

GRAND RAPIDS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

INTERACTING WITH “MOST MOVED MOVER”

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INTRODUCTION

“When a person takes leave of God, we need to ask what sort of God did they take leave of.”¹ In his book, *Most Moved Mover*, Clark Pinnock observes that we need to reevaluate our concept of God in light of the Exodus from the Christian story within our Western post-Christian, postmodern culture. I heartily agree. In our emerging post-Christian world, we need to ask hard questions about the concept of God out of which people are leaving, and why and how we the Church are offering up this conception; now is the time to reevaluate the doctrine of God. Such a reevaluation of the Church’s concept of God already began in the mid-1990’s with the landmark book, *The Openness of God*. Through this book, the authors offered an innovative, well reasoned argument that the God known through Christ desires responsive relationship with his creatures, while asserting now was the time to reconsider such classical theistic views on God’s immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge. Seven years later, Clark Pinnock wrote to extend and revise their original conversation.

In his book, Pinnock says we need to re-understand and re-articulate our concept of God. While rejecting Classic Theism as reducing God to the “unblinking cosmic stare” as described by Dallas Willard and insisting traditional Armenianism does not go far enough in “opening up” the nature of God, Pinnock writes to make a case for the so-called open view of God as described by Open Theism. Pinnock and the open view envision the God of the Holy Scriptures in these ways: it portrays God as a Triune community who seeks relationships of love with humans, having bestowed upon them genuine freedom for this purpose; Love and Freedom are central concerns because God desires loving relationships, which require freedom; it envisions God making a world where the future is not yet completely settled in order to make room for His creatures to

¹ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1.

exist, rather than treating them like puppets; it recognizes creating such a world was risky, but it was better to have a world in which humans could freely love God than one where He always gets his way; God grants humans significant freedom to partner with or against His will for their lives and enters a dynamic give-and-take relationship with Himself; finally, while God takes a risk in such a give-and-take relationship He is endlessly resourceful and competent to bring the world and His plans to an ultimate end goal. The aim of this paper is to analyze and interact with Pinnock's view through four "pillars"—Hyper-Relationality, Sovereignty, Changeability, and Temporality—and offer points of support and critique in an effort to help present an alternative understanding of God to a culture in need of such an alternative.

HYPER-RELATIONALITY

One of the foundational principles of Open Theism is the notion that God is hyper-personal and hyper-relational; the personal God, as evident in the self-ascribed personal name "YHWH", desires to enter into a covenanted partnership with his creatures. Since this principle undergirds God's Sovereignty, Changeability, and Temporality, the author spends a great deal of time throughout the book explaining God's relationality and loving posture towards those whom He would woo. According to Pinnock, God's Textual self-disclosure through the Holy Scriptures is writ large with evidence of this personal and relational posture toward His Creatures, especially through the narrative of the children of Israel and the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, he says the gospel compels us to re-understand God anew in light of the Jesus we encounter in the New Testament who changes and suffers on our behalf.² Over against this very personal, relational God is set the God of Hellenistic philosophy and Classic Theism that is immutable, timeless, and apathetic—the God of Augustine, Anselm, and Calvin.

² Pinnock, *Mover*, 27.

In this view, God does not grieve over the suffering of the world nor experience compassion, He is distant from His Creation, has determined its course like a Master Programmer, and it claims the language the Bible uses to describe this personal, relational God merely accommodates to finite understanding, rather than viewing the biblical metaphors as reality-depicting descriptions. The general aim of Pinnock's argument is clear: we need to be more affirming of God as a living person involved in history and less as a remote absolute principle. While the Scriptures do seem to point toward a hyper-personal, hyper-rationally "open" God, "a package of divine attributes has been constructed which leans in the direction of immobility and hyper-transcendence, particularly because of the influence of the Hellenistic category of unchangeableness."³ Through this Hellenistic, pagan tradition our perception of God as the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle replaced the Biblical God who responds to changing circumstances and is passionately involved in History. Pinnock argues against this depiction by pointing to the general thrust of the biblical narrative as evidence of God's hyper-relationality.

