

Pinnock, Clark H. *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. 217 pp. \$14.99.

Confronted with the contemporary challenge of religious pluralism, Christians are often called upon to reconcile their affirmation of the finality of Christ as the only Savior of sinners with their belief in God's boundless generosity and mercy towards all humanity. Clark H. Pinnock's book, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Christ in a World of Religions*, transposes the above problem into two theological axioms upon which he constructs his "evangelical theology of religions" (13).

The two components of this theology are: (a) *universality* (God's love for all humanity) and (b) *particularity* (the reconciliation of sinners through Jesus' mediation) of God's plan of salvation (17). Pinnock believes that his book meets the challenge of religious pluralism with a "biblically grounded and theologically sound argument" (181), and also avoids certain soteriological errors within the Christian community.

In charting a course to follow in this volume, Pinnock is faced with a number of options: "exclusivism" (which maintains Christ as the Savior of the world and other religions as zones of darkness), "restrictivism" (which limits hope of salvation to people who have faith in Jesus Christ in this earthly life), "inclusivism" (which upholds Christ as the Savior of humanity while at the same time affirms God's saving presence in the wider world and in other religions), and "pluralism" (the view that all religions lead ultimately to heaven). Pinnock's position can best be bracketed within the "inclusivist" camp.

The book is organized in five chapters. The first two chapters—"Optimism of Salvation" and "Jesus, Savior of the World"—offer biblical, theological and christological reasons for rejecting the fewness doctrine, according to which only a small number will be saved. Employing "a hermeneutic of hopefulness," Pinnock draws from the "universal orientation" of the biblical data to argue for "the optimism of salvation"—an expression that means that because of the boundless mercy of God, salvation is going to be extensive in the number of persons benefitted and comprehensive in scope (20). But while God's salvation is going to be universal, this salvation is reached by way of particularity in Christianity: i.e., a salvation through Jesus Christ. In making this christological argument, Pinnock distinguishes between the ontological necessity of Christ's redemptive work and the epistemological necessity to acknowledge Christ before one could be saved: "There is no salvation except through Christ but it is not necessary for everybody to possess a conscious knowledge of Christ in order to benefit from redemption through him" (75).

Chapters 3 and 4—"Religions Now," and "Religions Tomorrow"—discuss how Christians should relate to people of other religions. He maintains that a recognition of the optimism of salvation contributes to an attitude of oneness and love for people of other religions. Consequently, he recommends "truth seeking dialogue" as the most effective strategy in the Christian's mission activity. In chapter 5—"Hope for the Unevangelized"—Pinnock tackles the question of whether or not those who have not heard the gospel could be saved.

In arguing for his affirmative response, Pinnock points to God's desire for all to be saved as a fact that necessitates a universal *access* to salvation. He appeals to a "faith principle," not the content of one's belief, as the basis of universal accessibility to God's salvation (157-158). With respect to the fate of millions of "premessianic believers"—sincere seekers and followers of God (be they pagans, Jews, or Gentiles) who have not heard about Christ—Pinnock suggests that "a grace-filled postmortem encounter with Christ" ensures that they also will be saved (170-172).

There are some strengths in his work. Pinnock's bold attempt at a theology of religions must be applauded by Christians who consider mission and evangelism to be at the heart of their faith, and who constantly wrestle with how they should relate to other religions. His careful distinction between the ontological and epistemological necessity of Christ in soteriological discussion is useful. His theological explanation, using general revelation and God's prevenient grace, for the existence of truth and nobility in non-Christian religions is also enlightening (102-113; cf. 46, 76). Finally, his evangelistic strategy of "dialogue" appreciates the good in other religions, and thus avoids the cultural snobbery and imperialism that has often attended the mission activity of Christians (138-143). Without any *a priori* repudiating of other faiths as either wholly good or wholly bad, he does a masterful work in debunking the arguments of theological pluralists who seek to eliminate the finality claims from Christology by reinterpreting the Biblical data (64-74).

This is not to suggest that everything is totally impeccable in Pinnock's "optimism of salvation," his evangelistic strategy of "dialogue," and his "hermeneutic of hopefulness."

While he seeks to ground his theology of religions on a sound biblical basis, Pinnock leaves his readers to conclude that instead of allowing *sola Scriptura* to shape his views—as evangelicals have always insisted—his "hermeneutic of hopefulness" is established on "both Scripture and experience" (109, 106), "Scripture and reason" (158), and "historical factors, combined with a fresh reading of Scripture" (42). What hermeneutic undergirds this "fresh reading of Scripture"?

With regard to his "theology of optimism," two brief comments are in order. First, the "faith principle" which underlies his theology (157) maintains that the content of saving faith (without which "it is impossible to please God") does not have to be knowledge of the truth about Jesus, but rather a belief that God "exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6). Accordingly, Pinnock writes, "A person is saved by faith, even if the content of faith is deficient (and whose is not?). The Bible does not teach that one must confess the name of Jesus to be saved" (158).

While we may agree with Pinnock that "people are saved by faith, not by the content of their theology," and that "Faith in God is what saves, not possessing certain minimum information" (157, 158), one is left wondering what is entailed by this kind of "faith." Does "faith" in Hebrews 11:6—the believe that God exists and rewards those who seek him—exhaust what is involved in saving faith? Does not Satan also possess this faith (cf. James 2:19)? Can one

legitimately dissociate *how* a person believes (the subjective component of faith) from *what* he believes (the objective content of faith)? Does not the Bible teach that the minimum information necessary for salvation is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Acts 4:12; cf. Rom 10:9-10)?

