

“Divine Reciprocity and Epistemic Openness in Clark Pinnock’s Theology” by John Sanders, Hendrix College.

This paper was given at a session honoring the work of Clark Pinnock at the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco, November 18, 2011.

Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock was once a renowned defender of the doctrine of meticulous providence (where God tightly controls each and every event that transpires). He caused quite a stir when he rejected evangelical Calvinism and crossed the theological divide for freewill theism. In the final years of his life he caused an even greater controversy when he helped develop a particular theological model within freewill theism known as open theism. The lightning rod issue in this view is the affirmation of “dynamic omniscience” (God knows all the past and present exhaustively and the future as possibilities). This paper argues that the key motivation which led Pinnock to make these moves was his belief that God freely entered into reciprocal relations with creatures. This paper also claims that another factor was at work as well: he rejected an evangelical form of strong foundationalism which led to an epistemic openness to others. These two factors, divine relationality and epistemic openness coalesced for him in the openness of God model.

It began, he says, in 1970, when he was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School that he questioned his affirmation of strong Calvinism. He rethought his interpretation of particular biblical texts and he inquired about whether our prayers of petition really had an affect on God.¹ In 1975 he wrote that with what he calls “the insight of reciprocity in hand” he is now able to understand more of the implications of reciprocal relations between God and humans which led to his conclusion that strong Calvinism was inconsistent with.²

I suggest that there was an additional vital change in Pinnock’s epistemological approach at this point. His early work was apologetic in nature and the particular approach to apologetics he took is what Donald Bloesch criticized as “evangelical rationalism”. Pinnock was committed to the quest for epistemic certainty and he seemed to read divergent viewpoints only in order to show them wrong. At this juncture, however, he readily acknowledges that theologians are “fallible and historically situated creatures” (*Grace of God*, 16) and, importantly, he actually applies these ideas to himself and begins to see how much he needs to learn from others.³ He speaks of himself changing from possessing a “fortress mentality” to one of going on a “theological pilgrimage”. He rejected the strong foundationalism of conservative evangelical theology: “It took me decades to get free of the shackles of old Princeton, but this is a diminishing problem for

¹ See his chapter in *The Grace of God, Will of Man* (edited by Pinnock) where he describes his theological pilgrimage.

² See *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, 19 and Barry Callen’s intellectual biography Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal, 100.

³ It is common for evangelical theologians to say they finite and potentially fallible but they rarely apply this to their own theologizing.

younger people.”⁴ Pinnock begins to manifest some epistemic virtues that, he notes, are lacking in many evangelical theologians. Specifically, he becomes open to the other. He read widely among Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and other theological traditions and made use of what he found of value in them in order to rethink evangelical theology.⁵

In the 1980’s he says he began to rethink the divine attributes. He rejected strong immutability, strong impassibility, and divine timelessness since they were incompatible with the biblical portrayal of divine reciprocity as well as with his own experience of prayer (*Grace of God*, 24). In 1986 he wrote a chapter in *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views* which lays out the key elements of his approach. He mentions that he had read Richard Rice’s *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (1985). Yet, Pinnock’s focus here is on the type of sovereignty God practices, not the issue of omniscience and freewill. He rejects meticulous providence in favor of “omnicompetence” (146), claims that God acts “temporally and not timelessly” (146), and has chosen to be interdependent with creatures (146, 151). God operates this way because God wants relationships of love to form (148). If meticulous providence is correct then the relationship with God is closed, not open, and if it is closed then Pinnock does not know how to make sense of the idea that our prayers have an affect on God. He then argues that if the divine-human relationship is open, then the future must also be open which implies that the future actions of free beings cannot be known with certainty by God. He realized that divine timelessness, strong immutability, strong impassibility, and exhaustive definite foreknowledge were a package deal and their attempted harmonization with biblical teachings simply fell apart.

In 1994 he contributed the seminal book *The Openness of God*. At the beginning of his chapter he stresses that God is approachable and interactive. He also says that “humility is essential” for this topic since our understandings of God are always partial and in need of revision. Once again, we see divine openness and human openness placed side by side (102). He concludes by saying that “God is the best learner of all because he is completely open to all the input of an unfolding world, whereas we are finite and slow to react, reluctant to learn and inclined to distort reality in our own interest” (124).

The book received a great deal of attention and *Christianity Today* was generous enough to ask Roger Olson to write a review of the book. After receiving Olson’s review someone at the magazine decided it was too positive and so four other reviewers were hurriedly added and each of them trashed the book. Tom Oden’s review called the dynamic omniscience view a “heresy” because it was not part of his fabled “consensus of the first eight centuries.” At the end of his review Roger Olson asked whether American evangelicals have “come of age enough to avoid heresy charges and breast-beating jeremiads in response to a new doctrinal proposal that is so conscientiously based on biblical reflection rather than on rebellious accommodation to modern thought? This may be the test.”

⁴ Pinnock, “Evangelical Theology in Progress,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology*, ed. Roger Badham (Westminster John Knox, 1998), 79.

⁵ Pinnock wanted an evangelical theology which was faithful to the scriptures, sympathetic to traditions, alert to the life of piety, and made use of the best learning of the day.

In the decade which followed the publication of *The Openness of God* a founding member of the Evangelical Theological Society, Roger Nicole, charged that Pinnock should be expelled from the Society because the openness of God was incompatible the inerrancy statement of the ETS.⁶ The theme of one annual meeting of the ETS was on whether or not open theism was legitimate for evangelicals and a formal vote on his membership failed to garner the 2/3 majority needed to evict him. At this time several evangelical seminaries, led by the Southern Baptists, along with some denominations altered their statements of faith so that open theists could not be members.⁷

Pinnock responded to the controversy in his *Most Moved Mover* (181) where he suggests that the rancour surrounding the open theism debate could be lessened if: (1) We respect one another as believing scholars, (2) We always keep in mind that we know only in part, (3) Refrain from caricaturing what the other says, and (4) Refrain from politicizing the issue by declaring who is in and who is outside the boundaries of evangelicalism. Pinnock believed that theological determinism coupled with strong foundationalism among evangelicals fosters a “pathology” of closed-mindedness with a fondness for gate-keeping in order to exclude others with theological differences from evangelicalism. I once asked him why he continued to attend the ETS and he replied that he needed to hear what they were saying and he believed that they needed to hear what he had to say. In his better moments Pinnock lived out his notion that we should emulate God as the best learner of all who listens to the other.

For Pinnock, the openness of God model was an attempt to render coherent the God he read about in the Bible and experienced in prayer. Understanding that God was open to, and affected by, creatures encouraged him to be open to learning from others and thus revising his own beliefs. From the beginning of his development of open theism he understood that that there are epistemic virtues endemic to the openness of God model. Pinnock’s understandings of gracious divine reciprocity and the human need to listen to the other were both significant factors that motivated his embrace of open theism.

⁶ One of Nicole’s arguments was that if God actually changed the divine mind as open theists claimed, then God was not perfect and made errors in judgment. If so, then God could not guarantee biblical inerrancy.

⁷ For interviews with open theists and a telling of the controversy see Larry Witham’s *The God Biographers: Our Changing Image of God from Job to the Present* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010), chapters 8-9.