

CLARK PINNOCK ON WORLD RELIGIONS: EVANGELICAL PRECEDENTS?

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Clark Pinnock's most recent contribution to theological discussion is *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*.¹ As we have come to expect from Pinnock, this is a passionate work confronting a topic of vigorous contemporary debate. Pinnock's goal is to articulate an authentic Christian alternative to both the watered-down inclusivism of much recent liberal theology of religions and the restrictivism (which Pinnock sees as reactionary) of much recent conservative Protestant theology.

Obviously this is a very ambitious task, which necessitates battling on both fronts throughout the book. Thus, after an opening chapter that defends an Optimism of Salvation against the 'fewness doctrine' that has characterized most conservative Protestants, Pinnock pivots immediately in his second chapter to defend the Christian claim about the particularity of Jesus as Savior of the World against the minimalist relativism of several recent theologies of religion. His third chapter on the nature of world religions addresses both fronts at once, encouraging the one side to take more seriously the positive aspects that are found in other religions while challenging the other side to recognize that there are also negative aspects in all religions, as well as some irreconcilable differences between religions. Chapter Four carries such bi-focal argumentation into the issue of dialogue between world religions, simultaneously challenging conservative Christians to get involved in dialogue and criticizing relativist approaches to dialogue that rule out *a priori* any serious adjudication of competing truth claims. The final chapter deals with the age-old question of the Christian view of the fate of the unevangelized—again defending the universal availability of saving relationship to God on the one side while rejecting universalism on the other.

¹(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) page number references in the text throughout this essay are to this book. For Pinnock's earlier essays leading up to this book, see "The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions," in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, edited by Mark Noll & David Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 152–68; "Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religion," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (1990): 359–68; and "Acts 4:12—No Other Name Under Heaven," in *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, edited by William Crockett & James Sigountos (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 107–15.

While Pinnock articulates his position in dialogue with both the liberal and conservative sides of the Christian theological perspective, he is clear from the beginning that his major goal is to place the issue of religious pluralism on the agenda of evangelical theology (p. 15). One senses that he is as concerned to get evangelicals simply debating this topic (for the sake of their theological integrity) as he is to win converts for his own particular solution. Indeed, he concludes his discussion with a challenge for his evangelical critics to begin the debate (p. 183). He has not had to wait long for them to take up this challenge.²

The most consistent focus of Pinnock's critique throughout this book is the rigid 'restrictivism' of many conservative Protestants or evangelicals who summarily exclude all unevangelized from any participation in God's final salvation. As evidence of such a view one could point to the DuPage Declaration that was drafted at Wheaton college in 1990, which stated flatly: "We deny that other religions are pathways to salvation, or that one can be in a right relationship with God apart from repentance and faith in Jesus Christ."³ Pinnock lists many other examples (p. 196 note 13).

The most common evangelical response to such criticisms of restrictivism is to raise the accusation of universalism or relativism in return.⁴ For this very reason Pinnock repeatedly rejects universalism (p. 43). He also strongly criticizes the 'relativist' claim that all religions are equal or teach the same thing—only in different terms. He rightly points out that such claims are patronizing, failing to respect the specificity of the various world religions.⁵ They are nothing more than "Enlightenment dogmatism masquerading as toleration" (p. 71).

In contrast to the alternatives of restrictivism and relativism, Pinnock wants to affirm the decisive redemption in Jesus Christ in a way that does not exclude all possibility of salvation among the unevangelized. He refuses to restrict God's saving grace entirely to Christian circles, but equally denies that other religions should be considered fully salvific in their own right.

²For a few of the critical responses to Pinnock, see Bruce A. Demarest, "General and Special Revelation: Epistemological Foundations of Religious Pluralism," in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, edited by Andrew Clarke & Bruce Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), 135–52; Harold O.J. Brown, "How Crowded Will Hell Be?" *Christianity Today* (14 Sept. 1992): 39–40; and W. Gary Phillips, "Evangelicals and Pluralism: Current Options," *Evangelical Quarterly* 64 (1992): 229–44.

³See "The Dupage Declaration," *Good News* 23.6 (May/June 1990): 40–41.

⁴A good example is Millard Erickson, "The State of the Question," in *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, ed. Crockett & Sigountos, 23–33, esp. p. 24.

