

Retiring McMaster Theologian's Theory of God's Love Ruffles Evangelical Feathers

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Can you get to heaven if you're not a Christian?

Will sinners be damned to an endless flaming torture in hell even though our God is a loving God?

Is the Bible, with all its conflict and complexity, really to be taken literally?

McMaster Divinity College theologian Dr. Clark Pinnock has spent a lifetime contemplating such questions. The answers he has drafted paint a picture of a profoundly loving God who cares deeply for His children -- all His children. And that's gotten Pinnock into a heap of trouble with a hefty chunk of his evangelical colleagues.

While Pinnock is retiring after 25 years as Canada's leading protestant Christian theologian, it's not likely the wrangles he causes will die down any time soon. He's keeping his office at Mac, and the time he would otherwise have spent in the classroom will allow him to take to the road, presenting papers near and far, taking on brief teaching posts and gathering more fodder for his endlessly controversial theology.

But don't think Pinnock is short on friends or supporters. He's considered the fountainhead of at least one school of theological thought, and those who do like him tend to admire him personally and professionally.

Dr. Barry Callen, who teaches Christian studies at Anderson University in Anderson, Ind., was so taken by Pinnock's theology that he wrote a book, *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal, An Intellectual Biography*, published in 2000.

"I used the word 'journey' in the title deliberately," says Callen. "Clark has been a man genuinely on a journey, an amazing journey that's gone on for decades.

"If you track his journey, you track the journey of contemporary evangelical Christianity because he has interacted with most of the major players."

Pinnock has drawn the ire of critics by being on more than one side of a given issue. Rather than seeing this as a weakness, Callen says it speaks of Pinnock's ultimate strength as a theologian and practising Christian dedicated to honesty.

"He has changed because he's willing to change," says Callen. "He's felt that he has grown, and when he sees new light or a better view of revelation, he will courageously go for it and take the criticism."

Just how big a deal is Pinnock? When Robert Schuller visited Hamilton a couple of years ago, the televangelist known for his world-famous Hour of Power Christian TV show admitted he hadn't been sure if the Steel City was north of Buffalo or Detroit. But he did know Hamilton was Pinnock's home base.

"I respect him probably more than any other religious leader in the world," Schuller told The Hamilton Spectator.

"I consider his book, *A Wideness In God's Mercy*, to be the most seminal important book for shaping Christian theology for the next century. He's worked through some things like no other respected Christian theologian in centuries, since John Calvin, I think."

The 1992 work, *A Wideness In God's Mercy*, questioned an ages-old orthodoxy which holds that only Christians with a belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ can get to heaven.

"There is more love in my theology," says Pinnock. "The old view was that God would actually reject a lot of people for no reason except to show that He could do it."

Former dean of engineering and McMaster provost Art Heidebrecht was Pinnock's boss for the 2000-2001 school year when he served as interim principal of the divinity college. It's with a deep fondness that he regards his longtime neighbour and friend.

"I'm not a professional theologian," says Heidebrecht. "I'm a practising Christian and I appreciate some aspects of theology that resonate with Clark's approach."

"I think it speaks of a God who relates to us rather than some entity that we simply build a kind of theory around."

Among conservative evangelicals, Pinnock admits his views are provocative. But he shakes his head as he recounts his own theological conservativeness: He holds that Christ alone can save.

"But I'm holding to a wideness," he adds. His favourite Biblical passage is 1 Timothy 2:4, which tells us God desires that all humanity be saved.

"Now, if that's true, and if it's also true that most people who've ever lived have been non-Christians, then what are you saying? That all those people have no opportunity?"

"How can God be said to seriously care for them if there's nothing in place that could help them be saved?"

Pinnock points to the Old Testament as being full of saints and believers who didn't know Christ but had faith in God.

By combining that with the New Testament view that Christ is the only saviour, he arrives at a position of hope, that God's grace can be at work outside the church, drawing people eventually home.

"Now, that says to me that if a Buddhist turns out to have been genuinely seeking God, then I think he will be welcomed by God."

Pinnock points to 13th century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas and his notion of baptism. Baptism was once thought to be the only route to heaven, and if a person was born in a culture or time when baptism wasn't available, he would be shut out of God's love.

