

## **Comments on Clark Pinnock's Corporate and Vocational Understanding of Election**

How should Christians respond to a teaching, even one with seemingly impressive biblical credentials and a long history of acceptance within the (Western) church, if that teaching appears morally repugnant to them and utterly inconsistent with a God in whom there is no darkness at all? I was reminded of this question, which I have reflected upon many times throughout the course of my life, when I read the first few pages of Clark Pinnock's chapter. For as Pinnock points out, correctly, "many people inside and outside the churches have been devastated by the teaching, both narrow and exclusive, stemming from Augustine [that God restricts his mercy to a chosen few]. Though purporting to inspire in us awe before a sovereign God, what it does is lead us to doubt God's loving character."<sup>1</sup> And what, I would also ask, does a church that preaches such a doctrine have to offer those most desperate for a word of consolation? What can it offer the wife whose husband dies in unbelief, or the mother whose son leaves the faith, or the teenager whose best friend commits suicide? The teaching that, for all we know, God himself hated some of our own loved ones from the beginning and hated them in the same literal sense that he supposedly hated Esau is merely a prescription for more pain, more misery, and more fear.

But Pinnock has an advantage that many Christians have not had. As a scholar with scholarly resources at his fingertips, he is in a position to counter, at least to his own satisfaction, the exegetical arguments of those who would, in the opinion of many, slander the name of God. My question, however, concerns those Christians who have no such advantage; it concerns, for example, a simple peasant woman who may have lived in the vicinity of Geneva during Calvin's own lifetime. Having no knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, no real understanding of the Bible's

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<sup>1</sup> Pinnock manuscript, p. 2.

historical background, and no reasonable way to counter Calvin's superior scholarship, her only grounds for opposing a doctrine of limited election might have been her *moral conviction* that a worthy object of worship could not possibly be an unloving and unjust tyrant. So how, then, should she respond when told to suppress her own moral conviction and to bow humbly before the Scriptures (as someone else interprets them, of course)? I know of no better answer to this question than the one that George MacDonald gave: "Do not try to believe anything that affects you as darkness. Even if you mistake and refuse something true thereby, you will do less wrong to Christ by such a refusal than you would by accepting as His what you can see only as darkness."<sup>2</sup> So it matters not, according to MacDonald, what it is that "affects you as darkness," whether it be a racist interpretation of the curse of Ham, an appeal to Paul in support of institutional slavery, or an appeal to Romans 9 in an effort to persuade you that the Christian God is something less than all-loving and all-merciful: If the teaching strikes you as morally repugnant, you should say "either the thing is not what it seems, or God never said or did it."<sup>3</sup> For given the complexities in *any* interpretation of the Bible as a whole (see my comments on Robert Raymond), the façade of bowing humbly before the Scriptures is no excuse for accepting, in opposition to your own deep-rooted moral convictions, a seemingly blasphemous picture of God.

### **Can There Be Inclusive Election Without Universalism?**

To his credit, Pinnock underscores the inclusive nature of election, as we encounter it in the Bible. The election of anyone, he observes, "foreshadows the reconciliation of the world and, as such, it is a broad and not a narrow concept."<sup>4</sup> The election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for example, was on behalf of the entire human race, including Ishmael and Esau. So "election is an

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<sup>2</sup> George MacDonald, "Light," reprinted in Rolland Hein, *Creation in Christ* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), p 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pinnock manuscript, p. 4.

inclusive, not an exclusive category. It does not spell exclusiveness relative to others who are passed over but signals a movement toward the inclusion of all the rest.”<sup>5</sup> Pinnock even goes so far as to endorse Karl Barth’s understanding of election, at least in this respect: “Barth is right to focus on the election of Jesus Christ who represents the whole race. Not just Israel and church but all of humankind is elect in him.”<sup>6</sup>

