

Inerrancy Is Not Enough: A Lesson in Epistemology from Clark Pinnock on Scripture

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Abstract

In the 1960s, Canadian theologian Clark H. Pinnock declared that saving human knowledge of God could only be built upon the plain sense of the infallible and inerrant text of Holy Scripture. In the ensuing decades, however, Pinnock's confidence in an inerrant Bible severely waned. A close examination of Pinnock's early epistemological outlook reveals critical defects that sowed seeds of his later departure from a traditional confession of Scripture's total trustworthiness. Pinnock's theological migration reminds scholars and church leaders that only an epistemology that is rooted in the being, knowledge, and revelation of God in Scripture supplies the necessary context for a robust confession of Scripture's inerrancy and its relationship with the observable world.

Introduction

Canadian theologian Clark H. Pinnock opened his 1967 book, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility*, by claiming, “The central problem for twentieth century theology is its own epistemological basis.”¹ Pinnock went on to insist that a sure and saving knowledge of God can be derived only from the plain sense of the infallible and inerrant text of Holy Scripture. For him, any Christian endeavor—to the extent that it is truly Christian—must remain unswervingly faithful to Scripture as theology’s *principium cognoscendi* and “the necessary link epistemologically between sinful man and the inscrutable God.”²

In the decades following *A Defense*, however, Pinnock’s confidence in an inerrant Bible as the Christian’s ultimate epistemological norm severely waned. By at least 1977, he was convinced that evangelical defenders of an errorless Bible were evidencing a “fortress mentality” and had begun to “play on the fears of Bible readers” by telling them that the Bible was no longer trustworthy if it was mistaken on a single point.³ For the “later” Pinnock, Scripture’s dependability must also be qualified by, and adjusted to, the limitations imposed upon the text by its human authorship and historical milieu.⁴ Conflicts in ancient biblical manuscripts, the seemingly insuperable challenge of harmonizing purportedly disparate accounts, and the supposed illogical inference from inspiration to strict textual inerrancy, he believed, made “the argument [for an errorless Bible] based on epistemology ... very doubtful.”⁵ Even so, Pinnock remained confident that the

¹ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Defense of Biblical Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 18. See also Clark H. Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case: Studies in Christian Apologetics* (Nutley, NJ: Craig, 1968), 69.

³ Clark H. Pinnock, “Three Views of the Bible in Contemporary Theology,” in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, TX: Word, 1977), 65.

⁴ Pinnock cites G. C. Berkouwer’s *Holy Scripture*, trans. and ed. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), as a work that does justice to “the actual nature of the Bible ... taking into account the cultural context, and the human qualities,” which for Pinnock account for Scripture’s “inconsistencies, duplicate passages, [and] seemingly pointless details.” Pinnock, “Three Views,” 62. For a romp through various models for understanding the humanity of Scripture, including Pinnock’s, and a conclusion with a constructive alternative, see Paul Wells, “The Doctrine of Scripture: Only a Human Problem,” in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 27–61.

⁵ Pinnock, “Three Views,” 66. Pinnock has in mind here what Stephen Davis calls “the epistemological argument” for inerrancy, which Davis summarizes as follows: “Unless the Bible is inerrant, Christians have no sound epistemological foundation on which to base their beliefs. Thus, inerrancy is crucial for Christians.” Stephen Davis, *The Debate About the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 66. According to Barry Callen (*Clark H.*

edifice of theological knowledge could remain standing without a foundation in an inerrant Scripture and that Christian practice could even flourish in its absence.⁶

In the ensuing years, however, the edifice Pinnock perceived began to crumble as he followed his changed position on Scripture with additional radical theological views. He came, for example, to embrace a “wider-hope” theology in which redemption may extend to unevangelized people groups and the unconverted dead.⁷ He grew sympathetic with a number of motifs in process theism, rejected substitutionary atonement, and applauded elements of charismatic Pentecostalism.⁸ Today, Pinnock is perhaps best known as a prominent former spokesman for the movement within evangelicalism known as “open theism” (also “neoclassical theism” or “free-will theism”), in which a future that is unknown to God unfolds as he responds to man’s unconstrained and unanticipated decisions.⁹

