



Boyd, Gregory A.

Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Nearly twenty years ago a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed Greg Boyd wrote a book defending the doctrine of the Trinity against the objections of Oneness Pentecostals. At the time Boyd was full of zeal and all sorts of emotion, which comes out on nearly every page of *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity*, but rightfully so, the Trinity is worth getting excited about! It's worth defending vigorously! As a former Oneness Pentecostal (OP), Boyd was especially equipped to accurately describe Oneness beliefs about God and their arguments against the Trinity, and as a trained philosopher/theologian he was especially equipped to refute such views. This combination makes for a biblically sound apologetic that has held up well in the near-two decades since its publication.

The opening chapter is strictly descriptive and outlines the Oneness doctrine of God, which is founded on two basic premises: 1) Monotheism, and 2) the Deity of Christ. The resulting conclusion is that Jesus Christ is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit because the Bible speaks of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as God. Boyd also highlights the Oneness hermeneutic, which sees the distinctions between the Father and the Son as distinctions between Jesus' divine and human natures. After describing what OPs believe about God he highlights a number of their objections to the doctrine of the Trinity such as it violating monotheism (tritheism or splitting God into parts are the usual charges on this front); the use of unbiblical terminology; its alleged pagan origins; or the illogicality of the doctrine.

The following chapters are spent systematically refuting the Oneness doctrine of God as well as their arguments against the doctrine of the Trinity. Boyd's arguments are dependant mainly on Scripture but he does take some time to delve into the writings of the early Church Fathers (chapter 7) in order to show that the early church was far from Oneness in their theology. Boyd extends his examination past the Trinity to include the Oneness doctrine of baptism (chapter 6), which is intimately linked to (and actually served as the impetus for) the Oneness doctrine of God. Boyd shows the bankruptcy of the claim that baptism must be administered in Jesus' name only and that one cannot be saved apart from water baptism. He also tackles some other Oneness distinctives such as tongues, holiness standards, and the length of women's hair in a series of appendices (A-C) before closing out with an appendix (D) citing Oneness Pentecostal membership statistics.

The main points of contention between Oneness and Trinitarian theology are the personal distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the real preexistence of the Son. OPs have no problem making distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit since these are all distinctions within the one person of Jesus Christ, i.e., the Father is Jesus' divine nature, the Son is Jesus' human nature, and the Spirit is another way of speaking about divine immanence (or the Father as he exists in the world). Where they have the problem is in admitting that these are *personal* distinctions. Likewise, OPs have no problem affirming the *ideal* preexistence of the Son in the mind or plan of the Father but if they were to admit it was a real preexistence of the Son *as Son* before the Incarnation then they'd have to admit the personal distinctions that their theology doesn't allow for. Boyd persuasively shows these real personal distinctions and this real preexistence from a careful reading of Scripture.

In short, Boy effectively accomplishes his task, which is to provide sounds reasons for believing in the Trinity and sound refutations of the arguments against it. This book is the perfect primer to the budding apologist seeking to dialogue with OPs. Boyd will only be preaching to the choir for those who have had extensively interacted with OPs and debated these issues, but he preaches a good sermon. If I were to write a book on OPs and the Trinity then this is very much like the book I would write (save the appendices). The book shows an impressive interaction with the top Oneness authorities of the day, and while the endnotes are sparse, they show that Boyd was familiar with the relevant orthodox scholarship of the day as well. There's really not much to fault about this book so my criticisms are going to be a bit nitpicky.

One issue I had is a matter of terminology. Boyd consistently places the word "person" in quotation marks. He explains his rationale for this saying:

I shall throughout this work place the word “person” in quotation marks when I am referring to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. I do this to avoid the modern trinitarian tendency to overliteralize and overindividualize the threefoldness of the Trinity. This tendency has frequently encumbered the doctrinal discussion on the Godhead between trinitarians and Oneness believers. The quotation marks are intended to remind us that we are speaking analogically about God. (229, n. 1)

I can appreciate the concern but I think it’s misplaced. To start, God speaks of himself in personal terms, and we’ve been created in the image and likeness of God. Some, myself included, interpret that to mean that we’ve been created (at least in part) to exist in *relation* to others. On this understanding one could argue that *our* personhood is analogical to God’s. I think it’s a mistake to set humanity up as the standard that God is compared to. There’s also an issue with the language that Boyd employs, which presumably is not analogical since it bears no quotation marks. Repeatedly throughout the volume he refers to God’s “existing fully in three distinct ways” (61); “existing in three personally distinct ways” (64); “threefold personal way of existing” (83), which presents two problems as I see it. First, this seems a bit inconsistent with his placing the word “person” in quotation marks so as not to overliteralize or overindividualize. How does this language not result in those things? Second, I can’t see why this very language couldn’t be employed by OPs themselves. This type of phraseology seems apt for suggesting that the singular person of Jesus can exist in different personal ways without actually entailing a Trinity of persons.

Boyd also plays the analogical card with respect to the Father-Son relationship. He says:

When we, following Scripture, call God “the Father” and Jesus “the Son,” we are speaking analogically, not literally. We are saying that the loving relationship that exists between God and Jesus is *like* that of a father and a son—but, of course, devoid of the physical characteristics that are present in human father-son relationships. (63-64)

Again, one wonders why humanity is the standard to which God is compared, especially in light of flawed human father-son relationships. Boyd admits that in calling God the Father and Jesus the Son that we’re “following Scripture.” Where do we ever get the impression that Jesus spoke analogically when referring to God as his Father? We don’t. This was the case in the third- and

fourth-century debates over the relationship between the Father and the Son as well. As Peter Widdicombe said:

The terms Father and Son for third- and fourth-century Christians were not arbitrary terms, reflective simply of the assumptions and values of a particular kind of culture. Their use of the word Father to refer to God was based on the example and teaching of Jesus himself and the Bible's witness in the early church's practice. The Scriptures were regarded as inspired by God, and so their witness was authoritative. This was as true for Arius as it was for Origen before him and Athanasius after. It would not have occurred to Origen, Arius, or Athanasius that the proper method to approach the systematic reflection about the nature of God was to begin from the knowing human subject and her or his culturally conditioned experience of God. The terms Father and Son were for Origen and Athanasius the core terms of Scripture, in relation to which all others were to be considered; they were the terms given by God himself and by the Son; they were the terms of Christian initiation in baptism and of Christ's prayers and ours. Appropriately interpreted, they truly do tell us about divine nature; they are not arbitrary ascriptions. (*The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, 258-59)

My final gripe would be with "Appendix A: Salvation, the Spirit, and Tongues." Boyd ably refutes the idea that one must receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues in order to be saved. No arguments there. He makes some good points against tongues as the initial physical evidence of Spirit baptism, which I didn't find ultimately persuasive, but that's not my problem either. The problem is in the hermeneutic that says interpreters can't (or at least shouldn't) take "descriptive history" and derive from it "prescriptive doctrine" (see esp. 206-09). This is a common enough approach to Biblical interpretation but it's one that I think violates a method used in Scripture itself. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul appeals to Israel's narrative history and suggests that the things that happened to the Israelites in the wilderness "happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us." (1 Cor. 10:11) The point is that Paul uses descriptive history in order to teach prescriptive doctrine (in this case something about eating idol meat).

These minor quibbles aside I can recommend this book to OPs and anyone who interacts with OPs. My one recommendation to the publisher in the event of future printings or subsequent editions would be the addition of subject and Scripture indices. Boyd appeals to a copious amount of Scripture and it would be nice to have that all indexed in one place for ease of reference.