

An Interview between Clark H Pinnock and Homeletics website

Does Prayer Change Things? Yes, if you're an Open Theist

*Clark H. Pinnock (Ph.D. University of Manchester), Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology, taught at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario, from 1977 until his retirement last year. He is the author, editor or co-author of 15 books, including *More than One Way*, and *Flame of Love*, a work on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In recent years, he has become one of the leading theological voices for the "openness" movement, a theological perspective that takes another look at the omniscience of God. He spells out this view with a team of other writers in the book, *The Openness of God* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), and in his book, *Most Moved Mover* (Paternoster Press, 2001), a publication of his Didsbury Lectures in 2000 at the University of Manchester where he wrote his Ph.D. dissertation in New Testament under the supervision of F.F. Bruce, the first Didsbury lecturer. He writes in the preface to this book that he "did not for a moment imagine in 1994 that our book on the 'openness of God' would create such interest and provoke such controversy, particularly in the evangelical community." In fact, certain members of the Evangelical Theological Society have brought heresy charges against him to which he is now drafting a response prior to a fall meeting of the society. When we met with Dr. Pinnock in late winter in his office at the Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, these charges as well as the nature of his lifelong work were much on his mind.*

HOMILETICS: What is Open Theism?

PINNOCK: It's called by different names: free will theism, the open view of God, relational theism or even personal theism. They're all getting at God's nature as a personal being, a triune God who is essentially relational himself and who treasures relationships of love with his creatures.

So openists chose this word because it wasn't used by anyone else and we thought it could be a wonderful term for what we were saying. You could say that it is a variant of Wesleyan-Arminian thinking, which would suggest something very different. But we chose this term because we wanted to introduce this to evangelicals who might be interested but not know anything about it.

HOMILETICS: You say "we." To whom are you referring?

PINNOCK: The team: John Sanders, Bill Hasker, Richard Rice, David Basinger. So we knew that lots of people, especially the Christian philosophers were discussing these things (some of the biblical people were, too), but the systematic theologians were cautious and were worried about something new. So we wanted to communicate what we meant. We thought it might at least be a stimulus to the discussion.

So it was surprising that it received such a hostile reception in certain quarters, because we certainly didn't intend to provoke that, and I didn't even predict it, although once it happened, you could see why who is saying what and why. At first I thought of it as a variant of normal Wesleyan-type thinking, which sees God as a personal God in relation to us.

HOMILETICS: But if you had to stand on one leg and had to tell me what open theism is, what would you say?

PINNOCK: A relational view of God. Because the thing is that, in the past, with a high doctrine of predestination and timelessness and changeability, it's hard to see how God was relational.

HOMILETICS: But certainly classic theologians would not say that God is not a relational God?

PINNOCK: No, they wouldn't use that language, but it's hard to see how since God can't really respond to what we do because it's not really part of his own decree for the world. So it doesn't seem we're bringing out something that they wouldn't bring up in their preaching, but I think in their theology, God cannot have real relations, because that would imply that aspects of God's experience depend on something else. So we're trying to bring back the personal into it.

HOMILETICS: How does openness theology differ from process theology?

PINNOCK: We believe that God created the world out of nothing, and so God limits his power toward the world in order to have loving relations, but with process theology, God is doing all that he can do, so process doesn't see an ontological distinction between God and the world. I guess another word for it would be self-limitation. For open theists, God self-limits for the sake of love, whereas in process he is limited and he can't do anything more than that. It's quite different.

HOMILETICS: So in openness theology the future is an "open" question as far as the knowledge of God is concerned.

PINNOCK: This is the point that is most controversial. That's why I speak of it as a variant of Wesleyan-Arminian theism, because it posits a different view of the future. We think it strengthens that way of thinking, but some critics think that it's too risky, too dangerous.

So our view is not that God knows everything that can be known and is therefore omniscient without qualification, but that some aspects of the future are settled and other aspects are not settled. The world is such that certain things are still being settled by the agents in the world, by us and by God, so God knows things as possible as well as certain.

Traditionally, God knows everything that will ever happen certainly, so it must happen exactly that way. Whereas we're saying that God appears in the Bible to know some things for certain because he planned them or because they're going to happen definitely, but aspects of the future may surprise him.

I think that's a point that's gotten people scared, the idea that God takes risks and is vulnerable. The same thing with the impassibility of God.

HOMILETICS: So are you arguing that God can't know the future in a certain sense because that kind of knowledge contains a self-contradiction, in the same way that the proposition that God can't create a rock that is too heavy for him to lift contains a self-contradiction?