What accounts for Pinnock’s dramatic change regarding the character and content of Scripture? Did he self-consciously uproot his epistemology from its biblical moorings and replace it with an entirely different system? Or was there something defective in his epistemology from the beginning that (a) can help to explain Pinnock’s departure from an evangelical, even apparently Reformed, confession of Scripture’s inerrancy, and (b) contributed to his later theological evolution? This article argues that the culprit was a defective early epistemology. An examination of the broader framework

Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal [Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 2000], 56–57), the release of Davis’s book, which includes a chapter criticizing this argument, contributed to Pinnock’s re-evaluating and revising his traditional position on Scripture. If this is the case, it is noteworthy that Davis’s summary fails to address, at least in any pointed way, the Christian’s proper epistemological warrant for the belief itself that Scripture is inerrant. This article is intended to show how this lacuna played an important role in Pinnock’s departure from inerrancy.

⁶ See Callen, *Clark H. Pinnock*, 57.

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 153–72.

⁸ Clark H. Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 147; Clark H. Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 22–23; Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 129–39.

⁹ Pinnock defined open theism as “a relational and trinitarian doctrine with an emphasis on God as personal and interactive, both in his own immanent triune nature and in the economic relationships in which he engages and enjoys with creatures. It holds that God could control the world if he wished to but that he has chosen not to do so for the sake of loving relationships. Open theism does not believe that God is ontologically limited but that God voluntarily self-limits so that freely chosen loving relations might be possible.” Clark H. Pinnock, “Open Theism: An Answer to My Critics,” *Dialog* 44.3 (Fall 2005): 237.

behind Pinnock's initial trust in Scripture's total truthfulness reveals that his belief in inerrancy operated, at least in part, independently of Scripture's self-witness and authority. That is, Pinnock maintained defective epistemological assumptions—specifically including relying on an inductive-empirical form of reasoning that was insufficiently qualified by “the norming norm (*norma normans*)” of Scripture—that gradually exposed the instability of his early position on inerrancy and eventually infected much of the rest of his theology.¹⁰

The ensuing analysis does not presume to offer a comprehensive account of how Pinnock's faulty epistemology affected his entire theology. Nor does it deny that additional influences contributed to his theological evolution.¹¹ It simply aims to examine how Pinnock broke from an inerrancy position (a) by tracing that break back to a more basic epistemological commitment to would-be autonomous inductive and empirical reasoning and (b) by offering a critique of such reasoning from a Reformed theological perspective. This exercise will press home what the title of this article intends to convey, namely, that a bare confession of inerrancy, or one that surreptitiously depends upon some extrabiblical authority, is not enough to sustain a lasting Reformed Christian witness to the total truthfulness of Scripture. Instead, what is needed is a confession of biblical inerrancy and the Bible's relation to the observable world that is self-consciously rooted in an epistemological framework that is thoroughly shaped by the being and knowledge of the God revealed in his inerrant Word.

I. *Pinnock's Epistemology at a Glance*

Pinnock never presented a sustained exposition of his epistemology, or theory of knowledge. His concerns throughout his career were more overtly theological.¹² When he did attempt to explain his epistemology, he often

¹⁰ In contrast to valid deductive arguments, in which premises logically entail a conclusion, in inductive reasoning premises provide only a degree of support for the conclusion. See James Hawthorne, “Inductive Logic,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/logic-inductive/>. The descriptor “inductive-empirical” attempts to capture how Pinnock viewed sense experience as supplying the premises that allegedly validate Scripture's claims by way of inductive probability.

¹¹ For a fuller account of Pinnock's theological shift on the doctrine of Scripture, see Ray C. W. Roennfeldt, *Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority: An Evolving Position*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 16 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993). Pinnock offers a brief but even broader theological autobiography in his essay, “From Augustine to Arminius,” 15–30.

¹² The following statement from a book designed to commend the Christian faith to skeptics is typical: “This book will not be burdened with a lengthy discussion of epistemology, the

invoked philosophical terms rather loosely and without any explicit attempt to correlate them. But because one's method of knowing is integral to what is known, or what is claimed to be known, it is appropriate to examine Pinnock's writings on Scripture in order to grasp his epistemology and evaluate it.

