Clark Pinnock’s Holy Spirit: The Bridge to Salvation

“There always needs to be growth in our relationship with the Spirit. So there is always subsequence, always more”1

- Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love*

---

James Lim  
ST502: Christology and Pneumatology  
Dr. Bryan Burton  
March 3rd, 2011

---

A. Introduction

There are many theologians who have just as many points of view when it comes to the Holy Spirit. In his introduction to pneumatology, Karkkainen writes,

“It has been the task of the rapidly growing Pentecostal and Charismatic movements to remind the church catholic that in the devotion to God’s Spirit, it is not theology that is primary but rather a revitalization of the experience of the Spirit. Even though experience of the Spirit always leads to theological reflection about its meaning, spirituality is the first contact point.”

Therefore this paper will focus on a more current theologian who is from a charismatic background, Clark Pinnock. Of his many different approaches to the Holy Spirit and its role within Christianity, this paper will focus on how the Holy Spirit plays a role in the initiation of faith that leads to salvation of humankind. “He reminds us that when we look at salvation from the standpoint of the Spirit, we view it in its relational and affective terms... Pinnock searches for a concept of salvation that has its goal in transformation, personal relationship, [and] union.”

Specifically in his book Flame of Love, Clark Pinnock wrote of the Holy Spirit’s involvement with each aspect of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit’s intercessory role in salvation is one where it directs Christians to the loving embrace of God. He illustrates this point with Bernard of Clairvoux’s own example, “If the Father kisses the Son and the Son receives the kiss, it is appropriate to think of the Holy Spirit as

---

the kiss”\textsuperscript{5} The way in which the Holy Spirit enters into the lives of people, according to Clark Pinnock, will be examined within this paper.

**B. Friendship and Union**

Pinnock uses the example of communion to show how the Holy Spirit works in reconciliation. He writes, “Breaking bread and drinking wine are tangible signs of our future feast with Christ. For this reason Communion should be a celebration, not a sad memorial.”\textsuperscript{6} Atonement is another word that is used to describe what occurs during communion. In the process of becoming one again with God, the “Spirit is bringing us into intimacy with the Father through the Son, who is sharing his divine sonship with us.”\textsuperscript{7} By bringing His people intimately close, it is truly when the “Spirit calls us to become children of God in and alongside the Son and to join in his self-surrender to the Father.”\textsuperscript{8} It is not through the Spirit alone that this atonement is accomplished. “The goal of the Spirit as he works within our lives shedding light on the Word is to deepen our friendship with God.”\textsuperscript{9}

When it comes to unifying humanity with God, He “sent forth the Son to make this possible and the Spirit to share the experience of sonship with us.”\textsuperscript{10} It is still the Holy Spirit that allows for the friendship and is the means in which the union is created. It is through this union, “Believers, in Christ by the Spirit, are beginning to participate in God and experience the love pouring from the Father to the Son.

\textsuperscript{7} Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love*. Page 153.
\textsuperscript{8} Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love*. Page 153.
\textsuperscript{10} Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love*. Page 153.
Washed by waves of delight, we return love with the Son, waiting in the presence of God, and Spirit intercedes within us. In this life we are beginning to experience union with God.”

Therefore this “at-one-ment” is the first step in the Spirit’s role in guiding humanity towards salvation.

**B. Freedom in Love**

According to Pinnock, the Holy Spirit plays a vital role when it comes to expressing the love of God. Just like in the earlier quote, the Father’s “kiss” represents the Holy Spirit and it must be received in order to maintain any sort of significance. “The Spirit is wooing human beings to come into their proper destiny and come home to God’s love... Love woos—it does not compel. Conversion is not coerced.” Within this there are many different descriptions of how one is brought to receive God’s love: wooing, compelling, and coercing. The latter two have a connotation in which one is deceived through an effort to convince people. Pinnock negates these and he uses the term “woo” to describe how the Holy Spirit acts upon people. This term creates the imagery of romance rather than deception. In this romance, the Holy Spirit tries to show humankind how great His love is in hopes of having that love reciprocated. The “Spirit may draw, but people must consent.”

Within the love that is shared, there is the freedom to accept or reject it. The freedom that His Spirit expresses allows it so “persons are even free to pit their wills against God’s.” This extreme viewpoint is stated more clearly in *Flame of Love*, “He

---

rejoices in Peter’s yes and mourns over Judas’s no. Grace draws but does not compel. God works within us, but we may stifle the invitation and shut ourselves off.”¹⁵ The freedom lies within love though; to allow humanity to rebel against God also allows the love for Him to be completely by choice. “God did this because he desires genuine freely given love from his creatures, and not coerced ‘love.’”¹⁶ Through this freedom, the choice of receiving God’s love is even more rewarding. “From Mary we learn to respond to God’s initiative. The Spirit showered grace on her because she was open. So the Spirit came upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her. Mary responded by faith to God’s grace. She listened to the promptings of the Spirit; therefore she is blessed among women.”¹⁷ The Holy Spirit pours out the love but grants the freedom for that love to be reciprocated by the ones He touches.

C. Receiving the Spirit

Pinnock goes into detail about how God’s love within the Spirit affects believers, but one first needs to receive the spirit. “It is more common to hear people speak of converts ‘receiving Christ’ than of receiving the Spirit, through the New Testament speaks otherwise.”¹⁸ There is a great difficulty within the western Christian culture to readily embrace the idea of having an experiential moment with the Holy Spirit. According to this Gordon D. Fee, “No one can easily deny the

---

importance of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism.”

