

A Pilgrim Theologian (3) Clark Pinnock: then and now

These are crucial and strategic days for the evangelical movement, which represents the fastest-growing segment of the church worldwide.

Its great watershed issue in our postmodern and relativistic era is the nature and full authority of Scripture; it threatens the unity of evangelical movement. The question is: Can a high view of Scripture and theological novelty go well together? I believe it is impossible.

Everyone ought to be aware of this by now. In fact, can one still be called an evangelical while denying the complete trustworthiness of the Bible? I concur with the late American evangelical Dr. Harold J. Ockenga's (1905 - 1985) observation: "It is apparent that those who give up an authoritative, dependable, authentic, trustworthy, and infallible Scripture must ultimately yield the right to the use of the name 'evangelical'." Robert W. Yarborough even claims that "the debate about Scripture is ultimately, in fact, a debate about the nature of God." In other words, if evangelicals would conclude that Scripture can err, then the church and her theologians will discover that without an inerrant Bible there is no solid basis for Biblical authority and hence no sure word for theology or Christian living.

The Early Pinnock (1965-1974)

At the beginning of his career, Pinnock was a passionate defender of Biblical inerrancy. He declared that evangelicals confess inerrancy because it is Biblical to do so. He wrote that "the Scripture in their precise verbal form embody and comprise God's written Word, whose binding force cannot be annulled." He argued his case from the Bible's own doctrine of inspiration, the view of Christ and the apostles concerning Scripture, as well as from the historic position of the Church. He declared that God's Word does not and cannot deceive or it cannot be His. Since God is the ultimate author of Scripture, it does not err because He cannot lie. Therefore, "Scripture is to be believed in all that it teaches because of its divine authorship." Pinnock commented that the result of denying inerrancy, as skeptics well know, is the loss of a trustworthy Bible. It is nonsense to talk about an inerrant Bible with errors in it, and a trustworthy book which lies. The foundation of theology is only secure when the Bible is considered trustworthy. When it records a historical fact we understand a real event to have occurred corresponding to it. Pinnock didn't mince words in his defense of inerrancy. "To cast doubt on the complete veracity and authority of Scripture is a criminal act creating a crisis of immense proportions for theology and faith."

The Later Pinnock (1975 -)

One of the finest and readable works on inerrancy is Pinnock's *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology*, published in 1971. Evangelical scholarship at its best! The well known evangelical J.I.Packer counts it as a "major triumph... of Pinnock's first period."

But in the seventies Pinnock's shifted his position. He began to question the doctrine of inerrancy. He suggested that true belief in Biblical authority is shown in hearing and obeying, not in inerrancy. When an international coalition of evangelical scholars and leaders gathered in Chicago in 1977 to map strategy for a ten-year thrust to study and defend biblical inerrancy and to educate and inform the evangelical community of the doctrine's importance, Pinnock charged, "The last thing we need is a ten-year inerrancy campaign. Our concern should be with the blatant liberals who demythologize parts of the Old and New Testaments. The battle needs to be fought, not at Fuller Seminary (an institution which was criticized for its alleged looseness on Scripture), but in places like Chicago and Harvard divinity schools."

Pinnock indicated the word inerrancy is "not a very helpful word" since it is merely "a modern standard of precision and scientific accuracy."

In *The Scripture Principle*, published in 1984, Pinnock placed a greater emphasis on the humanness of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. He decidedly became more willing to allow that God accommodated His Word to mankind. He now advocates that Biblical veracity is focussed on matters of salvation rather than details. Biblical reliability means that the Bible can bring "us to know and love God in Jesus Christ and to nurture us in that saving relationship," rather than emphasizing matters of grammar or proper historiography. His approach is consistent with his recent interest in "narrative" or "story" theology, which accepts the accuracy of the overall Biblical story rather than its details. For example, Pinnock argues that "We are not bound to deny the Bible the possibility of playful legend just because the central claim is historical, as if to admit a few mythical elements into the biblical story as a whole would classify the Christian story itself as myth. Unquestionably; Jesus's Resurrection had to happen for the gospel story to be true; but the same does not hold for Elisha's axe head or the fate of Lot's wife."

Ray Roennfeldt, author of *Clark H. Pinnock On Biblical Authority. An Evolving Position*, comments that Pinnock hopes that his new approach will move liberals toward an acceptance of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, and conservatives toward a recognition of the Scripture's right to present the divine Word clothed in whatever human form it desires, and both toward a faithful hearing of that Word through the power of the Spirit.

Pinnock experiments with theology and repeated changes have led many evangelicals puzzled. They have asked, "In which direction is he really going?" No wonder he has been called an "evangelical maverick." His shift in his view of Scripture shows that his theology has become profoundly, even fundamentally experience centred. However, he is still convinced that religious experience needs the Scriptures the way any traveler needs a reliable roadmap. But in the process he has become one of the more prominent evangelicals who is convinced that the Holy Spirit is largely marginalized in the life of the Church.

Pentecostal Leanings

During the 1970's Pinnock changed his position on the Pentecostal/ Charismatic movement. He rejected Augustine's and Warfield's view that the gifts of the Spirit ceased with the early church. He affirmed that they are "a legitimate gift of the Spirit to the church today." In an article Biblical Texts - Past and Future Meanings, Pinnock writes that the rediscovery of Pentecost in the 20th century has led to a widespread correction of cessationalist traditions of Biblical interpretation.

"Openness to the full range of spiritual gifts is now the characteristic of the thinking of a large proportion of Christian people, even outside Pentecostal and charismatic circles." He concluded that the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement is now clearly a vital reality in modern Christianity and a great influence on his life and his work as a theologian. He said that he began to realize that God wants to teach us through the Bible by means of historical exegesis combined with an openness to the Spirit. He affirmed a progressiveness of revelation. He even said that with the Spirit's help, one "may need to go beyond Scripture in carrying out its intentions." For Pinnock "revelation has not ceased." He maintains that although the canon of the Bible is complete, the Holy Spirit remains in the church to speak through the Scriptures and in addressing us, through each other by gifts like prophecy. He claims that he has received "a word of prophecy" on several occasions (at least), and to have "received healing from a serious macular degeneracy" in his only functioning eye in 1982.

In regard to the healing of his eye, Pinnock testified, "I know from personal experience that one such incident can be worth a bookshelf of academic apologetics for Christianity (including my own books)." The widely debated "Toronto Blessing" with its "holy laughter" and other strange manifestations also made a deep impression on him. He first attended it in the summer of 1994. He thought the people there were so receptive to God that he found it a time of true spiritual refreshment. His personal testimony on the impact of the Toronto Blessing is telling: "I go to the meeting in order to wait on God and listen. There is an abundance of faith and expectancy there and the environment is conducive to encountering the Holy Spirit...I have found myself made more radically open to God's presence and have come away with my faith enhanced." He did, however, observe a weakness in the Toronto Blessing's teaching ministry. He felt that it sometimes failed "to deal adequately with the purpose of the Spirit, namely advancing God's reign by inspiring and empowering a serious following of God's servant Jesus."

Pinnock's theological journey and his changed view on Scripture estranged him from the Calvinism he once espoused. John Calvin passionately defended the historic "Scripture alone" principle. He warned that nothing should be added to the inerrant Scripture even by what may appear to be the direct revelations from the Holy Spirit. Calvin's explanation of his position on the essential unity of the Holy Spirit and the Bible is to the point: "He [the Holy Spirit] is the Author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself. Hence he must ever remain just as he once revealed himself there. This is not affront to him, unless perchance we consider it honorable for him to decline or degenerate himself."

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