1. *The Authority of Scripture and the Role of Reason*

Pinnock's early writings on Scripture present a person firmly committed to a supremely authoritative and wholly accurate Bible as the key source of true knowledge of God. For him in the late 1960s, the premier issue in need of a clear defense was the truth-claim implicit in the doctrine of inspiration, namely, that because the Bible is *God's Word* it remains utterly free from error.¹³ The greatest threat to this Christian conception of inspiration, and thus to one's confidence in the truths disclosed in Scripture, Pinnock argued, was what he saw as a then vogue inclination by would-be autonomous man to impose an existential *a priori* onto the text of Scripture.¹⁴ He noted, for example, how liberal critics of the Bible derive their conclusions from a "critical attitude adopted from the outset" rather than from a posture of total trust commanded by Scripture itself.¹⁵ For Pinnock, the issue was a moral one, for, as he said, the reader who "pontificates" on alleged errors in the Bible "has usurped for himself the infallibility which he has denied to the Bible."¹⁶ At first glance, Pinnock's case appears closed: either commit your epistemology to the authoritative Word of God written or allow an independent criterion to insert errors into a biblical text, which may then be wielded as a weapon to attack orthodox theology and undermine Christian fidelity to Scripture.

Yet even in the book once hailed as "the most vigorous scholarly statement of verbal plenary inspiration since Warfield,"¹⁷ Pinnock himself endorsed a

question of how we know what we know." Clark H. Pinnock, *Reason Enough: A Case for the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 16.

¹³ Pinnock, *A Defense*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. For a brief account of how rationalist biblical criticism inspired by the European Enlightenment is part of a broader anthropocentric worldview, see Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 24–29.

¹⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 182–83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81. After making the same point in 1967, Pinnock added, "This is freedom in the flesh, a freedom sought by no Christian believer." Pinnock, *A Defense*, 30.

¹⁷ Gordon R. Lewis, review of *Biblical Revelation*, in *Eternity* (January 1972), 50. Quoted in Daniel Strange, "Clark H. Pinnock: The Evolution of an Evangelical Maverick," *Evangelical Quarterly* 71.4 (1999): 313.

germ of independent, inductive thinking that ultimately contaminated his view of Scripture's inerrancy. In an attempt to "avoid philosophical solipsism and religious anarchy," he argued, even in this early stage, that one must not believe the Scripture's gospel "before the evidence for its truthfulness has been weighed."¹⁸ While human reason is not a source of revealed truth, Pinnock explained, it is still competent to test the historical claims of biblical revelation.¹⁹ Hence, defenders of inerrancy, he said, must be "revelation-empiricists."²⁰ They must recognize that "the validity of Christian theism rests on its *historical credentials*."²¹ For Pinnock, this implied an open-to-investigation form of the gospel that called for a presumably neutral and open-minded analysis of the verifiable facts recorded in Scripture.²²

Curiously, Pinnock added that Christians who investigate Scripture's truthfulness ought to begin by adopting the attitude of Christ and the apostles toward the Old Testament and thereby presume the reliability of the whole of Scripture.²³ On the surface, this methodological bias appears to set a high bar for evidence that might warrant concluding there was error

¹⁸ Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 44–45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44. According to Pinnock, a "revelation-empiricist" is "one who studies revelation as an objective reality, and comes to conclusions about its shape and credibility, on the basis of the evidence available." *Ibid.* As early as 1968, Pinnock urged the Christian apologist to "challenge the non-Christian to suspend his prejudice against Christianity for the time it takes to examine fairly the evidence for the Christian faith, to take up a proven method for ascertaining truth, the empirical method, and apply it to the biblical records." Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 86.

²¹ Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 45; emphasis in the original.

²² Clark H. Pinnock, "The Philosophy of Christian Evidences," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Apologetics and Theology of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 422; cf. Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 43–45. Pinnock summarized his apologetic approach when he wrote, "I am committed to appealing to reason to try to persuade those yet unconvinced to make a decision for Jesus Christ." Pinnock, *Reason Enough*, 13. For him, such appeals assume "our cognitive and personal freedom" to examine the available "probabilities" and "clues" for the Christian faith. *Ibid.*, 18. In response, it is important to note that the question is not whether reason and evidence play a central role in the task of apologetics, but whether one's reasoning and evaluation of evidence, from the outset, is thoroughly conditioned by God's inscripturated revelation.

