Most Moved Mover and Searching for an Adequate God

reviewed by Roger E. Olson in the January 30, 2002 issue

Just as the divisive issue of biblical inerrancy dominated evangelical theological discussion in the 1970s, so the issue of God's "openness" has increasingly dominated it recently. At the center of a growing firestorm of controversy within evangelical theology stand Clark Pinnock and his critics, some of whom would like to cast him and those who agree with him out of the evangelical community. Pinnock, a Canadian Baptist theologian, has developed the controversial concept of "open theism." One influential, conservative evangelical theologian has publicly declared Pinnock not a Christian and refused to have fellowship with him; others have described the God of Pinnock and his open-theist evangelical friends, a God who does not control everything and who takes risks, as pathetic and hand-wringing.

Perhaps the most damaging charge leveled against them by the neofundamentalist evangelicals who reject innovative, constructive theological reflection is that they are closeted process theologians. The careers and reputations of evangelical theologians are at stake in this controversy, which threatens to divide evangelicalism.

At its 2001 meeting the Evangelical Theological Society, which requires belief in biblical inerrancy for membership, passed a resolution affirming God's absolute foreknowledge and, in effect, declaring open theism contrary to the clear teaching of scripture. Whether open theists and their supporters will be allowed to remain members of the society is in doubt.

In *Most Moved Mover* Pinnock presents his long-awaited manifesto and apology. Open theism holds that "the future is partly settled and partly unsettled, partly determined and partly undetermined and, therefore, partly unknown even to God," Pinnock writes. Furthermore, according to open theists, "God himself has a temporal aspect." Some critics consider these views of the future to be heresy (or at least heterodoxy) for several reasons, among them that they have no precedent in the

Christian tradition and violate the Vincentian Canon that warrants belief only in what has always been believed by all Christians everywhere. Of course, such a criterion would render all kinds of Christians, even extremely conservative ones, heretics.

Another reason why many evangelicals consider open theism heresy is that they think it leads inevitably to the mistaken belief that God is unable to keep his promises and fulfill prophecies. But Pinnock and his fellows point out that they are not suggesting any limitation of God's omnipotence. Other critics of open theism simply claim that it conflicts with the plain sense of scripture, which teaches that God does know the future exhaustively and infallibly. Open theists explain those passages differently and point to numerous biblical examples of God changing his mind.

If it were not for the charges of heresy and attempts to expel Pinnock and others who think like him, such as John Sanders and Greg Boyd, from their teaching positions and from evangelical professional societies, such a debate would be stimulating and profitable. The problem is that, like the earlier inerrancy controversy sparked by Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible* (1977), the debate is threatening to divide the evangelical community over a secondary matter of doctrine.

Pinnock is professor of Christian interpretation at Baptist-related McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. Once a very conservative theologian himself, he was touched by the charismatic movement, switched from Calvinist to Arminian convictions, and finally embraced inclusivism with regard to the salvation of the unevangelized (*A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 1992). He then joined with four other evangelical thinkers to develop open theism (*The Openness of God,* 1994).

As Pinnock makes abundantly clear in the present work, his basic, underlying evangelical convictions and commitments remain intact. He unequivocally affirms the supreme authority of the Bible for Christian faith and practice. While some of his critics are dissatisfied with his accounts of biblical authority, inspiration and inerrancy, he affirms all three doctrines. Pinnock's evangelical convictions also include belief in the deity and Lordship of Jesus Christ, salvation through conversion to Christ by grace through faith, and the supremacy of God as the creator *ex nihilo* and omnipotent ruler over all.

Pinnock affirms that God could exercise meticulous providence by omnicausality and thereby know the future exhaustively and infallibly, but that God is "sovereign over his sovereignty" and limits his control in order to make space for the genuine freedom of creatures. "How boring it would be for God to have to reign over a creation project, each molecule of which has its predestined place! There would be nothing for God to do," he says.

More seriously, Pinnock argues that a God who exercises total control, to the exclusion of creaturely freedom and contingency within history, would be less glorious than one who, like the God of the Bible, chooses the relational path of suffering, responding, interacting, changing his mind and being omniresourceful rather than manipulative.

Pinnock defends the wide-tent view of evangelicalism that allows for diversity and theological innovation. He proves that open theism is closer to classical Christian theism than to process theology, while acknowledging some value in the latter. By declaring God's ontological distinctness from the world and ability to exercise unilateral action within history, he puts to rest the accusation that open theism is a slippery slope to process theology. "Open theists are evangelicals who look to Scripture, not to Whitehead," he states. "I appreciate Whitehead and Hartshorne much the way that conventional theists appreciate Plato and Aristotle."

Pinnock argues that the "conventional theism" of some of his harshest critics diminishes God's glory by calling God's character into question. He compares the God of paleo-Calvinism with the fictional creator-director of *The Truman Show* and asks, "Is it not heresy to teach that God does not essentially love? Does it not deny that God is light and in him is no darkness at all? (1 John 1:5). In the open view God essentially loves; creatures can rely on him loving them because he is love. Calvinism can offer no such assurance."

At times Pinnock falls into the errors of assuming that open theism is the only alternative to strict monergism (God as all-determining reality) and that "classical" or "conventional theism" is necessarily monergistic.

Augustine was the classical Christian monergist in that, at least toward the end of his life, he considered God to be the ultimate foreordaining cause of all things, including human decisions. Synergism is any belief in cooperation between God and human persons in producing history and salvation. Of course, much classical

Christian theism, from the early Eastern church fathers to Erasmus to Arminius to Wesley, has denied monergism and affirmed some kind of synergism while also affirming God's complete foreknowledge. Contemporary synergists like Pinnock and other open theists should take that middle way within classical theism more seriously.

The present Pinnock volume comes closest of all his works to being openly polemical; he has clearly been personally wounded by the attacks of some of his critics, and he returns fire for fire. Few of the "powers that be" in the evangelical community have come to Pinnock's or other open theists' defense even in the face of clear distortions and misrepresentations of their theology by influential neofundamentalists.

Those who misrepresent open theism as either a form of process theology or something too close to process theology for comfort probably will attempt to capitalize on the dialogue between evangelical open theists and process theologians in *Searching for an Adequate God.* That the book is coedited by John Cobb, a leading process theologian, will make them especially likely to do so. Anyone who reads the essays contained in the volume, however, will realize that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the two theologies. Indeed, the leading authors on both sides spend more time arguing than exploring common ground. David Ray Griffin speaks for process theology, and evangelical philosopher William Hasker and Seventh-day Adventist Richard Rice speak for the evangelical side. The great difference between open theism and process theology is that the first affirms God as the sole ultimate reality while the second affirms God-world as the sole ultimate reality.

Most Moved Mover is an excellent introduction to open theism (sometimes also referred to as "openness of God theology"). But since the book is written with an evangelical audience in mind, some of its references may be obscure to nonevangelical readers. In contrast, *Searching for an Adequate God* is at times technical and demands attention and familiarity with process thought and related issues in philosophical theology. Anyone interested in cutting-edge theological construction and controversy will benefit from engagement with one or both books.