

A Pilgrim Theologian. Pinnock's Journey

I often try to break new ground as a theologian. Theology is such an adventure and a rich feast. Surely a Spirit-led orientation in theology will not produce theological tedium or the stuck-in-the mud kind of work associated with standard evangelical theology. There is so much to be done and the Spirit will make me thirsty to see that it gets done. (Clark Pinnock, April 20, 1999.)

Pinnock's breaking "new ground" as a theologian has taken many twists and turns. His interest in the doctrine of salvation stands behind a wide range of writings, which cover almost the whole gamut of his writing career. He began as an ardent and enthusiastic Calvinist. He took seriously the conviction that the doctrine of election is at the heart of the Church, the centre of the Church's faith. In his early period he could appreciate Dr. H. Bavinck's talk about election in doxological terms, about its "glory," and about the rich comfort of the counsel of God. He would have agreed with Dr. A. Kuyper's assertion that election is "the cardinal confession of the church." Pinnock regarded alternate interpretations of the doctrine of salvation as suspect. Any alternative, like Arminianism, was regarded as unacceptable since it would imply that sinners could somehow aid in their own salvation - which is by grace alone.

Calvinism was understood to be evangelical Christianity in its purest form! In his writings and lectures he stressed the vitality of the Reformed faith. For example, in the summer of 1968 he was the primary lecturer at a Reformed conference in Florida. His Biblical focus was Romans 9-11, a key passage on predestination which he handled "in the high Reformed style" so important to him at that time. His early work on the doctrine of Scripture with its stress on its inerrancy was also done in his Calvinist period of life. In a 1985 essay published in *The Use of the Bible in Theology/Evangelical Options*, he still said that "Calvin's theology is good theology because on the whole his exposition is careful and sound."

Pinnock was a Calvinist until about 1970. The first link in the Calvinist chain of doctrines to break for him was the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Through his study of the exhortations and warnings in the epistle of Hebrews he came to believe that at least something depended on the human factor in salvation. According to Pinnock, it was this insight that broke for him "the logic of Calvinism." He now believed that God's will can be frustrated by human obstinacy. He concluded that for a Christian's to continue in the saving grace of God depends, at least in part, on the human partner.

Pinnock's break with Calvinism, which is a coherent doctrinal system and a worldview, led him to reconsider "many other issues", including election, total depravity, the atonement of Christ, and the nature and authority of Scripture. His departure from Calvinism also meant that he could not finally escape rethinking the doctrine of God, however difficult.

In his early view of Scripture, Pinnock stressed the divine factor and inerrancy. When he broke with Calvinism, he thought that Scripture should be understood as the result of both a divine and a human response. He began to shift to a more Arminian view of Scripture and admitted to construing "the Spirit's work in and through human writers in more dynamic terms than possible in Reformed theology." In other words, he began to jettison

the doctrine of inerrancy, he once so fiercely defended. For example, in 1986 Pinnock alleged the orthodox or old view of the Bible has tended "to exaggerate the absolute perfection of the text and minimize the true humanity of it." He now believes that the traditional statement of inerrancy has not always been developed in the most balanced and sensible way and that it cannot be defended in the face of modern literary criticism of Scripture. Consequently, Pinnock ends up over stressing the human element in Scripture and not giving adequate place to the divine role in the formation of Scripture. This weakened view Scripture combined with his new infatuation with Arminianism helps to account for his dissatisfaction with the strong emphasis on God's sovereignty in the views of inspiration held by such notable Calvinist theologians such as B. B. Warfield and J.I. Packer.

Pinnock's "conversion" to Arminianism was not a "Damascus" experience. He gradually emerged as an Arminian in a predominantly Calvinist evangelicalism. As Pinnock left Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for Regent College, Vancouver, in 1974 he explained: "I have become increasingly skeptical of the value and truthfulness of Calvinist theology...I am concerned that it threatens the integrity of the gospel which is offered in the New Testament without reservation to all sinners, and not to an arbitrarily elected number."

The books on the doctrine of salvation edited by Pinnock - *Grace Unlimited* (1975) and *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (1989), in which he and other evangelical theologians present "the all-inclusive scope of God's salvific [able to cause salvation] will," reveal his gradual shift. Pinnock's early position was that a Calvinist theological orientation was an essential part of valid Christian believing and evangelism. In his later view, he taught the opposite. He adopted a corporate view of election. He concluded that God has chosen a people, and individuals enter into God's election as they choose by faith to join the elect body in Christ. In *A Wideness in God's Mercy. Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (1992) he says that Abraham's election is for the sake of all people. "It is not an election in which God arbitrarily selects some to be saved while appointing others for damnation to his glory." Pinnock adds that "election has nothing to do with the eternal salvation of individuals but refers instead to God's saving of the nations." And he charges that "it was a major mistake of the Reformation to have decided to refer to grace and salvation."