²³ Clark H. Pinnock, "Limited Inerrancy: A Critical Appraisal and Constructive Alternative," in *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. J. W. Montgomery (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 151; Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 75: "Inerrancy is the standpoint for a Christian to adopt in his examination of Scripture." This helps to explain Roennfeldt's observation that the early Pinnock "held to a view of the relationship between biblical authority and biblical reliability that involved movement in both directions." Roennfeldt, *Clark H. Pinnock on Biblical Authority*, 209. That is, the Bible's self-witness to its divine character and inerrancy ought to inform one's evaluation of the evidence for Scripture's truthfulness and (yet) sufficient historical evidence may ultimately falsify that self-witness. Unfortunately, Roennfeldt's opposition to a Reformed view of divine sovereignty (see, e.g., *ibid.*, 319) leads him to miss the profound epistemological flaw in Pinnock's position.

in the text; after all, Pinnock observed, “nothing less than the authority of Jesus is on the line.”²⁴ But the force of this initial instruction to Christians soon erodes in the face of questions prompted by Pinnock’s call in the first place to weigh the evidence for Scripture’s truthfulness. For example, who gets to decide where the bar is set for gauging whether there is error in Scripture, or when it is cleared by sufficiently persuasive evidence? How does one decide what counts as evidence in the first place? And by what criteria should it be evaluated?

Such questions will re-emerge later in this study, but they bear on yet another question that is relevant to Pinnock’s early demand for Christians to adopt Jesus’s view of Scripture (at least preliminarily): what grounds one’s confidence in the accuracy of those texts that speak of Christ’s submission to the Jewish canon? Pinnock answers this further question when he writes that his Christ-inspired presumption in favor of Scripture’s inerrancy is proportional to “that evidence, in weight and amount, which vindicates the trustworthiness of Christ.”²⁵ Crucially, however, for Pinnock, even this evidence is properly authenticated by a mechanism of independent factual verification and inductive reasoning.²⁶ As it turns out, “evidence of a most compelling variety” may also overturn a Christian’s trust in what the Bible reveals to be Christ’s own view of Scripture.²⁷ If this is so, then it appears that the early Pinnock’s methodological commitment to Scripture’s inerrancy was nominal at best, since it, too, depended on an independent evaluation of Scripture’s witness to Christ and to itself.

The early Pinnock insisted that the church’s trust in Scripture as the infallible revelation of God is a mark of consistent Christian discipleship.²⁸ Yet this conviction sat uneasily with his higher-priority desideratum to screen Scripture’s claims for their “truth value.”²⁹ As Pinnock would put it later in his career, although God is powerful enough to secure an errorless Bible, “we have to look and see if this is what he willed to do.”³⁰ He went on to warn that “should the facts prove to be inconsistent with the testimony of our Lord, it is well that we know it ... with the full realization of the consequences.”³¹

²⁴ Pinnock, “Limited Inerrancy,” 152.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 151, quoting from B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 218.

²⁶ Cf. Clark H. Pinnock, “In Response to Dr. Daniel Fuller,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16.1 (1973): 70.

²⁷ Pinnock, “Limited Inerrancy,” 155.

²⁸ Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case*, 69.

²⁹ Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 37.

³⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 57.

³¹ Pinnock, “Limited Inerrancy,” 152. Cf. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 136.

2. Pinnock's Inductive Reasoning and the Delimiting of Scriptural Authority

Pinnock's appeal to the "facts" of empirical observation and to the conclusions of inductive reasoning to validate Scripture indicates that he operated with an epistemological standard presumed to be more authoritative than the Word of God written itself. For him, the Christian and the non-Christian alike may verify the reliability of Scripture by reading its claims and then, like a confused Berean (cf. Acts 17:11), run to allegedly self-evident facts of experience to see if these things are so.³² The danger of this approach should be clear. As soon as readers of Scripture encounter a particularly difficult inter-textual harmonization issue or entertain interpretations of historical evidences that they cannot, according to their limited knowledge and fallen reason (Rom 1:21; Eph 4:18; cf. 2 Cor 3:14), reconcile with Scripture, a rejection of inerrancy is all but inevitable. By the late 1980s, the floodgates had opened and Pinnock had come to believe that "strict" inerrancy was a "human construction" that spawned unnecessary problems for the text, imposed an interpretive grid on the Bible, and, in Pharisaical fashion, prevented laymen from "really hearing God's Word."³³ He came to concede that his one-time claim that "in our approach to biblical difficulties then we do not give equal weight to the phenomena [i.e., all that is in Scripture, except for its explicit self-witness] and to the doctrine of inspiration, as [Dewey] Beegle does" could not withstand the force of the Enlightenment methodology embedded in his epistemology.³⁴ Once he subjected the Bible's variegated Gospel accounts and Old Testament records to his allegedly autonomous and disinterested empirical eye, he concluded that "the case for total inerrancy just is not there."³⁵ Ironically, it appears that the early Pinnock's firm belief in the scientific verification of inerrancy is what eventually led him to see the doctrine as a false promise of rational certainty.³⁶

