

## Clark Pinnock as Theologian

**A Review of *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal: An Intellectual Biography*, by Barry Callen**

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[NOTE: This review article is to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Asbury Theological Journal*. Since that publication has been delayed, I have posted it temporarily to my website.]

Barry L. Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal: An Intellectual Biography*. Published in Cooperation with The Wesleyan Theological Society. Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2000. xxii, 293 pp., paperback. ISBN 1-928915-02-7.

“The Openness of Clark Pinnock” would be a good title for this review, for Pinnock’s life and theology have certainly been marked by openness. Barry Callen, University Professor of Christian Studies at Anderson University and prodigious editor of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, does useful service in providing this narrative analysis of Pinnock’s theological journey. Written and published with Pinnock’s cooperation (and in collaboration with the Wesleyan Theological Society), the book surveys the Canadian theologian’s theology up to the year 2000.

The approach is primarily chronological, highlighting key themes in Pinnock’s writings at different periods. Chapter 3, “The Certainty of Revealed Truth,” focuses on Pinnock’s work on Scripture, and the last two chapters deal mainly with free-will theism (the “openness of God” debate) and Pinnock’s pneumatology, especially as reflected in *Flame of Love* (1996). As appendices Callen provides key excerpts from Pinnock’s writings, each with a candid reflection by Pinnock (written for this book) on “How My Mind Has Changed.” The book itself grows out of Pinnock’s contacts with the Wesleyan Theological Society in the late 1990s.

The overall theme (reflected in the title) is that Pinnock’s theological pilgrimage has been an ongoing quest for the renewal and vitality of the church’s theology and witness. Pinnock’s work is renewal-and-mission driven. Pinnock admits candidly, “More like a pilgrim than a settler, I tread the path of discovery and do my theology en route” (a 1998 *Christianity Today* comment, quoted on p. 132). As Robert Rakestraw wrote in *Baptist Theologians* (1990), Pinnock’s theological work is marked by “a thirst for God and His truth wherever that may lead and regardless of whose theological system it may violate” (quoted by Callen, p. 78f). Much of Pinnock’s more controversial writings seem to have been offered to the public with a rather winsome naiveté as to the heated reactions they could provoke.

Pinnock, born in Ontario in 1937, began his theological work as a fundamentalist, though earlier influences were diverse. His paternal grandparents were British Methodist missionaries to Nigeria who eventually switched their affiliation to the (U.S.) Southern Baptists when their

understanding of baptism changed. Clark's grandfather Samuel Pinnock was both a missionary and a scholar, and his grandmother Madora Pinnock was a key influence in Clark's own conversion in 1950. His home church (Park Road Baptist in Toronto) was fairly liberal theologically, but through such influences as Youth for Christ and fundamentalist and dispensational radio broadcasts, Pinnock began "his Christian life and theological formation in the context of post-World War II fundamentalism" (p. 19). Callen observes that while Pinnock was a "loyal Baptist," in fact his "primary ecclesial identity was parachurch in nature" (p. 20). Since Pinnock's theology has so clearly been shaped by his own story, one wonders whether the relative lack of a focus on ecclesiology in his theological work owes something to these roots.

Pinnock did his doctoral dissertation under F. F. Bruce at the University of Manchester, focusing on Paul's understanding of the Holy Spirit (1963). The "battle for the Bible" was raging as Pinnock began his published theological work, so it was natural that his major early books focused on biblical authority as he taught first at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (where he switched disciplines from Bible to theology), and then at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1969-74). It was Pinnock's gradual shift away from defending biblical inerrancy that first made him controversial. Callen suggests that the latent influence of Bruce (and also reading C. S. Lewis) meant that Pinnock would never be fully comfortable among the inerrantists. At this stage Pinnock's journey intersected briefly with that of Dewey Beegle who in his 1973 *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* critiqued Pinnock's defense of inerrancy and who himself got into difficulty with his own Free Methodist Church (and reluctantly left the denomination) when he was attacked by Harold Lindsell and others for his views.