⁵This point has been made in quite convincing form in Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

The most fundamental claim in Pinnock's own approach is that Scripture clearly teaches the universal scope of God's redemptive will. And yet, God's redemptive work finds its definitive form in Christ, which is a *particular* event to which not all have access. What possibility of truth or salvation is available then to the unevangelized? Pinnock argues that Scripture affirms some true knowledge of God and some possibility of saving trust in God available even to them. This possibility is grounded in that general revelation which is an expression of the gracious universal presence of God's Spirit ever since creation, and in the specific universal covenant that God made with Noah (Genesis 9:8–12).

Like all God's covenants, Pinnock acknowledges that the Noahic covenant is conditional. Universal salvation is *not* guaranteed, only the universal *possibility* of salvation. That is to say, the unevangelized too must stand before God's judgment. However, they are assessed in terms of their response to God's beginning gracious revelation, not the definitive revelation of Christ. As Pinnock once phrases it, people are saved by faith in God, not the detailed content of their theology (p. 157). In addition to this general claim, Pinnock also speculates briefly about a postmortem appearance of Christ to the unevangelized. However, he relates any such appearance to some response to God in this life, so as not to render this life and its decisions meaningless (pp. 170–72).

One might expect that the most pressing question that evangelicals would raise about Pinnock's suggestion of some possibility of salvation through the Noahic covenant would concern its implications for the missionary motive. In anticipation of this response he argues convincingly that the definitive revelation in Christ *increases* possibility of response to God, rather than adding a detriment of further accountability. Further, this proclamation brings an awareness of the full dimensions of God's purposes for reordering life in this world, an awareness not available through general revelation alone (cf. pp. 176–80).

Pinnock himself anticipates—rightly, as responses have shown—that a more typical evangelical response to his entire argument would be simply to reject the claim that the Bible affirms God's universal salvific concern.⁶ He finds this rejection almost incredible, suggesting that there must be a “restrictivist control belief” operating in much evangelical theology that actively blocks out or suppresses this biblical material (pp. 18–19). As evidence that the issue is over *interpretations* of Scripture and not just the authority of Scripture,

⁶The clearest evangelical rejections of a truly universal salvific will of God in response to Pinnock are: Carl F.H. Henry, “Is it Faith?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own?*, ed. Crockett & Sigountos, 245–55; and Demarest, “General and Special Revelation.”

Pinnock points to the diversity of Christian understandings of the issue of salvation of the unevangelized.⁷

Pinnock finds himself particularly drawn to the more positive view of other religions articulated by early Christian theologians (especially Greek authors), often using a Logos Christology—where Christ presents the definitive exemplification of the truth of God evident nascently in creation. While Pinnock’s description of this earlier tradition needs to be nuanced, it provides a helpful vehicle for his identification of the central components of the ‘control belief’ that he is contesting.⁸ He sees the most momentous element as the decision by Augustine (adopted by Calvin and Luther) to reinterpret the biblical doctrine of election along the lines of special redemptive privilege rather than unique vocation on behalf of the world (p. 25). On these terms God’s saving grace is restricted *only* to the elect, rather than expressed *definitively* in the Christian community. A second element is the purely juridical account of the Atonement that developed in the West, epitomized in the Substitutionary Justification of Calvin and Luther (cf. p. 188 note 14). On these terms all consideration of response to God’s universal gracious activity is ruled inappropriate, as ‘works-righteousness.’ If one accepts both of these results, then all of those verses that say that God desires that *all* might be saved cannot really mean what they appear to suggest; they mean only that God wants all *types* of people to be saved, or something like that!

As these comments suggest, Pinnock is quite conscious that his proposal rejects some central claims of the magisterial Protestant tradition. As a partial defense he appeals to the presence of something like his position among some early church theologians (particularly Greek), Vatican II Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. The evangelical response so far to this tactic has been to nuance his reading of the early church, argue (incorrectly) that Vatican II was a dramatic deviation from earlier Roman Catholic teaching, and ignore the warrant found in Eastern Orthodoxy.⁹

⁷This diversity has been helpfully described and analyzed in John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁸For more nuanced accounts of this early Christian tradition see Chrys Saldanha, *Divine Pedagogy: A Patristic View of Non-Christian Religions* (Rome: Editrice Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1984); and James Sigountos, “Did Early Christians Believe Pagan Religions Could Save?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own*, ed. Crockett & Sigountos, 229–41.