As with his earlier methodology for validating biblical inerrancy, Pinnock's eventual denial of inerrancy exposes the deeper epistemological problems in attempting to verify Scripture, or anything else, through an allegedly

³² That Pinnock viewed empirically observable facts as "self-contained" and capable of being interpreted properly apart from Scripture can be seen in one of the rare occasions he formally addresses his epistemology, calling it a "common-sense" or "correspondence" model. On this view, he claimed, the Christian message "fits with the relevant facts of our experience and can be verified in an empirical way" by "thinking consistently and coherently about the data we encounter." Pinnock, *Reason Enough*, 16–17.

³³ Clark H. Pinnock, "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1987), 99.

³⁴ Pinnock, "Limited Inerrancy," 151.

³⁵ Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 58.

³⁶ Pinnock, "Parameters of Biblical Inerrancy," 100.

independent inductive and empirical analysis. First, factual verification by sense experience raises the crucial question of whose experience is sufficient to serve as the norm by which empirical knowledge is evaluated. Whose or what axioms will determine what the “facts” actually say and what sort of relationships obtain between them? As David Hume understood, apart from establishing universal criteria for attaining knowledge by sense experience, conclusions derived from an inductive epistemology easily devolve into descriptions of personal internal experiences. That is to say, unless induction proceeds according to true antecedent metaphysical commitments, one’s reasoning will inevitably collapse into solipsism or skepticism.³⁷ The later Pinnock provides a vivid illustration of this danger in his self-assessment that he had moved toward the view that “the truth [of Christianity] is better represented by a cumulative argument which makes an appeal to *intuitive and ultimately to personal judgment*.”³⁸

Second, as much as the early Pinnock may have wanted to avoid retreating into the cozy but hazy confines of subjectivity by appealing to an allegedly disinterested empirical method, the impossibility of bare induction led him to slip unspoken norming biases under the door. In the late 1970s, Greg Bahnsen challenged Pinnock’s inductivism by showing how his professed use of that method of knowing, far from maintaining the neutral and open-minded attitude Pinnock hoped would attract non-Christians to the gospel, “commits one to a great deal of unargued philosophical baggage.”³⁹ Bahnsen argued that the inductivist cannot, by inductive reasoning alone, meaningfully account for the reliability of sense perception, the constancy required to make observations, or a proper linguistic framework to communicate the resulting observations intelligibly, among other things.⁴⁰ To reason independently of the authority of Scripture one must make similar dubious assumptions for predication from inductive empiricism to mean anything coherent. Bahnsen concluded that the inevitability that philosophical precommitments are involved in any inductive endeavor “presents a solid challenge to the credibility of ... Pinnock’s espousal of exhaustive inductivism.”⁴¹

³⁷ Recall that philosophical solipsism was precisely the error Pinnock was attempting to avoid in his call for readers to verify Scripture’s claims empirically. See Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 44; cf. footnote 18 above.

³⁸ Clark H. Pinnock, “Pinnock Postscript: How My Mind Has Changed,” in Callen, *Journey Toward Renewal*, 229; emphasis added.

³⁹ Greg L. Bahnsen, “Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20.4 (1977): 299.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 296–300.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

To be fair, the early Pinnock admitted that his trust in Scripture's claims at least partially conditioned his inductive epistemology.⁴² For example, he noted that both he and Daniel Fuller refused to entertain the notion of philosophical naturalism since, "if we did, we would not be talking as biblical supernaturalists."⁴³ Pinnock even claimed that nothing less than God's invitation to sinners to find him in the empirical world of factuality ought to propel one's independent investigation of the Bible's claims.⁴⁴ However, on Pinnock's terms, though Scripture petitions fallen sinners to weigh the factual evidence of Christianity for themselves, they must still derive their conclusions without appealing to any *a priori* biases gleaned from beyond the text itself.⁴⁵ But, as we have seen, such bare inductive reasoning is impossible, since some kind of metaphysical framework must provide the stability necessary for meaningful empirical observation; and any framework that is divorced from the norm of Scripture will oppose the claims of Scripture from the outset.