Pinnock accuses St. Augustine (354-430) for placing too much emphasis on the divine aspect of salvation. He says that "in the bitter Pelagian controversy, for example, he was driven to stress the sheer gratuity of divine grace at the expense of any human contribution." And Pinnock supposes that it was this bitter controversy that drove Augustine to place such a strong emphasis on divine sovereignty in grace "and to accept the harsh notions, which accompany it, including soteriological predestination, total depravity, everlasting conscious torment in hell, strict limitations on who can be saved."

Pinnock's centre of reference is no longer the glory of God, the proclamation of His sovereignty and mercy in judgment, a summons to bow down in awe and adoration before the Almighty on Whom we are depended for all things, including salvation. His new focus is on man's ability, on what God can do for men. Ronald Nash sums up Pinnock's views as "that the salvation of every human being is ultimately up to that person. God can coax and plead with the sinner; the Holy Spirit can do his best; Christ has already died for the

sinner. But the sinner will never experience salvation until he or she decides to believe. Salvation is a consequence of humans participating with God. God's part was providing a Savior; the human part involves the use of free will to accept what God has done."

Pinnock also caricatures the Calvinism he once so fervently embraced. In a 1992 essay The Conditional View in Four Views on Hell, Pinnock says that according to the larger picture, we are asked to believe that God endlessly tortures sinners by the million, sinners who perish because the Father has decided not to elect them to salvation, though he could have done so, and whose torments are supposed to gladden the hearts of believers in heaven. In another work Pinnock dismisses the sovereignty of God as wanting "to control everything like an oriental despot," and is "virtually incapable of responsiveness." In *A Wideness in God's Mercy* he claims that "insofar as certain of its representatives have presented God as a cruel and arbitrary deity, orthodox theology badly needs revision." I believe that the evangelical Baptist John Piper's remark is an appropriate response to Pinnock's harsh assessment of Calvinism. Piper said that the death and misery of the unrepentant is in and of itself no delight to God. God is not a sadist. He is not malicious or bloodthirsty. Instead, when a rebellious, wicked, unbelieving person is judged, what God delights in is the exaltation of truth and righteousness, and the vindication of his own glory and honour.

When we call Pinnock an Arminian, we should keep in mind that there is "a vast distance" between Arminius (1560-1609) and contemporary Arminianism. This should not be a surprise as Arminius in the North American context is read through the eyes of John Wesley and Methodism.

As we follow Pinnock's changing views, we can notice that in recent years there have evolved significant similarities between the theological work of John Wesley in the eighteenth century and Pinnock's in the twentieth. For example, in his 1997 keynote address to the Wesley Theological Society, Pinnock observed that there is shallowness in the rhetoric of "Scripture only" and said that over the years he had come to realize "how Wesleyan my moves in method and theism were."

Pinnock's break with Calvinism also led him to wonder about the salvation of those who have never heard the Gospel. Ray Roennfeldt points out that in the light of his Arminian approach to the doctrine of salvation, Pinnock asserts that because God is one who desires all to be saved, "we can be sure that he reveals himself in one way or another to everyone, and invites them to make a decision for or against him." In *A Wideness in God's Mercy* Pinnock makes some disturbing claims for one who prizes himself an evangelical theologian. Unlike the Reformers, he affirms the redemptive potential of general revelation. He says that "it is surely valid to infer that divine grace is prevenient everywhere. God's ever-gracious Spirit is not confined to the walls of the church." He states that he does not deny there is a knowledge of God apart from Jesus Christ. "I accept general or cosmic revelation, and I believe that many people in other religions worship God, even in ways that fall conceptually short of the revelation of God's nature which Christ brings."

Pinnock even declares, "When Jews and Muslims, for example, praise God as the Creator of the world, it is obvious that they are referring to the same being. There are not two

almighty creators of heaven and earth, but only one. We may assume that they are intending to worship the one Creator God that we also serve...People fear God all over the world, and God accepts them, even where the gospel of Jesus has not yet been proclaimed." Pinnock does not appear to take very seriously the Biblical truth that man has as natural tendency to hate God and his neighbour (Lord's Day 2, 5). And his new stance does not encourage Christians to obey our Lord's Great Commission. Why bother reaching Muslims, Jews, and others with the Gospel, when people are accepted by God even where the Gospel has not yet been proclaimed?

Pinnock's journey from St. Augustine to Arminius, and to Wesley is not finished. The newest stage in his theological wanderings is his flirtation with "the openness of God" theology.

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