PINNOCK: We're saying that omniscience doesn't mean that the future is exhaustively foreknown because God's made a world the future of which would be decided by himself and human agents. So it's really the reality of the human agents as to whether they make any difference for the future. If they do, then it means that certain things are not yet settled, because they haven't made their choices, or done their thing.

HOMILETICS: How does this affect biblical prophetic statements?

PINNOCK: That's a challenge. There are different types of prophetic statements. Some of them announce what God will do, so it's nothing about foreknowledge, it's intention, right?

Some of them offer alternatives: If you repent, this; if you don't, that. So the future is open and they're being asked to make a decision as to which way it will go.

And many of the prophecies are quite general as to how they will be fulfilled; they're not specific. So there are very few that actually require exhaustive, definite foreknowledge to be interpreted fairly. Although, of course, in the New Testament, as you know, these prophecies are turned in new directions sometimes, so their fulfillment is somewhat surprising in light of their original contextual appearance.

In fact, if you thought that God had exhaustive definite foreknowledge you might well wonder why the prophecies are not more precise, because in fact they're not. In process theology, God can't determine anything about the future because he's doing all he can do already, whereas in our view God can determine aspects of the future as he wishes, like Christ is considered a predestined Messiah. He's free to do that, too. He normally doesn't predestine things in detail, but he is certainly free to do so if he wants to.

HOMILETICS: Critics would say that the God that you envision is certainly not the God of classical theology and that he is in fact a diminished God. If you have a God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and so on — this seems to be less of a God than that traditional view.

PINNOCK: That depends on your view of God's perfections. If it is a divine perfection to control everything, then our God is diminished. But we think, "What's so great about a God who controls everything? Isn't a God who loves us and enters into relationships with us a wonderful ideal of God?" So it's partly how you see things. If God's glory is to determine everything, then we diminish God. But the Bible doesn't have such a God and we don't worship such a God.

HOMILETICS: Where in the Bible do you adduce support for these ideas?

PINNOCK: The openness of God is very scriptural. It's the classical people who are embarrassed by texts that speak of God changing his mind. We're the ones who think that perhaps these texts reveal something about God. In Genesis 6, for example, and all the repentance texts, God is sorry that he made man upon the earth. It's odd, because our opponents are saying we deny biblical authority, but in the debate it looks like it is they, not us, who deny biblical authority. Jonah is another example where God says he will judge Nineveh and then he doesn't. He relents. And of course the odd thing is that Jonah is angry about that. God's relenting from judgment is the glorious thing about God! We're not diminishing God by saying God relents from judgment, but celebrating that he is a God who does! Then there's Isaiah 5, where God says, "I planted this vineyard Israel and did everything I could and look what happened. It brought forth sour grapes. What could I have done that I didn't do?" In other words, God is confronting a situation that appears to be a great matter of distress to him. But how could it be if he had determined it all? It wouldn't be. It would just be another thing he had already decided.

HOMILETICS: You weren't always an open theist. How did this change in direction come about for you?

PINNOCK: Well, I used to be a five-point Calvinist in the late '60s and then I came to read Hebrews and noticed how it appears our relationship to God is conditional upon faith, so I was intrigued by the idea that God is conditioned by some of the things that creatures do.

The old view is that God is not conditioned by anything his creatures do because he has determined what they do. But if, in fact, God's will is affected by what his creatures decide, then that calls for a personal theism, relational theism, open theism.

So in a way open theism goes right back to the early '70s when I realized the weakness of deterministic thinking. And then over the years I wrote different things on the subject. Then John Sanders talked to me and we decided that since this is a view that some people know about, but not all, let's present it in a clear way just for evangelicals so that they can see what we think.

HOMILETICS: Has this made a ripple on the mainline side, or is this a problem primarily for evangelicals?

PINNOCK: The Evangelical Theological Society is a peculiar group of very conservative evangelicals. But there are many who consider themselves evangelicals who don't go to it who you would find in different sections of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature and who are positioned in the Wesleyan faith. So they see it correctly, namely, as a variant of their own position and worthy of consideration — which is all we want them to do. Like Randy Maddox [Professor of Wesleyan Theology, Seattle Pacific University], for example, a major interpreter of Wesley, who wrote a great book. He says that Wesley might well have considered openness in full agreement with what he was getting at.

So there are evangelicals who are not ETS evangelicals. You almost need a new term. There are the ETS types who would go after me like that, but normal evangelicals who are outside that, they regard it just for what it is — a variant of Wesleyan-Arminian thinking. Nicole, a five-point Calvinist, wants to emphasize how different our view is so they can isolate it as a heresy, because they don't want to criticize all Wesleyan-Arminians although they don't like their views.