Pinnock's incoherent empirical approach to validating his belief in inerrancy eventually eroded his commitment to inerrancy. But what is particularly subtle about the evolution of Pinnock's views on Scripture is the way he deployed his early description of what biblical inerrancy means in order to service his later rejection of it. In the late 1960s, Pinnock claimed that Scripture's infallibility and inerrancy is "obviously restricted to the *intended assertions* of Scripture understood in an ordinary grammatical exegesis of the text."⁴⁶ In itself, the statement is innocuous, even helpful. A century earlier, and in similar fashion, B. B. Warfield and A. A. Hodge claimed that inerrancy demands that exegesis of biblical texts "must always seek the meaning *intended*, not any meaning that can be tortured out of a passage."⁴⁷

⁴² A point Bahnsen acknowledges in *ibid.*, 300. See also footnote 23 above.

⁴³ Pinnock, "Response to Dr. Daniel Fuller," 70.

⁴⁴ Pinnock, "The Philosophy of Christian Evidences," 422.

⁴⁵ To be clear, Pinnock often struggled to articulate exactly how the Bible ought to influence our reasoning without violating the principle of neutrality he required to properly validate its claims. For example, he wrote that Christian scholarship should conduct an "open, inductive investigation of the biblical claims" (Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 151) yet also employ "a hermeneutics of consent" toward strange or alarming texts. Similarly, Christians must exclude from consideration those "theories that prevent the Bible from functioning as the truth-telling Scriptures of the church" (*ibid.*, 138) even though we may be surprised at "the kind of truth it chooses to deliver" (*ibid.*, 152). In these ways, we are "required to be liberal and conservative at the same time" (*ibid.*, 203).

⁴⁶ Pinnock, *A Defense*, 13 (emphasis added). See the nearly identical claim in Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 71: "The infallibility of Scripture is not, in one sense, absolute. Its field is restricted to the *intended* assertions of Scripture understood by an ordinary grammatical-historical exegesis of the text" (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁷ B. B. Warfield and A. A. Hodge, "Inspiration," *The Presbyterian Review* 2.6 (1881): 246

But while Warfield and Hodge's claim was designed to safeguard the categorical trustworthiness and accuracy of the entire (autographic) biblical text,⁴⁸ Pinnock's caveat that inerrancy should be restricted to the intended teaching of Scripture left room, in principle, for *unintended* errors by the Bible's human writers in the margins of their teaching.⁴⁹ Indeed, as Pinnock's epistemological commitment to an autonomous brand of "fact-checking" began to exert its pressure on his earlier trust in Scripture's total truthfulness, his earlier description of the nature of Scripture's inerrancy served instead to delimit for him the scope of the Scripture's reliability. By 1977, Pinnock still espoused a view of inerrancy "relative to the intention of the text," but, by that point, the phrase meant that "there are errors in the Bible, but they do not overthrow inerrancy because they do not belong to the intended, but only to the unintended teachings of the Bible."⁵⁰ What was once a potentially useful description of inerrancy now, for the later Pinnock, meant "one could fairly say that the Bible *contains* errors but *teaches* none."⁵¹ A major reason for this new understanding of Scripture's truthfulness, Pinnock explained, was his determination to take the difficulties presented by the phenomena of the biblical text "very seriously," which for him meant

(emphasis in the original); cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: James Clark, 1960), 1:163. Only slightly different language is used in the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, commonly understood by evangelicals as a clear explanation and defense of the doctrine, when it asserts that Scripture is "of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches" (Statement 2) and is "true and reliable in all the matters it addresses" (Article XI), "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy with Exposition," in G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 269, 272.

⁴⁸ The two authors sum up their statement by claiming that "no phenomenon can be validly urged against verbal inspiration which, found out of Scripture, would not be a valid argument against the truth of the writing." Warfield and Hodge, "Inspiration," 246.

