

A Pilgrim Theologian. Clark Pinnock: Wandering Pilgrim

Clark Pinnock's theological wanderings show his penchant for going on new and untried ways.

In 1985 Pinnock still taught Biblical inerrancy and the sovereignty of God in the inspiration of Scriptures. In his essay How I Use the Bible in Doing Theology he said that "The mark of a wise and sound theologian is to let tensions which exist in the Bible stay there and to resist the temptation to tamper with them...I cannot tamper with the data as regards divine sovereignty and human freedom just because it would be easier if one were at liberty to do so." In his 1990 book *Tracking the Maze*, Pinnock characterized contemporary theology as "a labyrinthian maze that practically defies tracking." He describes the situation as a crisis of identity in which some theologians are no longer able to distinguish what is Christian truth from what is not. And he continues on to say "that theology seems to be drowning in a sea of human opinions and modern trends, having lost touch with the substance and standards of the faith as historically confessed by the churches." But by the end of the 20th century his switch from Calvinism to Wesleyan Arminianism convinced Pinnock that the Reformed view of the doctrine of God is in need of a serious overhaul. He struggled again with the age old questions: What about predestination and free will or the omnipotence of God and opposition to Him? How can the statistical fact that some are predestined and others are not be harmonized with the righteousness of God? In his search for new answers Pinnock became a fierce critic of the doctrine of election and caricatured it. He felt that Calvinism teaches that the host of the Lord should be thinned rather than thronged; that like Gideon, who had to reject soldiers rather than recruit them, Calvinists reject people rather than recruit them for the faith. He didn't mince words. "To say that God hates sin while secretly willing it, to say that God warns us not to fall away though it is impossible, to say that God loves the world while excluding most people from an opportunity of salvation, to say that God warmly invites sinners to come to knowing all the while that they cannot possibly do so -such things do not deserve to be called mysteries when that is just a euphemism for nonsense." And Pinnock began to push a new doctrine of God, which is called "openness theology." It vastly differs from orthodox Christianity; an approach that is threatening divisions among evangelicals, and which has led to intense debate among members of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Openness Theology

"Openness theology" also called "free-will theism" derives its name from the 1994 book *The Openness of God*, written by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, and William Hasker. Pinnock says that he is now drawn to a new orientation, which sees God as love, away from the view of God as authoritarian and austere judge. He says that love as God's reigning attribute. The sovereign God, truly transcendent, has chosen to make room for others and to seek real and mutually responsibility with them. God relates to us primarily as parent, as lover and covenant partner, who sympathizes and responds to what happens to the world. Pinnock now views God as One Who woos and invites us, not as One Who dictates and manipulates us. He says that he does not believe that God determines the course of history unilaterally. He believes that the future is open and that

God not only affects creatures but that creatures affect God. In his book *The Openness of God* he notes:

God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us... We respond to God's gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses...and on it goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals.

According to Pinnock, God limits himself voluntarily. He does not control everything that occurs. He honours the degree of relative autonomy, which He grants to the world. Although Pinnock confesses God's independence from the world, God is still "dependent on the world in certain aspects." God is learning along with us, and changing the world in the face of new circumstances.

Limited Omniscience

The most troublesome and controversial consequence of Pinnock's free will theism is the implication that God has no complete knowledge of the future. He asserts, "if history is infallibly known and certain from all eternity, then freedom is an illusion." God, of His own free will has given up the ability to see the future. Pinnock says that the freedom of man is compromised if God knows in advance what He will decide.

What about the prophecies in Scripture? His position is puzzling, to say the least. He believes that God allows the future to be "really open and not available to exhaustive foreknowledge even on the part of God." And "free actions are not entities which can be known ahead of time. They really do not yet exist to be known ahead of time." Although God does not determine everything about the future, He determines what He chooses to, since He is the Lord of history.

Pinnock's position on the freedom of man and God leaves many questions. Why should the Almighty and all-knowing God create a being whose choices are beyond His foreknowledge? If man is autonomous and free God apparently must watch with great anxiety what people are going to do. If God is not Almighty and not omniscient is He worthy of worship?

