinal issue but a judgment issue.

"These are but three manifestations of "Christian Onlyism ". I'm sure any of you could describe many more you have encountered. In my church of Christ tradition, for example, there exists an A Cappella Onlyism, which suggests that musical instruments are inappropriate (or even evil) for Christian worship assemblies. Few of the A Cappella Onlyists admit that this is a salvation issue, but they will refuse to fellowship in instrumental churches or even with individuals who are members of instrumental churches. Music is a subject for a future ET&N, but let me suggest for now that by refusing fellowship with someone, these Onlyists are, in fact, suggesting that those who use instruments are not Christians, for how else could anyone justify a refusal to fellowship?"

I believe a study on the Biblical use of the term "Fellowship," "Only-isms" would be a good topic for discussion and also the practice of Musical instruments. The blanket statements made here are not accurate.

[Dick] I'm not sure what "blanket statements" this reader is referring to, but I assume he was referring to the comment about a cappella vs. instrumental music. I have scheduled an issue of *ET&N* on the subject for about three months from now to give myself time to study and reflect, so I'm not going to go into the issue now. In my comments, however, I did not intend to imply that all "A Cappella Onlyists" refuse fellowship to those who disagree, but it is a common phenomenon, and by "A Cappella Onlyist," I am referring to those who insist it is the only acceptable form of musical expression in Christian worship, not those who choose—by tradition or preference—to retain a cappella congregational singing, as my own church family currently does.

My objection to "A Cappella Onlyism" at this point lies only with those who make musical practices a litmus test for genuine Christianity. But more on that in April...



Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now*? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

**NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Tarsus (March 6)**

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