⁴⁹ In his review of Pinnock's *Biblical Revelation*, Fuller interprets Pinnock's description as limiting inerrancy in a manner similar to his own view that only soteriologically oriented texts are inerrant. Writing his review in the form of a letter to Pinnock, he states, "In your handling of my view of inspiration (pp. 79f.), you imply that, unlike Warfield, I am 'limiting its [the Bible's] accuracy.' Do you not, however, do the same when you say, 'The infallibility of Scripture ... is restricted to intended assertions of Scripture.'" Daniel Fuller, "On Revelation and Biblical Authority," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16 (1973): 67. While the early Pinnock strongly objected to Fuller's comparison, the later Pinnock essentially agreed with Fuller's position (cf. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 222–26). This later position is clarified further in Clark H. Pinnock and Barry L. Callen, *The Scripture Principle: Reclaiming the Full Authority of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 247–51. For an excellent examination of "limited inerrancy" positions as "argument[s] by slipperiness," see Vern S. Poythress, "Problems for Limited Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 18.2 (Spring 1975): 93–102.

⁵⁰ Pinnock, "Three Views," 63–64.

⁵¹ Clark H. Pinnock, "The Inerrancy Debate Among the Evangelicals," *Theology, News, and Notes*, *Fuller Seminary*, Special Issue (1976): 12 (emphasis in the original).

subjecting them to a more rigorously would-be autonomous inductive investigative procedure that, it is argued here, had plagued his view of inerrancy from the start.⁵²

II. *An Alternative and “Revelational” Epistemology*

Having surveyed the flawed empiricism governing Pinnock’s approach to Scripture, we do well to sketch an alternative epistemology that begins with the being and knowledge of God revealed in Scripture rather than the epistemological independence of man. It was mentioned earlier that one must settle the question of metaphysics outright in order to justifiably avoid the persisting skepticism of a subjectivist epistemology. But what type of metaphysic provides the necessary conditions to make investigation of so-called “facts” intelligible? Specifically, what theory of reality provides the requisite framework for justifiably affirming inerrancy and for making empirical and inductive efforts to confirm the claims of Scripture truly fruitful? Reformed theologian and apologist Cornelius Van Til offers a cogent answer when he states that “the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs.”⁵³ Van Til means that no “fact” exists that is independent of the comprehensive knowledge and plan of God. The discerning reader will note that these metaphysical claims both derive from and undergird the fact that Scripture is God’s inerrant self-revelation and must function as one’s supreme *principium cognoscendi* if one is to successfully relate the Christian faith to science and history.

Therefore, submitting to Scripture’s revelation of God and to the God who speaks in the very words Scripture, we may probe additional questions from within the circle of this “revelational” epistemology. How do we know, for example, that God’s plan for the world is coherent? First, we know that it is *coherent* because Scripture reveals that the God whom Christians confess is exhaustively self-known, the only independent, self-contained, necessary, and divine being (Exod 3:14-15; Isa 41:4, 44:6; John 5:26; Acts 17:25).⁵⁴

⁵² Pinnock, “Three Views,” 67.

⁵³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 125.

⁵⁴ Much more could be said on this point, but we simply note that each of these descriptions touches on what theologians have called God’s *aseity*, a term that comes from the Latin *a se*, meaning “from or of oneself.” It refers to the fact that God is not dependent upon anything but himself to exist. He is utterly self-sufficient and self-existent. Aseity captures the truth that God’s eternal being and knowledge are *coterminous*. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*,

What is more, it is the creative power of the integrated mind of this triune God that gives coherence to his creation and thereby makes possible any empirical investigation of the world (Ps 33:11; Isa 46:8–11). Second, we *know* this truth only because, given the absolute nature of God’s being and knowledge, whatever “fact” exists for us to know, including our knowledge of the “fact” of God’s omniscience, is known by way of his sovereign and flawless revelation (Isa 8:20; 2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21). Here we begin to approach a truly Christian epistemology: because God alone is the transcendent reality who creates, sustains, reveals, and has already correlated the discrete phenomena of creation and its history by his exhaustive decree (Isa 46:10; Eph 1:11; Acts 17:26), for man to know anything at all, he must replicate, on a creaturely scale, the coherent knowledge of God. He must acknowledge the revelational character of all that he knows, including the fact of his knowing. Moreover, because it is the triune God’s comprehensive plan and knowledge of history, predicated upon his own exhaustive self-knowledge, that permeates and governs all fruitful investigations of the world, every fact that man encounters in the world presses home to him his inescapable dependence on the absolute, personal God of Christianity (cf. Ps 145:16; Zech 12:1; 1 Tim 6:17; Jas 1:17). Only this epistemological framework enables man to evade the whirlpool of chance, since it alone recognizes (and submits to) God as absolute Creator of all creaturely laws, logic, and life. Similarly, only God speaking in the Scriptures affords this God-centered epistemological framework, which, in turn, undergirds a Christian’s trust in the Bible as God’s inerrant Word.⁵⁵

Under this “revelational” scheme, where every created fact is inextricably revelational of the triune God, the most basic notion common to all men is not that they have a bare capacity for inductive reasoning, but that they possess as his image a true knowledge of God whenever and wherever they know anything at all, including their own intuitive and immediate self-awareness (Rom 1:21a).⁵⁶ However, since the fall in Eden, the entrance

vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008), 150–53, 191–96.