This being the case, Pinnock places heavy emphasis upon how one receives the Spirit and consequently how it leads.

The first emphasis is placed on the initial encounter with the Spirit and how He meets us. “Spirit comes in the proclamation of the Word. More than a cognitive issue, this creates a power encounter.”

By delving into the Bible, Pinnock describes several ways in which the Holy Spirit moved,

“[Paul] speaks of what Christ accomplished through him in his mission to the Gentiles: ‘by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God’ (Romans 15:18-19). The impact was more than a result of impressive human wisdom. The Spirit removed veils (2 Cor. 3:16-18). There were demonstrations of Spirit and power (1 Cor. 2:4-5). It was power ministry.”

These first exposures to who the Holy Spirit is were a testament to show that the presence of God was with them. The initial experiences are what allow people to open themselves up further to what will be revealed, and “as the Spirit leads the church into mission, he leads each believer too.”

God introduces himself by revealing his Spirit through the initial experience, but more is required. “Salvation requires the operation of both grace [from the Spirit] and the human will.”

---

D. How He Moves

Once the Spirit is received, the conversion begins and he or she then works towards their salvation. Pinnock makes no allusions, “Spirit does not promise feeling states of constant victory and exhilaration, but to be present with gifts when needed for mission.”24 He uses the word “mission” to express that as Christians, the Spirit calls people into service. The reception, as important as it is, only initiates the relationship between man and God. When the Spirit resides within a believer, He “unites us to Christ and leads us to intimacy with God. Not an obscure mystical relationship, our union leads us into familiarity with God’s heart. It is an intimacy that does not eclipse concerns about mission but creates a longing for the kingdom and God’s will to be done on earth.”25 Pinnock emphasizes the change within a person that creates a Kingdom-centered focus now that the Spirit has a presence within them. The Holy Spirit “is creating new realities and making people instruments of the ongoing process of mission.”26 Although the Holy Spirit is often referred to as the counselor, as wisdom, as the intercessor, Pinnock looks to a more active role in which the Holy Spirit continues to woo the believer towards fulfilling God’s will.

There is a lot to expect from the Holy Spirit once it has entered one’s life, but it is not something that is to be manifested all at once. Pinnock is careful to point out, “Baptism in the Spirit... gets worked out over a lifetime, whether it begins in

---

24 Clark Pinnock, Flame of Love. Page 164.
26 Clark Pinnock, Flame of Love. Page 166.
infancy or later in life.” Understanding God’s will through the Spirit takes time, Pinnock illustrates it with an example, “Everyone has a certain capacity to appreciate music, but it may have to grow and be nourished. Similarly, it takes time to learn how to ride the wind of the Spirit.” This relationship between the self and the Spirit is one that takes a lifetime, but “the goal of salvation is union with Christ in divine glory.” That union is initiated, received, and actualized through the Holy Spirit.

D. Critique

i. Weaknesses

The terminology that Pinnock uses makes me feel uneasy at times and it causes me to question his theology. He states, “We are invited inside the Trinity as joint heirs together with Christ.” And although I can understand the point he is trying to get across, it feels as though this, along with other similar statements, suggest a joining together in a divine way. By quoting Athanasius, he suggests that we can be at the same level as God: “God became man, that man might become God.” Even though Pinnock states explicitly that there is a clear distinction between man and God in the union, his statements continually seem to suggest otherwise. “As the Persons of the Trinity dwell in and with one another, so we,

---

31 As quoted in: Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love*. Page 153. (From Irenaeus Against Heresies 3.19.1; Athanasius On the Incarnation 2.54)
created in the image of God, dwell in and with God, sharing the life of the Trinity and experiencing movements of love passing between the Persons.”\textsuperscript{32}

In the earlier section “Freedom and Love,” Pinnock’s statement that “The Spirit may draw, but people must consent.”\textsuperscript{33} Is followed up by stating, “we are also coworkers with God.”\textsuperscript{34} I find this to go against the idea of “by grace, through faith” because it suggests that we contribute to the work that is done by God and that we assist in our own salvation. At this point in time, without further knowledge of Clark Pinnock’s theology, it is difficult to know if I am misinterpreting him or if I find his theology to be weak in this area. Still, as a writer his work should be able to stand alone and represent his point of view, therefore I feel he discredits God’s sole providence in salvation.

Clark Pinnock also seems to imply that salvation can be attained outside of Christianity. He states,

“Recognizing the cosmic breadth of Spirit activities can help us understand the divine universality, since God’s breath is everywhere, reaching out and touching people. The bond of love of the Trinity is the power of God in the world, ceaselessly pouring out love and creating hope. The Spirit has a thousand ways of passing by and gracing people. We can abound in hope for people through the power of the Spirit, who inspires hope in us, not only for our future but also for the future of the world and for the ungodly whom God would justify. (Emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{32} Clark Pinnock, \textit{Flame of Love}. Page 154.
\textsuperscript{33} Clark Pinnock, \textit{Flame of Love}. Page 158.
\textsuperscript{34} Clark Pinnock, \textit{Flame of Love}. Page 158.
Does this mean that he believes God will justify those who have not accepted Jesus Christ, who is the way the truth and the life? I have a very difficult time accepting that.

**ii. Strengths**

I do find it helpful that he makes many references to the Bible as opposed to creating his argument around a debate. By using more Biblical examples of his theology it helps me to better understand the point of view in which he represents.

Although Clark Pinnock seems to take his ideas a little far, he places a lot of emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit within the Christian life. How the interaction between man and the Spirit leads to acceptance, understanding, and salvation.
Bibliography