Now so far, this accords nicely with the emphasis of my own chapter. But Pinnock also claims that Barth goes “too far,” because his inclusive understanding of election seems “to imply the actual justification of humankind and (therefore) moves in the direction of universal salvation.”<sup>7</sup> Is this not precisely what Romans 5:18 says, however? What did Paul mean when he declared that Jesus Christ brings justification and life to all humans, if he did *not* mean that Jesus Christ brings *actual* justification and life to them? Or consider Romans 11:26. Contrary to what Pinnock seems to suggest,<sup>8</sup> this text expresses far more than a vague hope that Jews as well as Gentiles will be saved; it instead makes a confident prediction that *all* Israel will be saved. **Note also that Pinnock begins one of his sections with the heading, “No Horrible Decree, No Self-Selection,”<sup>9</sup> and this heading already seems to entail universalism. For what third possibility is there except universalism? If you insist upon a final division within the human race between the saved and the damned, then *something* must explain that division; and Pinnock appeals, moreover, “to human freedom” for his explanation, arguing that the damned freely “say no to God” in a context where they could have freely said yes.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, then, the saved freely say “yes” to God in a context where they could have freely said “no.” Or, as Jerry Walls puts it in a passage**

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

that Pinnock quotes favorably,<sup>11</sup> “God will do everything he can, short of overriding freedom, to save all persons.” So clearly, how we exercise our human freedom is what makes the decisive difference on Pinnock’s view; and if that is not self-selection, one wonders what the term “self-selection” could possibly mean in the present context. Alternatively, if election excludes self-selection, then the election of all humanity surely does entail the eventual salvation of all humanity as well.

### **Does God Interfere with Human Freedom?**

Consider more closely now the Pinnock/Walls claim that “God will do everything he can, short of overriding freedom, to save all persons.” Though I tend to agree with the sentiments behind such a claim, we cannot finally assess it until we achieve some degree of clarity concerning what would, and would not, count as an interference with human freedom. Suppose that I am standing atop the Empire State Building with the intention of committing suicide by jumping off and plunging to my death below, and consider two very different ways in which God might interfere with my freedom in this matter. He might, in the first place, simply cause me to change my mind; that would effectively prevent the suicide from occurring. Or he might, alternatively, permit me to leap from the building and then cause me to float gently to the ground like a feather; that too would effectively prevent the suicide from occurring. I am not free to accomplish some action or to achieve some end, in other words, unless God permits me to have the thing I have chosen, however confusedly I may have chosen it; and neither am I free to separate myself from God, or from the ultimate source of human happiness, unless God permits me to experience the very life I have chosen and the full measure of misery that it entails.

As I see it, then, damnation is a process whereby the damned gradually learn from experience the true meaning of separation from God. At the beginning of our lives we might never

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

have guessed that we cannot reject the Creator and Father of our souls without rejecting ourselves, or oppose God's will for our lives without opposing, schizophrenically perhaps, our own will for our lives. Neither might we have guessed that submission to God is not really submission to an external will or external power at all; it is merely a way of acknowledging and honoring our own deepest desires and yearnings, the very desires and yearnings that God in his love also yearns to satisfy. So in our confusion, we make wrong choices, and at this point God can either permit us to follow our chosen path, thereby respecting our freedom, or interfere with our freedom to follow it. **And God frequently does interfere, no doubt, with our freedom to do specific things; if he protects me from someone's murderous intent, for example, then he interferes with this person's freedom to murder me. But we also have, I believe, a more general freedom, expressed in thousands of specific choices, to move incrementally either in the direction of repentance and reconciliation or in the direction of greater separation from God, and that freedom God always respects. In a sense, he even condemns us to such freedom, because he will not permit us to remain forever in ambiguity, opting sometimes for reconciliation and sometimes for separation. Instead, he will providentially control our lives in such a way that requires us to confront everything that stands between us and full reconciliation.**

So does a guarantee of universal salvation require that God interfere with human freedom in inappropriate ways? Not at all. As surprising as it may at first appear, it is free will theism, not universalism, that postulates an inappropriate interference with human freedom. To illustrate the point, let us suppose, as we do in our discussion of Jack Cottrell, that I should hold, for whatever reason, the false belief that fire does not burn, but instead produces highly pleasant sensations. This time, however, let us compare two very different scenarios: (1) However absurd it may seem, here we imagine that God wants to preserve my freedom to shove my hand into fire;

so whenever I freely choose to do so, he protects me from the fire and from its power to burn and to cause pain. He does this because he knows that a severe burn would shatter my illusion about fire and thereby remove my libertarian freedom to repeatedly shove my hand into the fire. (2) Here we imagine that God does nothing either to prevent me from freely acting upon my illusion or to prevent the fire from burning my hand; so when I do shove my hand into the fire, the resulting burn shatters my illusion about fire, removes the only motive I had for shoving my hand into the fire, and effectively removes my libertarian freedom to repeatedly shove my hand into the fire.