⁵⁵ Relevant here is Bavinck’s astute observation that attempts to construct a doctrine of Scripture on the basis of some extrabiblical authority are exercises in unbelief: “For those who make their doctrine of Scripture dependent on historical research into its origination and structure have already begun to reject Scripture’s self-testimony and therefore no longer believe that Scripture.” Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, 424.

⁵⁶ Cf. the famous opening line in Calvin’s *Institutes*, virtually unchanged from the first edition in 1536, that knowledge of God is given in the act of self-knowledge. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (London: SCM, 1960), 1.1.1.

of sin has ravaged human consciousness (Rom 1:21–23; Eph 4:18), leading man to suppress—but never eradicate, since he, as image, remains utterly dependent on God—the knowledge of God impressed upon and within him. Entrenched in intellectual rebellion against God, sinful man now hates all supernatural revelation (whether Scripture or in nature) that confronts his claims to independent reasoning and attempts, as much as he is able,⁵⁷ to interpret the world about him independently of God in his self-revealed Lordship. The redemptive correction of this otherwise futile enterprise comes to man only by the gospel of inscripturated revelation as it is applied to him by the power of the Spirit working by and with the Word of God in the heart (cf. WCF 1.5). As a result, and as Van Til perceptively noted, the inerrant Scripture “stands before us as that light in terms of which all the facts of the created universe must be interpreted,” rendering Scripture utterly necessary for epistemological, empirical, as well as ethical, purposes.⁵⁸ The foregoing aspects—(1) the free and exhaustively determined counsel of God for the world predicated upon his own self-knowledge and aseity, (2) the dependence of every fact upon God to be what it is, and (3) the necessity of a regenerate consciousness in submission to the Scriptures as the Christian’s ultimately authoritative interpretive lens for all of human experience—provide three baseline requirements for a truly Christian and Reformed epistemology. They also underscore the normative role Scripture ought to have played in Pinnock’s attempts to positively relate Scripture’s self-witness to the empirically observable world.

Conclusion

Clark Pinnock’s ultimate rejection of Scriptural inerrancy is a telling example of how a flawed epistemology not only generates theological missteps but also harbors them. By failing from the outset to submit his God-given tools of inductive and empirical analysis to the authority of Scripture and the unique epistemological framework it reveals, he ended up abandoning his earlier—and, as it turns out, merely formal—commitment to the Bible’s total truthfulness. Pinnock’s journey sheds light on the danger of divorcing

⁵⁷ This caveat is crucial and refers to the gracious activity of God to restrain nonbelievers from consistently living out their epistemological rebellion while on earth. For what remains a useful summary of the doctrine of common grace, see the three points formulated by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church meeting in Kalamazoo in 1924, reprinted in John Bolt, “Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 (April 2000): 7–8.

⁵⁸ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 129.

one's epistemological method from one's professed theological convictions and touches on the relentless temptation of the human heart to reason independently of God. To put the same point another way, Pinnock serves as a stark example of the potential ruin that awaits those who do not relate their epistemology properly to the task of theology and, more specifically, do not submit their thinking about Scripture to the rule of Scripture itself.

If in his later years Pinnock was willing to retract a few of his attacks on inerrancy,⁵⁹ perhaps in his earlier years he would have acknowledged that a bare confession of inerrancy is not enough. Perhaps he would have known that a true and lasting commitment to the inerrant Scriptures is the Spirit's gift to the Christian who submits his intellect to the God of Scripture and, in light of his glory, discovers that his words are "trustworthy and true" (cf. Rev 21:5; 22:6).

⁵⁹ Noted in a letter from Dr. David M. Howard Jr. to the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), dated October 24, 2003, reporting on the proceedings of the ETS Executive Committee's investigation of Pinnock's theology. This report was kindly mailed to me by Dr. James Borland, the Secretary-Treasurer of ETS at the time of the investigation.