Three of the strongest hyper-relational "thrusts" Pinnock describes in Scripture relating to Open Theism is human freedom, the story of Israel, and Jesus Christ. In painting a God who is open, partnering, dependent, interactive and hyper-relational, Pinnock begins with Creation. God's creative act of breathing the cosmos into existence was not only a self-expressive act, it was also communitarian and self-limiting. According to Pinnock, "creating human beings who have true freedom is a self-restraining, self-humbling and self-sacrificing act on God's part."⁴ As Creator, God assumes residency in the world, operates within our space and time, relates to us within our structure of time, partners with humans in History, engages in conflict with opposing creative powers (both human and non-human), and is not in complete control as the result of those competing creative powers. He says that Scripture and experience show God

³ Pinnock, *Mover*, 65.

⁴ Pinnock, *Mover*, 31.

created humans with “libertarian freedom,” the freedom to perform or refrain from an action. By creating humans as free agents, God left open the possibility of humans choosing relationship with Himself, obeying His ordered Way, and acting in such a way that was not predicted nor planned by God. Creating beings crafted after His image necessitated beings who had the freedom to choose and left open the risky possibility of rejection and an unsettled future.

These notions of risk, undefined future, and hyper-freedom, are especially evident in God’s covenant with Israel. In it, God partnered with a people in a mutually binding “contract” and required them to honor their end of the bargain. God required them to consciously choose Him and His Way, allowing them to fail at their contractual obligations, which they did. Through His covenantal partnership with this chosen people, we see a God who risks by voluntarily binding himself to His creatures, changes his mind based on an interactive relationship, and alters His plans in light of His people’s covenantal failing by invading earth in the person of Jesus Christ, ultimately leading to the Cross where “instead of using his powers to enforce compliance, God travels the path of vulnerable love.”⁵

What are we to make of this God who risks for relationship that Clark Pinnock describes? While he is weak on specific Scriptural support (i.e. chapter and verse prooftexts), I believe Pinnock does make some valid arguments for a general thrust within Scripture that reveals a God who is risky for the sake of love, partners with humanity, is marked by hyper-relationality, and chooses to be impacted by human freedom. Conventional theism suffers from a monarchic view of God who is the “sole performer” of the story and dictates the script from above, rather than a Being who is inanimately involved and affected by a story in which other characters exist. As Pinnock alludes, the narrative of the Garden in the Scriptures pictures a realm of unlimited possibility, because God created other characters with the freedom to choose. And because true

⁵ Pinnock, *Mover*, 59.

freedom demands real, actual choice, both in relation to God and Creation, how could God not be affected at some level by those real choices? Furthermore, because God freely and deliberately loves humans and is conditioned by human acceptance or refusal of that love, love necessitates vulnerability, thus God is affected by the objects of His love and made vulnerable by them. In the Sodom and Gomorah narrative, for instance, we see a God who changes His mind in light of his relationship with Abram; God and his choices are affected by a human. This affecting is wrought not because the human is stronger than God, but because God chose to be affected by this relationship, because the essential posture of the nature of God is Love, not control.

SOVEREIGNTY

Because God is hyper-relational and purposefully crafted beings after His image exist eternally with them in relationship, Pinnock explains the Bible does not teach that God exercises all controlling sovereignty, but instead alludes to a general sovereignty.⁶ An open view reveals a God who shares power with His co-creators and limits His own power through human freedom. This of Open Theistic notion stands over against a Greek concept of a domineering, all-controlling despot typically articulated by a more deterministic, Classic Theistic understanding of God. While the open view has a place for sovereignty, it recognizes the universe is filled with dynamic forces and events outside God. The “march of history” moves accordingly, because God chooses to share His power with beings outside Himself (both human and non-human being). In fact, the open view of God and new re-negotiations of the doctrine of sovereignty helps with the problem of evil, a contribution to systematic theology that is long over due.