So Aquinas wrote of the desire for baptism as a way for non-Christians to have access to God's love.

But ideas like this draw the ire of Pinnock's ideological foes. And ideas like the openness of God, Pinnock's insistence that God isn't a cold, removed, self-sufficient being, but that He loves to be in relation to his children, that He is as moved by us as we are by Him.

His detractors say Pinnock is reducing God to the human level.

"You even get threats," he says, mentioning a book published in Iowa a few years back that said God should bring judgment upon people who talk about openness.

Pinnock doesn't really take that group seriously, dubbing them the "evangelical Taliban." But he won't write them off either.

"I don't give up because my God doesn't give up. So you see, I have a theology that even lets me handle them," he says with a smile.

"We're going to miss him," says McMaster Divinity College principal Dr. Stanley Porter.

"His classes this last semester were very large because a lot of students knew this was going to be their last chance to take a class with Dr. Pinnock."

His replacement, Dr. Kurt Richardson, who, like Pinnock, specializes in systematic theology, says there are other outstanding people in Protestant theology, but none as widely read as Pinnock.

"And he's great at public debate," says Richardson.

"He's a passionate theologian, defends his ideas very winsomely. He is fearless in debate and yet never abrasive.

"He embodies Christian virtue both when he has an admiring and willing audience and also when he has a kind of hostile audience. He has appeared like a Daniel in the lion's den over and over. The lions' mouths keep getting shut, but he lives to debate another day."

Pinnock likes to compare his view of hell to that of the late C. S. Lewis, a darling of the evangelical fold. Lewis saw the wicked who did not repent as becoming "nearly nothing."

"God is not sadistic," says Pinnock. "I automatically know there's something wrong with a tradition that says God dangles sinners over the flame. He just doesn't. That's all. Period."

To make that work, Pinnock envisions a hellfire like any other fire -- consuming all it touches, instant death, so the wicked don't have eternal life, but aren't tortured by its contents into eternity.

As for Biblical inerrancy, the notion that the Bible is divinely inspired and therefore without error, Pinnock, who as a younger man believed in Biblical inerrancy, recognizes that the Bible's complexity begs for analysis.

"It's hard to interpret. You know there are strange things in it. With inerrancy, you're talking about a Bible that doesn't exist.

"We have to wrestle with the text we've got, and loading it with terms like inerrancy almost stands in the way, almost makes you despair because it isn't like that.

"Just let the Bible speak to you in its own way. It doesn't need your defence. Just read it and it'll take care of itself."

One of the things Callen admires about Pinnock is his faithfulness to his roots. It would have been easier for Pinnock and his detractors if he had left the Baptist fold, but he hasn't, for the simple reason that they are his people.

"The Evangelical Theological Society is a very strong and prominent society of Christian theologians who consider themselves evangelical, and Clark is a longtime member," says Callen.

"But that group is also dominated by the point of view of evangelism that Clark has basically abandoned. Sometimes they're very critical, to the point they suggest that he leave. But that doesn't compute with him. He says, 'You're still my people. Of course, I'll be back.'"

Callen notes a "versatility and wholesomeness" to Pinnock.

"He has this incredible intellectual capacity and can enter into any arena and run with the big boys because he is one of the academic big boys.

"He goes to a blue-collar Baptist congregation and he fits right in with folks who don't have his level of education because when he's in worship, he's there as a simple, honest, sharing believer like anyone else.

"When I visited him in Hamilton, we went for a walk to the aviary. He loves birds and he could identify them all, so suddenly he became a poet who was in touch with nature."

When asked about his fondest memory of his quarter century at McMaster University, Pinnock mentions small class sizes that allowed for meaningful interaction with students.

Then his face lights up as recalls a weekly chapel he was responsible for organizing about six years ago.

They were singing the hymn, *Marching In The Love Of God*, when Pinnock and the assembled students led the faculty on a march up the centre aisle, past the altar, out the door and in through the chapel again.

"I've always longed for the chapels to be more alive, more engaging, and this was sort of a breakthrough. There's a certain iciness about the tradition and the formality of not talking or interacting.

"I just don't like that. I want interaction. I want love. I want joy. I want clapping. I want everything human."