



STATEMENT DO076

**A Summary Critique:
Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity
Gregory A. Boyd (Baker Book House, 1992)**

**Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne's
Dipolar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysic
Gregory A. Boyd (Peter Lang Publishing, 1992)**

by William D. Watkins

In his book *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* (hereafter *OPT*), Gregory Boyd, assistant professor of theology at Bethel College, clearly explains and effectively refutes a modern-day version of an ancient heresy: modalism, or what Boyd refers to as the Oneness heresy. Modalism made its first appearance in the third century A.D., and in the past 75 years has reappeared in the Oneness Pentecostal movement, which has more than “one million members in the United States and close to five million worldwide” (p. 10). What’s even more alarming is that most of this movement’s converts have come from the ranks of “former Trinitarian Christians” (10).

Over the centuries, the basic thesis of the Oneness heresy has remained the same: “The orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity is fundamentally incompatible with a faith that there is only one God. Therefore, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot in this view be real, distinct, coequal persons in the eternal Godhead, but are only different roles that one divine person temporarily assumes” (9).

Boyd — a former Oneness Pentecostal himself — demonstrates how Oneness Pentecostals move from the premises that “There is only one God” and “Jesus Christ is God” to the conclusion that “Jesus is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (26-27). Of course, Trinitarian Christians accept the two premises, but they cannot embrace the conclusion without rejecting the Trinity. And Oneness Pentecostals have worked hard to prove to Trinitarians that their view is fallacious on a number of grounds. After walking readers through the antitrinitarian arguments, Boyd spends much of the rest of *OPT* critiquing them biblically, historically, philosophically, and theologically.

In almost every instance, I found Boyd’s case valid and compelling. On the other hand, I ran across a few statements which raised suspicions that he was not solidly within the historical mainstream of orthodox Christian thought. For example, he says “there is nothing in any Christian’s definition of God that rules out his becoming a man” (63). Does this mean God can change? Is Boyd denying the classical view of God’s immutability? It seemed so, especially in light of this: “A belief in the Incarnation means that *everything* Christ went through and did, God went through and did....Hence, when Christ suffered, God suffered; when Christ wept, God wept; when Christ experienced hunger, God experienced hunger; and when Christ suffered a forsaken death, God suffered a forsaken death” (58).

Contrary to Boyd, classical theologians such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Luther were careful to point out that God did not literally become man in the Incarnation but rather the Son of God, in and through His person, joined the divine nature to a human nature without altering the nature of deity in any way or at any time.¹

Statements such as these led me to check out Boyd’s academic work *Trinity and Process* (hereafter *TP*), which he footnotes in *OPT*. It more fully develops and defends his doctrine of God and its implications, especially for the doctrines of creation, Christ, and salvation. When I did so, my suspicions were unfortunately confirmed.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

In *TP*, Boyd takes on process philosopher Charles Hartshorne in an attempt to salvage what's viable in Hartshorne's metaphysic and use it to resolve what Boyd sees as the problem areas of classical Christianity. As with Boyd, I studied Hartshorne's work for several years and came to the conclusion that he was the most forceful contemporary critic of classical Christianity. Unlike Boyd, however, I concluded that Hartshorne's understanding of God — even with modifications — does not provide a viable alternative to the classical model.

According to the classical view, God is pure act (He has no potential to be other than He is), infinite, eternal, perfect, simple (He has no internal complexity in His being), immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Hartshorne rejects this conception and replaces it with a *neoclassical* or *dipolar* one. He argues that God has two poles — one is abstract and the other concrete. The concrete pole is God as He exists at any given moment in His ever-changing experience, whereas the abstract pole is that which is common and constant in God's character given any possible or actual world. When a human being suffers pain, God experiences that pain in His concrete pole by sympathetic participation. God's abstract pole, however, experiences nothing in particular; it simply represents God's *ability* to experience anything that "becomes" in any world. In other words, God as concrete is God as He actually is now. God as abstract is God as He must always be. And since the concrete pole is characterized by becoming, *becoming* rather than *being* is the most fundamental characteristic of reality.²

For Hartshorne, God is also personal but not in any substantive or Trinitarian sense. He views God as "an enduring society of actual entities" — not an 'I' who endures through change but an 'I-I-I-I' series that is created partially anew each moment.³ God in His present concrete state is not identical to what He was in His previous concrete state. The God one may serve now is not the God one may have served yesterday nor the God one may serve tomorrow — or even the next second.⁴

Boyd modifies Hartshorne's view and attempts to come up with a revised neoclassical model that will satisfy the scriptural picture of God as triune and render this picture intelligible to modern people who see the world as "thoroughly dynamic, relativistic, and relational" (3). In some ways, he succeeds. He shows how God is better conceived as triune rather than as singularly personal. He also demonstrates that God is self-sufficient and free in respect to His creation. Unlike Hartshorne, who believes God cannot exist without some world or other, Boyd argues that creation must have been a free act of God and that He does not need a nondivine world with which to coexist. God is also free to respond to His creation in a way that expresses His infinite love, goodness, and aesthetic appreciation.