HOMILETICS: But they would regard your views as extreme.

PINNOCK: We want to say we are not extreme.

HOMILETICS: So are you a heretic? You don't look like a heretic.

PINNOCK: I've found that concerning the question of divine foreknowledge there are different ways you can think of it from within personal theism: God is timeless and he foreknows everything by virtue of that, or middle knowledge, a new view of how it might be understood, or simple foreknowledge — he simply knows the future; we don't know how he knows it, he simply does.

And then there's our view. So there are three or four ways one could look at the matter and we're just saying, "Let's try this way." And some of the critics are saying, "It does work better." If the Calvinists looked at the ways personal theists might understand foreknowledge they would say our way is the most coherent of the bunch. If you have that kind of view, our way is better because all the others imply that the future is already there, settled. It won't be different from what it is. It's been videoed.

So we're saying if you want a relational theism you really need to deal with this question of omniscience and see it as present knowledge — God knows everything about the future at this point that can be known, not God — he knows everything as actual about the future because, in fact, some things remain to be seen. Like 2 Peter, the reason Christ hasn't come again is because God is waiting for more people to repent. This thing yet needs to be settled. He doesn't want to close it down too soon. We're the people who think that there are aspects of the future that are not yet settled. Isn't that obvious? We all live our lives that way — that our future is not settled. That we're going to help make it. Right? What's so odd about this?

HOMILETICS: What's middle knowledge?

PINNOCK: That's a theory that Bill Craig has picked up. It's from the Middle Ages. They think that God knows what any free agent will do in any given situation before he/she does it, and they think that doesn't take away human freedom because they're free to do it, but that God is able to know what they would do in any given situation. So they want to present libertarian freedom with divine exhaustive foreknowledge.

We think that if God knows what free agents would do in any situation, that means that they're predetermined to do it because how could he know that? Why couldn't he be capable of being surprised if their freedom were genuine? So we take freedom to imply novelty about certain aspects of the future. If there is freedom, you're not always going to know what someone will do in any given situation. Because that's the point.

We point to Scripture where God is enraged or rejoicing, or he responds to things as if they came to be known as real — in his experience. God's experience involves new things happening. Which he can handle! We see the world as a project that God is engaged in, and our critics seem to think he can't handle it. They seem to diminish God themselves, as if the world had an open future in which the creatures would decide some things, not God, and they might well displease God. They think that would be a terrible thing, whereas we think it is a glorious thing. Kierkegaard said somewhere that what is wonderful about God is not that he has to control everything and thus be in charge, but that he doesn't have to, that he has loving relations and he can handle it.

HOMILETICS: It was J.I. Packer, perhaps someone else, who introduced the idea of compatibilism — that perhaps the problem of foreknowledge is that all these things have been resolved in the mind of an infinite God but not in the minds of finite beings.

PINNOCK: We think that Packer is just pulling the covers over the incoherence of what he says. [laughter]. On the one hand God determines everything; on the other hand we also act and are responsible. If God controls it all, how can you hold people responsible for what you do? But he says it's compatible. He says it's a mystery. So Packer is trying to have a libertarian view of freedom — we're responsible for what we do — without denying that God determines everything.

We're just saying, "You can't." It's just a contradiction. And there's no reason to think it isn't a contradiction for God. How does he know God can work it out? He's just stating it. We think it's a fallacy of his theology. We agree about mystery, but it shouldn't be used to cloak incoherence.

HOMILETICS: With your view you could really argue that prayer does change things.

PINNOCK: Yes. Oh, I think that's a very strong point. A lot of the appeal of openness is that, on the one hand, it can take a lot of Scriptures more straightforwardly, like repentance texts, but, on the other hand, it can also better handle practical matters Christians always assume — such as prayer making a difference.

Because in the classical view, praying cannot make any difference. The outcome is predestined. The prayer — the answer for which is predestined — is also predestined! The reason openness has an appeal today is because it has an existential fit. People assume when they pray that the openness view of God is true and that, in fact, God may respond to them and do something that he otherwise would not have done. So part of its appeal is its practicality. If God is inviting the world to be saved it seems to imply that the world can be saved, and therefore that is not predestination — it looks like it's an open thing. So I think the critics see their position as shaky. I don't think they're uncertain about it, but that they're terribly vulnerable and that it's best to get rid of these openness people. Hence the ETS action: Open theists shouldn't be allowed to be a part of the discussion.

Taken from: <http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/interviews/Pinnock.asp>