I think not. But the God of the Bible is neither helpless nor limited in knowledge. And the Almighty God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his inimitable style A.W. Tozer speaks of the Wonder and the Majesty of our God. Omnipotence is not a name given to the sum of all power but an attribute of a personal God whom, we Christians, believe to be the Father of our Lord Christ and of all who believe on Him to life eternal. The worshipping man finds this knowledge a source of wonderful strength for his inner life. His faith rises to take the great leap upward into the fellowship of Him who can do whatever he wills to do, for whom nothing is hard or difficult because He possesses power absolute.

Jesus Christ

I must disagree with Pinnock. He has an overly optimistic view of man, his abilities and freedom. And if he is right, God could not have predicted salvation through the cross since Christ may or may not have been crucified then at the hands of wicked men. But our hope for the future is in the God of the Scriptures Who knows the past, the present, and the future. He cannot be caught by surprise by anything. The whole scheme of redemption was not an emergency plan, which God adopted when all seem to be lost. It was the loving unfolding of the eternal plan of God. God's self-disclosure in Christ is the supreme attestation of His omnipotence, omniscience, and the incarnation of His Son. The true solution of mankind's dilemma is in Jesus Christ Who became man. In Christ we see the face of God the Father. He repeatedly said that He and the Father are one and that in Him the Father brings about the redemption of the world. Although it was man who crucified Christ and was held responsible for this unspeakable crime, it was certainly in the mind of God.

In his Pentecost sermon the apostle Peter said about Jesus' crucifixion, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." (Acts 2:23). The apostles Peter and John said in their prayer, "Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:27,28). The crucified, risen, and ascended Christ is the King of the world. "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col.1:17). Like Paul in Romans, we should make Jesus Christ our first concern so that we know our sin and the need for the Saviour. When I bow in all humility before God in Christ, in full awareness of my sin and lostness, than I can see Him as my Father in Whom I can put all my trust. And when I do this, the question of predestination is no longer a statistical problem, but a wonder of the fact that with no obvious merits of my own I am justified out of free grace, a child of God Who holds me safe in the hollow of His hand for time and eternity.

An Evaluation

Pinnock's "intention" is to remain an evangelical and true to the historic Gospel, but his "open" view of the doctrine of God elicits serious concerns. Some of his critics have been rather pointed. R.C.Sproul said publicly that Pinnock is a heretic for holding such a view as limited omniscience. Norman Geisler thinks that Pinnock's work is a part of "a dangerous trend within evangelical circles of creating God in man's image." And he noted that the very idea of God not knowing all things, past, present, and future, is unacceptable to many evangelical Christians.

Pinnock does leave us with more questions than answers. How can we say that God is reliable and loving when people can thwart His will? Are we free to disobey God whenever we want to believing that there is little God can do about it? Is God so respectful of our freedom that we can rebel at will? Furthermore, how God do something about suffering if He is not all-powerful and all knowing? And if He has to work in partnership with us, He must change when we change.

Pinnock attempts to read Scripture out of the context of historic confessional interpretations. But the Holy Spirit didn't begin His work at the end of the twentieth century.

He has been at work for more than twenty centuries. Scripture is not for the academically trained only. God's intention is that the Bible is to be understood by all His people. Christians should not put all their confidence in the latest academic scholarship. The calling of Christian scholars is to help ordinary Christians to a deeper faith and a better understanding of the great historic Biblical truths.

Conclusion

G.K. Chesterton once remarked, " God says, in effect, that there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained." There is so much in life we can neither understand nor reconcile in the face of widespread tragedy or personal trials, yet we confess that God is sovereignly at work in every situation. (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10).

As Canadian author Margaret Clarkson, herself a lifelong sufferer said, "That God is, indeed, both good and powerful is one of the basic tenets of Christian belief." We can only speak and write about God with fear and trembling. We may not lower Him to level of our thought. Our language is not adequate enough to speak about and describe the majesty of our Creator God. With the apostle Paul we exclaim,

"Oh, depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things, To Him be the glory for ever! Amen" (Romans 11:33-36).

Johan D. Tangelder
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