Second, Pinnock recognizes that there have been many "pagan saints" before and after Christ, who though "informationally premessianic" (161), were nonetheless accepted by God (e.g., Abel, Enoch, Noah, Job, Daniel, Melchizedek, Lot, Abimelech, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the Queen of Sheba, the Roman centurion Cornelius, and the pagan astrologers who came to worship Christ at his birth, etc.). These individuals, according to Pinnock, received and responded to God's "premessianic revelation" and "prevenient grace," a knowledge of God which will be "updated when they enter into his presence" in a postmortem encounter with Christ (92-106, 172).

Pinnock's argument fails, however, to show whether or not the "pagan saints" continued in their paganism once they were confronted with the claims of God given in the premessianic revelation. He also does not address one critical question that has to do with the *content* of the faith confessed by the "pagan saints": If one believes that the institution of the sacrificial system in post-fall Eden (and more comprehensively in the worship life of Old Testament Israel) foreshadowed the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ, cannot it be argued that the "pagan saints," just like post-messianic believers such as Peter, John, or Paul, all confessed their faith in Jesus Christ—however fuzzy that knowledge of Jesus Christ may have been?

It seems that while Pinnock exalts the finality of Jesus Christ as the only Savior of sinners, at times he comes dangerously close to down-playing the uniqueness and full deity of Jesus Christ as God-incarnate. He writes: "Uniqueness and finality belong to God. If they belong to Jesus, they belong to him only derivatively. He is not unique in his own right as an independent being, but as the Father's beloved Son" (53); "Incarnation, then, is not the normative category for Christology in the New Testament" (62). Could this apparent devaluation of christology be the reason why he makes a theological bid for a postmortem encounter of "pagan saints" with Christ (a doctrine that lacks sound biblical and exegetical support)?

Finally, although Pinnock's evangelistic strategy of "dialogue" rightly recognizes that other faiths share some similar concerns and views with Christianity (138-143), it fails to show to what extent these are identical. For example, a traditional religion in Ghana reveals that the worshippers "intend to acknowledge the true God as we do" (97); the experience of Buddhists seeking God teaches Christians about their need to be less materialistic and "more spiritually Buddha-like" (140); the writings of a Hindu sect "celebrate a personal God of love" (100). But the parallels and similarities between Christianity and other faiths do not *prove* that the gods in these non-Christian religions are identical with the personal, transcendent, and triune God of Scripture. Neither does Pinnock explain whether spirituality in these religions is equivalent to Christian spirituality—whether being "spiritually Buddha-like" is the same as being Christlike.

Despite the above weaknesses, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* will stimulate contemporary evangelical thinking on the problem of religious pluralism.

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Rhodes, Ron. *Christ Before the Manger: The Life and Times of the Preincarnate Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992. 299 pp. \$13.99.

In *Christ Before the Manger*, Ron Rhodes, Th.D., gives a glimpse of the fellowship of the triune God such as Christ, the eternal Son, makes possible to finite beings. For Rhodes, the sonship of Christ does not denote inferiority, since for the Semitic mind "son of God" means "of the order of God" (12-13, 30-31). God is revealed in Christ according to a plan conceived for humankind before time, to be carried out in time. This plan includes the preincarnate appearances of Christ and culminates in an earthly millennial kingdom, after which glimpses of God are replaced with his unveiled presence (14-15, 34).

Rhodes presents Christ as possessing all the divine attributes; he is the image, exact representation, and fullness of God. Christ's immutable, omnipresent divinity is mobile, active, and capable of local presence. These attributes are comforting, Rhodes writes, because Christ can never change his mind about using his power to secure us forever in faith (43-48). Rhodes further expounds the biblical revelation of Christ as Creator, Preserver, Angel of the Lord, Shepherd, Savior, Eternal Logos, holder of divine names, virgin-born, and possessor of human life and eternal glory.

The discussion of Christ as Savior, Logos, and fully human deserves special notice. (1) Christ's role as Savior was not an afterthought, but a part of God's plan, which encompassed even sin. This plan was a matter of sovereign decree, formulated on the basis of boundless wisdom and knowledge and allowing for freewill decisions. God's eternal decree is his sovereign resolve and purpose controlling all of creation (125-131). (2) Concerning the Eternal Logos, in the OT the Word was an active agent of God while in the Jewish targums "Word of God" was substituted for "God." Around A.D. 25, Philo developed dualistic concepts of a good God, evil matter, and mediating logos. However, John presents the Word as a divine person, unlike the OT or Jewish ideas (146-148). (3) "All that Christ did among human beings in his *preincarnate* state prepared in some way for what he would accomplish in his *incarnate* state" (190). His conception was supernatural but His subsequent development was normal, except that He never sinned. Christ did not cease to be God, but neither did He use divine attributes for Himself. He became "God *plus*," for in contrast to triune oneness, he has two natures (198-199). Rhodes postulates that Christ, "with his divine nature *and* with his human immaterial nature . . . departed from his human body" and returned "to the same physical body in which he died" (201). The natures were without mixture or separation. Christ is *fully God and fully man*, always conscious of deity and humanity, one Will-er who possesses both a divine will and a human will (203-204).