Callen describes Pinnock's theological project in the 1970s as "Unraveling Reformed Scholasticism" (the title of Chapter 4). Reviewing the Western theological tradition in the light of Scripture, Pinnock discovered "the insight of reciprocity"—that God's sovereignty is not to be understood in such a one-sided way as to exclude the possibility and significance of real human response to God, and God's response to humans. Here Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace appears to have been helpful. Pinnock's writings as he explored the implications of "reciprocity" for the doctrine of God would eventually lead to his being accused of "neotheism" and "extreme Arminianism."

As background to Pinnock's work in "revising classical theism," Callen briefly mentions the case of Asbury Seminary professor Claude Thompson in the late 1940s. Though there is no direct connection with Pinnock, Callen draws a parallel between Thompson's views (and those of his Drew mentor, Edwin Lewis) and Pinnock's later critique of the Augustinian/Calvinist understanding of God. Lewis, Callen notes, questioned "the Calvinist reliance on the absolute sovereignty of God as the right assumption" for resolving the problem of evil. Thompson's views could not be tolerated at Asbury at the time, Callen says, because "influential elements of the North American Wesleyan-Holiness tradition associated with Asbury seminary [sic] had begun looking toward" post-war evangelicalism rather than their own Wesleyan sources as "primary theological paradigm." Callen argues that the Thompson case pointed to "the need for a fresh openness in theology that champions key elements of the Wesleyan theological tradition in contrast to a rigorous and rationalistic evangelical alternative" (pp. 138-39). This is what Clark Pinnock has done.

*Pinnock's Political Theology*

Callen traces Pinnock's "pilgrimage in political theology" (as Pinnock later called it) in the early 1970s, shortly after Pinnock went to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Pinnock came into contact with Jim Wallis, the Trinity student who was soon to launch the *Post American* (now *Sojourners*). Pinnock was captivated by the issues of social justice and countercultural community embodied by Wallis and his compatriots and was soon writing for Wallis' magazine, warning of "pseudo-disciples who can hardly distinguish the cross from the flag" (quoted, p. 111). The political-theological debate here, Callen notes, was a sort of replay of the "debate that raged between sixteenth-century Anabaptism and Calvinism. Pinnock had been nurtured in the latter and now was moving toward the former" (p. 109).

The sojourn was brief, however. In a candid essay in Ronald Nash's 1984 book, *Liberation Theology*, Pinnock renounced his "leftist convictions" (as he called them) and re-embraced political conservatism. He described this period as "one enormous zigzag" in his career. Pinnock in fact bounced from the right to the left and then back to the right again, politically speaking.

The episode is instructive. Pinnock's adoption of radical Christianity was emotional and wholehearted—"a paradigm shift—a total transformation"; "a heady experience which intoxicated me and many others" (Pinnock, "A Pilgrimage in Political Theology," in Nash 1984, p. 106). Yet before long Pinnock swung back to the right, becoming enamored of the likes of Milton Friedman, George Gilder, and even R. J. Rushdoony. His political theology (at least in the 1970s and 1980s) seemed incapable of transcending the socialist/capitalist divide to imagine other options; the rhetoric is that of right versus left. Pinnock gives little evidence of thorough *theological* probing of either option. His so-called "Pilgrimage in Political Theology" is perhaps the least theologically profound thing he has published. He seems to have overreacted at both sides of this "zigzag." Perhaps if Pinnock had in the early 1970s endorsed or adopted a more nuanced and biblically grounded version of radical Christianity he would not have reacted so strongly back in the other direction, adopting a political viewpoint that (in my view) clashes with the gospel at key points. It is remarkable that Pinnock could describe his rightist political views as "the center"—even if that is the self-evident assumption of many *North American* evangelicals. Pinnock asserted in *Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal* (1985), "There is a problem of ideology in contemporary Christian social ethics, but it lies more on the left than on the right" (p. 63).

