

Clark H. Pinnock: A Pilgrim Theologian (2)

Surveying the theological landscape at the dawn of the new millennium, we see symptoms of concern everywhere. Theologians have gone into many new directions. They seem to travel on a path without knowing where it will lead them and us. Uncertainty is always the companion of those who seek new ways. One area of tension, and one of the most contentious, is the attempt to reinterpret doctrine. The question always arises whether the new interpretation has preserved the Gospel or whether its content has undergone a transformation.

Clark Pinnock's theological journey is singled out for close scrutiny as his work reflects the larger story of evangelicalism and his impact on it. Pinnock is driven by openness and a willingness to search, change and innovate. He thinks of evangelical theology as "in progress." In 1993 he wrote that evangelical theology has to be pilgrim theology. "We never pass beyond the necessity of reconsidering our traditional interpretations until the return of Christ. We continually ask where the deep structures of Biblical revelation are pointing. A theology that is not restlessly probing and exploring is not serving the Church well."

In 2000 he remarked that theology is a venture in hope and always capable of enrichment and reform. "Witness to the gospel," said Pinnock, "cannot be content with past meaning in an antiquarian way." In the process he has made several dramatic shifts in his viewpoints, and became a catalyst, perhaps not intentionally, of many controversial issues, which have confronted evangelicalism in the last two decades: the authority of Scripture, the role of other religions, the nature of hell, the charismatic renewal, the place of spiritual gifts, and the doctrine of God (free-will theism). Pinnock prefers to be known "not as one who has the courage of convictions, but as one who has the courage to question them and to change old opinions, which need changing." Stanley Grenz said about Pinnock: "No twentieth-century evangelical thinker has been more controversial than Clark Pinnock. He has been lauded as an inspiring theological pilgrim by his admirers and condemned as a dangerous renegade by his foes [as he has pursued] his fascinating intellectual journey from quintessential evangelical apologist to anti-Augustinian reformist."

Pinnock recognizes that he has become known not for individual positions he has advanced, but for changing his mind so often over the years. Some evangelicals dismiss him by saying, "well, he has changed his mind again." Roger Nicole comments, "Clark Pinnock has certainly shown considerable open-mindedness through the years, but this is flawed by the instability that has led him to shift his stance repeatedly, even long after he began teaching theology." But Pinnock wants people to judge him by the merits of his positions and not think of him only as one who repeatedly changes his mind. However, anyone who follows his theological journey will wonder about these many changes, and even his flipflops, in vital areas of orthodoxy. In 1997 he wrote that he has come to see himself "as a pilgrim-type theologian who likes to explore territories outside the fortress to see what is out there." But he does more than exploring; he believes he has a mission to work for a change within evangelicalism and is in it for the long haul. While taking the risk of thinking out aloud, often strident in print, seeking to free the evangelical community

from "its shackles of Reformed scholasticism," he invites critique. He should not be surprised! Consequently, Pinnock has been described in ways ranging from a staunch defender of the faith against liberalism to spreader of subtle heresy. "Some evangelicals think I am just what is needed," comments Pinnock, "while others fear I am nearly pagan."

Pinnock places great value on his evangelical credentials. But is he a "real" evangelical? What exactly is evangelicalism? Two or three decades ago evangelical theology was nearly homogenous. The key figure then was Dr. Carl F. Henry, American Baptist theologian, able defender of the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, first editor of *Christianity Today* (1956-1968), who had become a leading and respected voice in and outside the evangelical movement. Today it has become difficult to describe evangelicalism. George Marsden seems to indicate that the glue that holds this dynamic and very visible movement together is the common opposition to liberal theology. Kenneth S. Kantzer, a leader in modern evangelicalism and former editor of *Christianity Today* (1978-1982) maintains that "the formal principle of Biblical authority is the watershed dividing liberal Protestantism from evangelicalism." Some emphasize its strongly Puritan, Reformed roots. Others argue that the attempts to define it is nearly pointless. Someone even said that defining the term "evangelical" has become as difficult as stapling "Jello" to the wall.

Since 1968 Pinnock has been an active member of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). The latter was organized for the purpose of "fostering conservative Biblical scholarship by providing a medium for the oral exchange and written expression of thought and research in the general field of the theological disciplines as centered in the Scriptures." As a member of the ETS Pinnock signed his agreement to its stated "doctrinal basis": "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." For decades this one sentence creed was considered sufficient. In recent years, it became necessary to expand it in order to protect the Society from infiltration by deviant views of the Trinity. To the original sentence was added: "God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

According to Gilbert Bilezikian, professor emeritus at Wheaton College, the addition was necessary because "from within our own ranks a potentially destructive redefinition of the doctrine of the Trinity is being developed that threatens its integrity at what has historically been proven to be its most vulnerable point: the definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son."

In the 1980's Pinnock became the first leader of the Canadian section of ETS, now the independent Canadian Evangelical Theological Association (CETA). When Pinnock joined the ETS, he was a staunch defender of the inerrancy of Scripture and sound doctrine.

In 1971 he wrote in *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* that the authority of Scripture is the watershed of theological conviction, the basis of all decision making. He argued against theological fads. He observed that heresies are always novel, at least in appearance. And it is important to note his strongly expressed conviction: "The

rejection of biblical infallibility is not only responsible for the chaos of modern theology, whose methodology is bewildering and whose utterance is inarticulate, but for the most serious apostasy in the history of doctrine."

How long Pinnock, with his changing views, will remain prominent in evangelicalism is an open question. Has he departed significantly from evangelical orthodoxy or is he a shining knight who takes real risks to bring it to new life and relevancy? Pinnock faithfully attends ETS and CETA meetings even though his positions and work are often criticized there. In a 1998 interview he remarked, "I am an older and honored member, but one who is thought (at least by some in the Society) to have crossed over the line of orthodoxy as ETS understands it." And this is how he tellingly describes his current, ambivalent feelings, revealing the impact he has made on evangelicalism: "We are beginning to see a number of theologians who resemble, not settlers with a fortress mentality as before, but pilgrims searching for truth....Nowadays, if you want to find two types, the settlers tend to congregate at the Evangelical Theological Society, while the pilgrims like to gather in various sections of the American Academy of Religion. Fortunately, for those like myself who want to mix with both types, the societies meet back to back in the same cities."

Johan D. Tangelder
September, 2001