Like the European philosopher LeRon Shults, Clark Pinnock believes “absolute evil” exists in the world. This genuine evil, as he puts it, resulted not by the willing hand of an all-

⁶ Pinnock, *Mover*, 55.

controlling God, but rather out of the possibility entailed by genuine freedom. “If love requires freedom and if freedom entails risk, God could not create such a world and be absolutely certain what the creatures would do with it.”⁷ Furthermore, the general sovereignty God enacts upon the world out of His hyper-relationality and human partnership allows for the “bad things that happen to good people” precisely because He is not hyper-sovereign nor holds a monopoly on power and the affairs of the world. As Pinnock says, “If God had such a monopoly, one would have to deny the existence of genuine evil because evil is something God wanted to happen.” I welcome Pinnock’s re-imagining the doctrine of sovereignty and nature of God for this point alone, let alone several others. I agree with Pinnock that if nothing happens outside the sovereign will of God, then there is no genuine evil. If everything truly does happen for a reason, then God’s hands are rightly stained with the blood of the Jewish Holocaust victims and countless Africans who have died because of starvation and malnutrition.

On the other hand though, while I agree with his idea of genuine evil and understand how human freedom can affect God and History, I do wonder how we are to reconcile this notion with the picture of an in-control-God found in the Scriptures. For example, in the Psalms and Job God is portrayed above and outside Creation, He is both YHWH (immanent) and Elohim (transcendent). Although, as Pinnock writes, maybe Scripture’s picture of Divine Sovereignty is not of a single, all-determining divine will that calls all the shots,⁸ but of an all wise, resourceful, and creative God who can cope with all of the contingencies that result from the choices of other powers. My fear is that such a view of God sacrifices transcendence at the expense of hyper-immanence. There is danger of going to too far in making God “one of us,” though I appreciate Pinnock’s effort at wrestling God “out from the clouds” and presenting a more entirely relational God that fails to appear with Classic Theism.

⁷ Pinnock, *Mover*, 132.

⁸ Pinnock, *Mover*, 53.

CHANGEABILITY

If God “hyper-relationally” operates within our time and space, partners with us, engages us in conflict, binds Himself to us in covenanted relationship, and shifts in His actions and views because of this relationship, then He must also be characterized by what Pinnock terms “changeable faithfulness.” By this term the author means that while God is completely reliable and true to himself, He is at the same time flexible and able to change course as circumstances require. In other words, God’s character and nature is stable, but God is not static when it comes to His relationship to history; because He is intimately involved with and affected by the world, the relational connection to His creatures necessitates an affected God.

This view of God’s nature stands in sharp contrast to the Hellenized God of Classic Theism. In chapter two, Pinnock suggests the Christian doctrine of God was heavily shaped in an atmosphere influenced by Greek thought. Greco-Roman philosophical categories pressured early theologians into supposing that God was unchangeable and non-temporal, categories that do not square with the biblical portrayal of God as dynamic, involved in the world and changed by it. In response to Aquinas seemingly embraces Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover” God, Pinnock writes, “Surely the gospel does not view God in terms of changeless thought and timeless being but in reference to historical events. It testifies to a God who became temporal in a man, Jesus of Nazareth, with whose sufferings and death God identified himself.”⁹ The Greeks called the category of Divine unchangeability “static perfection” and insisted there was no change or temporality in God. Tertullian, while rejecting other pagan notions, embraced this idea of an absolute unchanging and unaffected God. In response, Pinnock identifies with Karl Barth in embracing the truth that God is revealed in Jesus Christ, a revelation that begs a God invested and tied to time, while being changed and affected by His interaction with it.

⁹ Pinnock, *Mover*, 70.

Pinnock also suggests because God is hyper-relationally involved with the world and dynamic, rather than distant and immobile, the sequence of time is also marked by changeability, leading to real alternative possibilities. The idea that the Sequence of Time can change is largely understood in light of God-given human libertarian freedom. He suggests that a free, dynamic God crafted beings after His own image as free, dynamic beings that engage in give-and-take relationships with their Creator and Others. I agree and suggest that the Bible itself seems to insist in this freedom when it holds people responsible for their actions, something not easily accounted for by Compatibilists. In explaining his reasoning, Pinnock offers the activity of prayer an example of the intersection where God and Time both experience change.