⁹For criticism of the appeal to the Early Church see again Sigountos, “Did Early Christians Believe Pagan Religions Could Save?” Sigountos nuances Pinnock’s claims without denying the presence of some affirmation of the universal possibility of salvation among these authors. For an argument that Vatican II introduced something for which there was no traditional warrant, see David Wright, “The Watershed of Vatican II: Catholic Attitudes Towards Other Religions,” in *One God, One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism*, edited by Andrew Clarke & Bruce Winter (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), 153–71. For a convincing argument to the contrary that there was strong traditional Roman Catholic precedent for Vatican II see Francis A. Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992). For an accessible introduction to Eastern Orthodox views see

Of course, granting Pinnock the warrant of these non-Protestant traditions would not automatically recommend his position as an ‘evangelical’ option. Many evangelicals assume that this label should be limited to Protestantism, if not indeed to conservative Reformed theology! If the latter limitation is definitive, then Pinnock’s position would surely not be a viable evangelical alternative. However, this limitation must be challenged vigorously. In the first place, there has actually been more diversity on the issue of the salvation of the unevangelized among Reformed theologians than is often admitted.¹⁰ More importantly, it has been shown convincingly that any historically adequate use of ‘evangelical’ in describing American Christianity must include such groups as revivalist Methodism, the Holiness Movement, Pentecostalism, and Arminian-leaning Baptists.¹¹ When one surveys ‘evangelical’ treatments of the possibility of salvation among the unevangelized within this broader extent of the term, then positions approximating that of Pinnock are not uncommon.¹² In this light, Pinnock’s proposal certainly does merit consideration as having not only some biblical and historical warrant, but also evangelical warrant!

I want to develop this point briefly in connection with one specific branch of the broader ‘evangelical’ tradition. If John Wesley is admitted as a part of this tradition, then he presents a mature position on the question of the unevangelized that is much like that of Pinnock: these folk will be judged in light of their response to God’s initial universal work of grace, and there is

Anastasios Giannoulatos (Yannoulatos), *Various Christian Approaches to Other Religions: A Historical Outline* (Athens: Poreuthentes, 1971).

¹⁰The best demonstration of this point is John Sanders’ survey of three different Reformed views in “Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?” *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988): 241–59.

¹¹See Donald W. Dayton & Robert K. Johnston, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1991).

¹²For a few such evangelical treatments see Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1984), 137–75; (The Evangelical Alliance), *Christianity and other Faiths: An Evangelical Contribution to our Multi-Faith Society* (Exeter, Devon: Paternoster, 1983); Malcolm J. McVeigh, “The Fate of Those Who’ve Never Heard? It Depends,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 21 (1985): 370–79; Peter Cotterell, “The Unevangelized: An Olive Branch From the Opposition,” *International Review of Missions* 78 (1988): 131–35; and Evert D. Osburn, “Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989): 367–72.

good reason to hope that many of them will be saved!¹³ Wesley's similarity to Pinnock on this point is no accident for he too drew on early Greek theologians, whom he particularly favored of all the early church theologians.

Of course, this position is not the only thing that Pinnock and Wesley share. They both are strong critics of the Reformed doctrine of double (or single!) predestination. Predestination and the status of the unevangelized are closely related issues, for one of the most frequent explanations of the exclusion of the unevangelized from knowledge of God's saving grace is that they are not among the elect, being left in the chains of total depravity. The common predestinarian accusation against a position like Wesley's or Pinnock's is that they are denying this problem of human depravity. This is surely not the case. They both affirm the need for God's grace if any person is to respond to God. They simply refuse to believe that God would arbitrarily limit access to that grace for any person in need.

This brings me to one of my main observations. If one watches carefully it becomes clear that what is at stake in this debate for Pinnock is not human ability or disability, but the character of God! He frankly finds the assumptions about God implicit in the predestinarian restrictivist tradition to be appalling. He charges that they portray God as a cruel and arbitrary deity (p. 19). He references Dale Moody's consternation about the kind of God who would give humans enough revelation to damn us, but not enough to save us (p. 104). He quotes Elton Trueblood to the effect that such a God would be more devil than God, and—more importantly—would not even resemble Jesus Christ, whom Christians proclaim to be the definitive revelation of God (p. 150). Finally, he speaks in his own voice that such a God could not be the God whom Jesus called Father (p. 154).