Here, obviously, context is important, as Callen notes. The heady 1970s were not the 1990s. But one wonders what might have happened if Pinnock had engaged Anabaptist and liberation theology with the sympathetic but cautious depth of his later dialogue with process theology and other traditions. In his theism, Pinnock has arrived at a position that is closer to Wesleyanism than to Calvinism or Augustinianism—something of a mediating position, with a quest for balance. Had Pinnock sympathetically engaged the more conjunctive Wesleyan and Arminian perspectives earlier, his "political theology" (and implied ecclesiology) might have been more profound and biblically prophetic.

The ecclesiological issues here seem to carry through into Pinnock's later work. Pinnock has a fine chapter on ecclesiology in *Flame of Love*. The theme is that a balanced ecclesiology is both sacramental and charismatic. This is good, but incomplete. Pinnock says, "The church is an extension not so much of the incarnation as of the [Spirit] anointing of Jesus" (*Flame of*

*Love*, 114). But why not both? A three-dimensional ecclesiology that is charismatic, sacramental, and incarnational is biblically sounder than Pinnock's two-dimensional model. In discussing the sacramental aspect Pinnock does helpfully insist on the value of material and physical things, but the emphasis is more on sacramental signs than on the church's calling to incarnate the life and justice of God's kingdom here and now. Though Pinnock ends the chapter with a call to servanthood and "caring for needs" (p. 144) he scarcely mentions the key biblical stress on justice. The Holy Spirit empowers the church to witness effectively to the justice as well as the mercy of God's reign (e.g., Isa. 61, Lk. 4). This broader understanding of the church in relation to the kingdom is largely missing in Pinnock. The reason perhaps traces back to the "zigzag" of the seventies.

### *Divine Openness and Foreknowledge*

Wesleyans (as also a number of Pentecostal/Charismatic theologians) seem generally to have welcomed Pinnock's affirmation of free-will theism because of its compatibility with a Wesleyan understanding of God, Christian experience, and Scripture. In *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (published in 2001, subsequent to Callen's book), Pinnock commented that the "open view of God continues the much older debate between theological determinists, like Calvin, and free will theists, like Wesley," but "makes the choices even sharper and clearer, being itself a more coherent alternative to Calvinism than Arminians have presented" (p. xii).

Does Pinnock go too far, however, in his view that divine foreknowledge must be understood as limited if human freedom is real? Clearly this is the most contentious issue in Pinnock's openness theology, as Callen points out. Pinnock himself says in one of his postscripts, "I suppose that the most controversial aspect of my re-thinking is my openness to thinking of divine knowledge as *present* knowledge, the view which affirms omniscience but not exhaustive *foreknowledge*" (p. 243; emphasis Pinnock's). God voluntarily limits his foreknowledge in order to give humans genuinely free choice. Pinnock does not agree with Norman Geisler that a biblical understanding of divine sovereignty necessarily means "complete control of all things," including the future. As Callen puts Pinnock's view, "Complete control certainly lies inherently within the divine capacity; but the question is whether God chooses to function in this manner in relation to humans" (p. 106).

Is this consistent with Scripture and with Wesleyan theology? Pinnock's strong rejection of predestination is much like Wesley's; both rejected it because it impugns the moral character of God. Wesley however did not reject belief in divine foreknowledge, while Pinnock argues that rejection of predestination necessarily implies a limitation of exhaustive foreknowledge on God's part. Callen notes that both Pinnock and Wesley hold "a concept of divine foreknowledge that does not imply determinism"; thus "it probably is better to say that human choices to accept divine grace enter God's knowledge because they take place rather than that they take place because God knew (and presumably determined) them in advance." (p. 157). Wesley himself said, "God, looking on all ages, from the creation to the consummation, as a moment, and seeing at once whatever is in the hearts of all the children of men, knows every one that does or does not believe, in every age or nation. Yet what he knows, whether faith or unbelief, is in no wise caused by his knowledge. Men are as free in believing, or in not believing, as if he did not know it at all." Wesley insisted however that "when we speak of God's foreknowledge we do not speak according to the nature of things, but after the manner of men. For if we speak properly, there is no such thing as either

foreknowledge or after knowledge in God,” since God is not limited to time (Sermon, “On Predestination,” Par. 5).