Now in which scenario, I ask, does God show greater respect for my freedom of will? In the first he interferes entirely with my freedom to experience the true nature of fire; one might even argue that, whatever the appearances, I never successfully shove my hand into a fire at all. And beyond that, if God created free agents for the purpose of permitting them to experience the consequences of their free choices and thereby to learn important lessons on their own, so to speak, then in the first scenario God undermines entirely one of the prime reasons for creating free agents in the first place. In the second scenario, however, God himself does nothing to interfere with my freedom of will; he merely permits me to choose and to experience the consequences of my choice. In that way, he shows genuine respect for my free choice; and if the consequences of that choice shatter my illusion about fire and teach me an important lesson about the nature of the world, then so much the better.

Consider, finally, how similar freewill theodicies of hell are to our first scenario above. According to Jerry Walls, whose view Pinnock seems to endorse, “hell may afford its inhabitants a kind of gratification which motivates the choice to go there”;<sup>12</sup> and more than that, says Walls, the damned may even experience a kind of illusory happiness: “Those in hell may be almost

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<sup>12</sup> See Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 128.

happy, and this may explain why they insist on staying there. They do not, of course, experience even a shred of genuine happiness. But perhaps they experience a certain perverse sense of satisfaction, a distorted sort of pleasure.”<sup>13</sup> Though Walls denies that the damned are *genuinely* happy, he does not deny that they *believe* themselves to be happy; to the contrary, he insists that, for some lost souls, the illusion of happiness may endure forever and with sufficient conviction to explain why they never leave their preferred abode in hell. And though Walls later characterizes the above comments as something of an overstatement,<sup>14</sup> he never does justice, so far as I can tell, to the New Testament picture of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” in both the fiery furnace and the outer darkness. It is as if, on his view, the damned never experience the full horror of the life they have chosen, even as, in our first scenario above, I never experience the excruciating pain of a severe burn, not even when I shove my hand into a fire. But if separation from God finally includes separation from every possible good in life and even from all human relationships, including such improper ones as master and slave, then not even God can *both* respect a person’s choice to live apart from him *and* protect that person from the consequences of such a choice. **When John Milton’s Satan imagines himself reigning in hell, he never even considers the outer darkness where a soul, suspended alone in nothingness and without even a physical order to experience, could not possibly exercise power or dominion over someone else. So just as no one rational enough to qualify as a free moral agent could both experience a severe burn and confuse the resulting pain with sensations of pleasure, neither could such a person both experience the loneliness and terror of the outer darkness and confuse this with a desirable state.**

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> See Jerry Walls, “A Philosophical Critique of Talbott’s Universalism,” in Robin A Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p. 121.

Accordingly, only by *interfering* with our freedom to continue separating ourselves from him could God protect us from the sheer horror of doing so; and for that reason alone, no genuinely free agent could possibly cling forever to the illusion that a life apart from God is more desirable than the bliss of union with God. It is hardly surprising, of course, that in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and deception most of us, if not all of us, should initially find the broad road that leads to further separation (and finally to destruction) more attractive than the narrow road that leads to more abundant life. For at the beginning of our earthly lives, we are all programmed to pursue our own interests as we perceive (or in many cases misperceive) them; and furthermore, our natural fears often tempt us to seek refuge in power relationships of various kinds. But what starts out, according to the imagery of Matthew 7:13, as a wide and easy road to follow—or the most natural way to behave—becomes more and more difficult as we continue to experience the true meaning of separation from God. So, as the consequences of our sinful choices continue to reveal—first in this life, then in hell, and even in the outer darkness, when necessary—the sheer horror of a life apart from God, the illusions that make such choices possible in the first place will eventually fall away from us like the shackles they are.

Whereas we can indeed freely choose, therefore, to live apart from God, at least for a while, we cannot *both* experience the full measure of such a life *and* escape the horror that it entails. Neither can we both experience such a life and cling forever to the illusion that it includes some possible good or another for us. And neither, therefore, can we both experience such a life and freely embrace it forever. Since in the very nature of the case, then, there can be no freedom to reject God forever, our salvation finally rests upon God's faithfulness to us and not upon our own human will or exertion. And that, I should think, is a conclusion that Pinnock would also welcome, particularly in light of his own rejection of both self-selection and a horrible decree.