Granting these positives, Boyd also adopts much of Hartshorne's position, even though he makes modifications. For instance, Boyd agrees that God has two poles: one represents God as He is necessarily and the other what He experiences moment-by-moment. In other words, God is supremely consistent in His character while also supremely changing in His responsiveness to creation (230-31) and His relationship to Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (392). This means "the *totality* of what God is at any given moment is contingent" (232). What God experiences in and outside of Himself changes Him. God is "an eternally ongoing event, and an event which is dynamic and open." Within God, there is "eternally 'room for expansion'" (386).

Boyd also contends that God freely experiences our hurts, joys, and sins by entering into solidarity with us (379-81). If He didn't, says Boyd, God would be indifferent to us and our lives wouldn't matter to Him, nor would He matter to us (357-58).

Boyd's reconstruction of Hartshorne's theology further includes the ideas that God is supremely temporal rather than timeless (although Boyd argues God has always existed), surprised by the future free actions of creatures rather than knowing them fully, and characterized first and foremost by *becoming* rather than *being* (as is also true of the rest of reality).

While Boyd's criticisms of Hartshorne's metaphysic are worth the price of the book, his revised neoclassical perspective fails in several important respects. In this short article I have space to mention only two among the many I would like to address.

First, Boyd's belief that all reality is characterized by process raises a critical problem. The statement "All reality is in process" is either itself in process or it is not. If the statement is changing, then its truth value and meaning are also changing. So the statement may be true one moment and false the next, or meaningful one second and meaningless the next. In fact, the statement may even be true and meaningful in some places of the universe at some moments, and false and meaningless in other places of the universe during the same moments. Therefore, if the statement "All reality is in process" is itself in process, then no one could know from one moment to the next if it were actually true or meaningful, which is self-defeating. On the other hand, if "All reality is in process" is itself not in process, then there is one aspect about reality that is not changing, which renders the statement false. Of course, Boyd could argue that all reality is in process *except* the truth and meaning of the statement "All reality is in process," but if he did he would be engaged in special pleading. The only way out is to accept the premise that "Not all reality is in process," but this undercuts the metaphysic upon which Boyd's concept of God is built, for it leaves open the possibility that the most fundamental being in reality — God — is that aspect of reality that does not change.

Second, Boyd's contention that God must experience our suffering, joys, and so on for our lives to matter to Him — and for Him to matter to us — has problems too. For one thing, our lives *do* matter to God and classical theism can account for that. God is an absolutely perfect being and therefore in need of nothing to enrich His nature (Acts 17:24-25), but this doesn't mean we cannot do anything *for* Him. On the contrary, God has sovereignly determined that we should serve Him by carrying out some of His purposes, such as bringing the good news of redemption to those who need to hear it. As we do this, we magnify God's glory, which is the outward manifestation of His internal character. As a magnifying glass enhances an object in the viewer's eyes without changing the object's nature, so our service for God exalts His character without altering His immutably perfect essence or adding to His experience.

Also, as theologian E. L. Mascall notes,

When we are in trouble what really helps us is not sympathy, in the sense of an imaginative or even a ctual participation in our sufferings, but concrete practical help. And from this point of view there is real consolation in the knowledge that...the God who can meet our deepest needs will not be one who is himself entangled in its contingencies...but one who , while his loving care extends even to the least of his creatures and while he knows them in their weakness and need better than they know themselves, is himself unchanged and unchangeable, the strength and stay upholding all creation who ever doth himsel f unmoved abide, a God in whom compassion and impassibility are reconciled in the union of omnipotence and love. "I the Lord change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" [Mal. 3:6].⁵

Besides, classical theists do hold that God participates in our sufferings through the Incarnation. More specifically, the Second Person of the Trinity — the Son of God — through His human nature experienced physical pain (John 19), temptations (Heb. 4:15), emotional upheavals (Luke 20:21; John 10:35), deprivation (Matt. 4:1-2), and even death (Luke 23:46). But His divine nature remained unaffected.

Because of Boyd's understanding of God, some critics have discounted his book on Oneness Pentecostalism and branded him a heretic. I would do neither. *OPT* is an excellent nontechnical refutation of modalism. I hope it is read widely and used to win Oneness Pentecostals to the triune God. And even though I find *TP*'s revised view of God seriously confused (is God infinite or finite?), I do not believe it can fairly be labeled heretical. It should rather be considered aberrant, in a class with the "open God" of Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and others.⁶ While these theologians' view of God compromises His infinite nature, it does not outright deny it.

After reading his books, I have no doubt Boyd is a conscientious Christian who is attempting to carry out the theological task to the best of his ability. And while I seriously disagree with some of his conclusions, I applaud his efforts to remain faithful to Scripture. It is my hope that he will experience fruitful dialogue on these issues with theologians who adhere to the classical view.
— *William D. Watkins*

William D. Watkins is President of his own literary company, William Pens, and Director of Publications for the American Center for Law and Justice. He is the coauthor with Norman L. Geisler of *Worlds Apart: A Handbook of World Views* (Baker Book House, 1989).

¹See Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

²Charles Hartshorne, "Personal Identity from A to Z," *Process Studies* 2 (Fall 1972): 209.

³Charles Hartshorne, "The Dipolar Conception of Deity," *The Review of Metaphysics* 21 (December 1967): 287.

⁴Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1964), 211. See also *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1967). 142-43.

⁵E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*(Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967), 142-43.

⁶See Alan W. Gomes, "God in Man's Image: Foreknowledge, Freedom, and the 'Openness' of God," *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1987, 18-24.