Wesley was content to leave it at that—in the realm of mystery due to our temporal limitations. Pinnock however rejects the “eternal now” view of God’s knowledge as unsatisfying theologically and philosophically. Yet one may question whether Pinnock deals adequately with the time/eternity issues involved. His (and Callen’s) discussion here is full of time references—decisions “not yet made,” for instance. An adequate treatment would have to explore in depth the nature of space and time as dimensions of God’s multi-dimensional world and existence. Clearly the very idea of “foreknowledge” is a human construct, as Wesley said. Pinnock does not fully deal with this issue in the writings examined in Callen’s book.

Philosopher William Hasker does discuss the time/eternity issue in his chapter in *The Openness of God* (1994). Like Pinnock and other free-will theists, Hasker rejects divine timelessness or the “eternal now” view of God. His view is that “God is temporal—that he lives and interacts with us through the changes of time.” What he really means, however, is not that God is captive to chronological time but simply that “God experiences changing mental states.” Physical time did not exist prior to the physical creation, but (Hasker argues) we can affirm that “a change of state, and therefore of time, does exist in God, who is thus present in every ‘now’ of time rather than in the ‘eternal Now’” (*Openness of God*, 128, 194f). This seems to mean that God experiences time in some physically atemporal, or supratemporal, sense.

Pinnock briefly explores time and timelessness in *Most Moved Mover*. Sticking close to Scriptural language, Pinnock argues that God is everlasting but not eternal. God is a “temporal agent” who “is above time in the sense that he is above finite experience and measurement of time but he is not beyond ‘before and after’ or beyond sequence of events” (p. 96). Pinnock speculates that perhaps before the physical creation “God experienced a kind of timelessness because there was nothing to measure temporally”—that “God is timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation” (p. 98). But what is this if not the affirmation of mystery and seeming paradox? Pinnock appears in fact to affirm that God is *both* temporal and timeless, admitting that these two affirmations cannot be fully harmonized rationally given our state of knowledge and earth-bound existence. Here theologians inevitably sound like two-dimensional creatures trying to describe a three-dimensional world. Rather than saying that God is “temporal” or “not timeless,” we might better speak simply of “God’s time,” in the process agreeing with God: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8). When does the quest for intelligibility and rationality cross the line of the knowable within a space-time world and become nonsense? (which perhaps is more the issue than is heresy). It is neither incoherent nor intellectually unsatisfying to admit not only the limits of our knowledge but also of our (present) intelligible rational categories.

In fact Pinnock seems not really to be denying that God is eternal, but only that he is not timeless. He affirms in effect that God is timefully eternal, not timelessly eternal. Eternity for God is everlastingness, not timeless changelessness. This however is certainly in some sense to speak analogically or metaphorically, abstracting from our own temporal experience to dimensions of existence we don’t understand and only with difficulty imagine. In the final analysis, it appears to me that Pinnock’s position is not hugely different from Wesley’s. Both

finally resort to analogy and mystery. Pinnock goes further than Wesley (which he thinks logically necessary) in questioning exhaustive divine foreknowledge, but in the end both admit that in this area we are speaking beyond what we know or understand. We can agree with Wesley that properly speaking “there is no such thing as either foreknowledge or after knowledge in God” without buying the philosophical view of an “eternal now.”

In the final analysis, it seems to me that Wesley—despite the differences of time, culture, and theological project—provides a better critique of Pinnock than Pinnock does of Wesley.

Not only does Callen’s account of Pinnock’s “journey toward renewal” give us comprehension of Pinnock’s theology, attitude, and motivation. It also serves as an informed primer on post-World War II evangelical theology in the context of larger cultural and theological currents.

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