In other words, if the restrictivists are right about God's dealing with the unevangelized, then Pinnock wants little to do with their God! And neither would Wesley! For him, such a God makes one's 'blood run cold.' Or, as he put it regarding the implications of predestination:

(The doctrine of predestination) destroys all [God's] attributes at once. It overturns both [divine] justice, mercy and truth. Yea, it represents the most Holy God as worse than the devil But you say you will 'prove it by Scripture'. Hold! What will you prove by Scripture? That God is worse than the devil? It cannot be. Whatever that Scripture proves, it never can

¹³For two examples of this claim in Wesley see "Large Minutes," Question 77, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 8:337; and Sermon 106, "On Faith," §I.3–4, *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984ff), 3:494–95. For an extended study of this theme in Wesley see Randy L. Maddox. "Wesley as Theological Mentor: The Question of Truth or Salvation Through Other Religions," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 27.1 (1992): 7–29. Pinnock briefly refers to Wesley as warrant on pp. 158, 182–83.

prove this. ... There are many Scriptures the true sense whereof neither you or I shall know till death is swallowed up in victory. But this I know, better it were to say it had no sense at all than to say it had such a sense as this. ... No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that [God's] mercy is not over all [God's] works.¹⁴

Thus, Wesley would share Pinnock's conviction that an understanding of God that is in keeping with the revelation of Jesus Christ would necessarily involve affirming God's universal love for and mercy on humanity. Also like Pinnock, Wesley would not understand this to imply universalism. For this God of universal grace is equally a God of holiness who respects and upholds human responsibility.¹⁵ If any thing, Wesley would stress this aspect of responsibility even more than Pinnock. Pinnock tends to emphasize the generous number that will be saved while quietly side-stepping questions about whether this turns into 'cheap grace' (cf. pp. 175-6). Wesley would lay more emphasize on the necessity of some human response to the grace of God (in whatever degree of its revelation) as a co-operant participation in salvation.

Another major area where I believe that Wesley would be rather uncomfortable with Pinnock's proposal is in his tendency to draw sharp lines of demarcation between the various covenants of grace (with direct reference to dispensationalism! cf. pp. 105, 162). For Wesley there are progressive *degrees* of grace and progressive *degrees* of revelation, not distinct types of grace or revelation.¹⁶ For example, even general revelation is gracious revelation for Wesley, the revelation of Prevenient Grace. Moreover, this Prevenient Grace is not simply a mitigating force against evil (as Pinnock suggests, p. 103), it is the initial degree of truly saving grace.

One final area where a Wesleyan perspective on the possibility of salvation among the unevangelized would differ somewhat from Pinnock is in its trinitarian grounding. Pinnock makes several brief attempts to gain a universal availability of salvation by appeal to the Trinity (e.g., pp. 77-78, 104). However he remains vague in how he understands this. Sometimes he suggests a Logos Christology. Other times he emphasizes the universal presence of the Holy Spirit. Wesley would come down clearly on the side of the latter alternative.

¹⁴Sermon 110, "Free Grace," §§25-26, *Bicentennial Works*, 3:555-56.

¹⁵For more on this point see my article "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Perspective of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19:2 (1984):7-22; and a forthcoming book *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*.

¹⁶For details on this point see Maddox, "Wesley as Theological Mentor." Compare Wesley on this point to the radical separation between general and special revelation, and general and special grace, in Demarest, "General and Special Revelation."

A Logos Christology too easily sacrifices the particularity of the Christ event.¹⁷

In short, while Pinnock would indeed find a sympathetic colleague in Wesley on this issue (and many—though not all—in the later Wesleyan traditions), he would also find himself being pushed to make clearer the uniqueness of Christ, the continuity of God's gracious work, and the importance of some degree of human response (i.e., holiness) even to the most nascent forms of Divine Grace. The crucial point, however, is that this would all take place *within* an 'evangelical' context—if this word is used with historical integrity.

¹⁷This point requires more explication than is possible here. I refer the interested reader again to my forthcoming book on Wesley's theology that has entire chapters on Christology and Pneumatology.

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