Drawing on his understanding of both the sovereignty and hyper-relationality of God, Pinnock says, “in prayer God treats us as subjects not objects and a real dialogue takes place. God could act alone in ruling the world but wants to work in consultation. It is not his way unilaterally to decide everything. He treats us as partners in a two-way conversation and wants our input.”¹⁰ Because God is intimately connected to humans in relationship and exercises a general sovereignty that allows for a variety of outcomes within the Sequence of Time, the God of the Bible appears to respond to the needs and petitions of humans. God changes His mind in response to the dynamic relationship of individuals and intervenes in Time in response to these relationships and to execute His ultimate end goals. Prayer changes God and Time because He allows it to influence Him. Obviously, this contrasts drastically with the Classic Theistic understanding of God that prepackages Time as pre-determined and set, while portraying God as simply a programmer of code for the Machine of Time.

¹⁰ Pinnock, *Mover*, 172.

TEMPORALITY

A final component to the open view of God is the concept of His temporality. While God is above Time, in the sense that He is above finite experience and measurement of it, He is not beyond Time's sequence of events, thus God is a temporal agent. Though He gives no specific reference, Clark Pinnock says Scripture presents God as "temporally everlasting, not timelessly eternal."¹¹ Indeed as Savior, God in Christ must somehow be in time and a realm in which he can function. Though an entirely different discussion could exist on what exactly is time, Pinnock declares that we must not lose sight of the fact that God relates to His creatures within time and along a temporal path.

Pinnock says Classical Theism took a wrong step when it declared God was outside the temporal order. Classical Theists reasoned that if He was bound to the past and future, He would have lost something and also not yet arrived in another state of being. This is why timelessness and changeability are so intertwined: if God is temporal then he can change, because temporality is to experience change. Thus, the Platonic notion of timelessness was intertwined with the Christian notion of God. But Pinnock correctly reveals that a timeless God could not create a time-bound world nor exist within its history as our Redeemer. Furthermore, it would be difficult to take God's actions within time seriously if God was timeless, just as it would be hard to imagine God as relational if He were unable to change. In the end, God is above time in the terms of our finite experience and measurement of Time, but not beyond its sequence.

While I understand the historical impetus behind the timelessness argument, why does this necessitate an existence inside, not outside Time? At one point he writes, "God is not thought in terms of timelessness. He makes plans and carries them out...God is inside not outside of time." Why can God not exist both within and without Time? I understand why he

¹¹ Pinnock, *Mover*, 96.

critiques descriptions of a God that stands so far outside of Time that He does not directly move within nor is He directly affected by it. To say, though, that God is only time bound does not seem to resonate with Scripture's revelation regarding the nature of God and eternity. In it we God is both the "beginning and the end" in addition to acting within History.

CONCLUSION

As A.W. Tozer once said, "A right conception of God is basic, not only to systematic theology, but to practical living as well." Ultimately that is what this conversation is about: flesh and blood humans encountering a real, existential God who dips down into the stories of individuals. While some fear Open Theism dances to close to the edges of reasonable orthodoxy, it is that unreasonable dancing that will, hopefully, move Classic Theists from a "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God" depiction of God closer to a hyper-relational Lover. Instead of viewing God as a wrathful housemaid who has found a nasty spider and is just waiting to fling it into the licking flames of the fires of Hell, may we take cues from the open view of God that paints Him as loving Creator who crafted beings after His own image with real freedom and beckons them to real partnership, yet respects human choice and risks rejection. May we appreciate the vibrant picture of a God who loves and beckons humans from their broken, destructive choices, while still carrying out His ultimate plans for cosmic restoration. Because in the end, maybe Western culture is emerging into post-Christendom not because of the God it finds in the Bible, but the one it encounters in the Holy Sepulchers on street corners each Sunday morning.

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