

Clark H. Pinnock: A Pilgrim Theologian (1)

Canadian theologian, Dr. Clark H. Pinnock, a tall, mild-mannered, gentleman, whom I had the privilege of meeting on occasion, has become a renowned theologian within North American evangelicalism. He is not an ivory tower scholar who has lost touch with the personal and practical dimensions of the Christian faith.

Thousands of evangelicals in numerous denominations have a large collection of his books on their shelves. His articles in *Christianity Today* and other periodicals are widely read. Many think of him as an inspiring model in an age where moral principles and religious convictions, which once appeared fixed, are now doubted or denied. Others think of him as a brilliant man who is on a "curious theological odyssey." Some call him a "theological gadfly." Whatever one's opinion is of Clark, the Reformed community should pay careful attention to Pinnock's influential writings; they reveal disturbing and questionable theological developments within evangelicalism.

Pinnock was born to a middle class family in southern Ontario, Canada, on February 3, 1937. His maternal grandparents went to Nigeria as British Methodists missionaries. They became Baptists while in Nigeria and joined the U.S. Southern Baptist mission. In the 1920s they immigrated to Canada. In the 1940's young Clark attended the Park Road Baptist Church in Toronto, a congregation to which he later referred to as a "liberal church," which had come under the influence of "progressive theological views" which were disseminated at that time from the Canadian Baptist Seminary at McMaster University. He remembers at fifteen years of age attending lectures in one of Toronto's Baptist churches by the McMaster faculty "in which higher critical theories regarding the Pentateuch, the book of Daniel, and the Psalms" were presented to a congregation of laymen. He writes that he "can remember feeling then...how destructive to our confidence in the reliability of the Bible some of these views were." In 1985 he commented about his church upbringing and deepest concern as a theologian: "I remember feeling appalled at the omission of the central gospel themes both in my church and in others like it. It has been about thirty years since I was saved, and I have never been able to shake off the feeling of outrage and arrogance of the liberal decision to revise the New Testament message to make it acceptable to modern men. I suppose that my deepest concern as a theologian today is to expose this deadly error."

His 1949 conversion to a personal commitment to Jesus Christ came largely through the witness of his Bible-believing maternal grandmother and a like-minded Sunday School teacher at the church. In recalling the influence of the latter, Pinnock remarks: "I do not owe my conversion in 1949, humanly speaking, to that congregation or its ministers, but rather to a teacher in our Sunday School who, deeply troubled by the lack of sound biblical preaching in the pulpit, continued to teach the Word of God to his intermediate class of boys, aged 12-14." His Christian nurture outside the family came through a Bible study group at the high school, literature, and several evangelical religious radio programs he came to value. He also became involved with "Youth for Christ," washed dishes for one summer at the Canadian Keswick Bible Conference, and attended a large missionary conference in Urbana, Illinois. The Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship was a key component for his theological development from almost the beginning of his Christian

journey. He also immersed himself in the staunchly Calvinist writings of John Murray, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Cornelius Van Til, and Carl F.H. Henry.

Pinnock graduated from high school in 1956, attended Victoria College, University of Toronto, where he pursued biblically-related ancient languages. In 1960 he completed his B.A. with honours in the Ancient Near East Studies Program, received both a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Harvard and a British Commonwealth Scholarship to any university in England. He decided to accept the latter and pursue Ph.D. studies at the University of Manchester under the evangelical biblical scholar and apologist, F.F. Bruce. His chosen topic for his dissertation was "The Concept of Spirit in the Epistles of Paul." His thesis was that throughout her long history the church has seldom taken full advantage of the doctrine of the Spirit in preaching and practice. Following the bestowal of the Ph.D. degree in 1963, Pinnock became one of the more prominent evangelicals in arguing such a thesis and pursuing its implications. He stayed in England for two years and worked as Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at Manchester. It was during this time that Pinnock heard about Dr. Francis Schaeffer, corresponded with him, and spent one summer as a student and worker at Schaeffer's L'Abri Fellowship in Huemoz, Switzerland: a spiritual shelter "especially for those seeking the answers to the basic philosophical problems with which all who care about finding a meaning or purpose in life have to struggle."

For two years, Pinnock and his wife Dorothy spent part of their summers both in Italy and with Schaeffer in Switzerland. Schaeffer showed Pinnock that orthodox Protestantism was intellectually respectable and its theology relevant. He also devastated liberal theology by means of intellectual analysis. He was insistent that a sound theology must be grounded in an inerrant Bible if it is to be able to give solid answers to honest questions. He also introduced Pinnock to "pre-evangelism apologetics," which is based on the conviction that only the gospel can supply an adequate basis for meaning and values. Pinnock's abiding interest in apologetics is clearly evident from the wide range of books and articles he wrote on the topic.

He became an "evidentialist" apologist, which is an attempt to provide "objective evidence of the truthfulness of the Christian message." His 1980 *Reason Enough* (later published under the title *A Case for Faith*) examines objections to the Christian faith and provides "five circles of evidence." According to Pinnock, Schaeffer "was a most important person" in his life. He comments, "I needed a teacher like Schaeffer to make sense of my own instincts." Pinnock observes that Schaeffer's appeal was precisely his ability to deliver a strong message of historic Reformed theology in academically intelligent ways.

Later in life Pinnock became critical of Schaeffer. He believed that Schaeffer was beyond his depth in philosophy and theology and that his influence as a thinker would not last long. In 1986 he wrote, "Schaeffer may not have been a great scholar, but he was a wise man, steeped in Scriptures and aware of modern life."

In 1965 Pinnock accepted a position at the New Orleans Theological Seminary as Assistant Professor of New Testament. While in New Orleans his interest changed from New Testament to Systematic Theology. (It is important to note that Pinnock has written only one book of exegesis, his slender commentary *Truth on Fire: The Message of*

Galatians, published by Baker Book House in 1972.) In 1967 Pinnock suffered a detached retina that left him essentially blind in one eye. Not required by the Baptist seminary to identify with a Baptist church, he chose to attend mainline Canal Street Presbyterian Church, which was experiencing a "charismatic" renewal.

From 1969 to 1974, Pinnock taught theology at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois before moving to Regent College where he stayed until 1977. Since then he has been Professor of Systematic Theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. In his present capacity, Pinnock has a considerable though controversial influence among the Canadian Baptists. Many evangelical Baptists view McMaster as the center of mainline liberalism. The controversies over the nature and authority of Scripture in the early decades of the 20th century, which led to a split in Baptists ranks and the founding of the Toronto Baptist Seminary, have not been forgotten. When Pinnock arrived at McMaster, he viewed it as "liturgically formal, academically oriented, and related better to the academy than to the church." He "stuck" it out, and his evangelical voice was heard.

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