

WOLFHART PANNENBERG'S CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT: A REVIEW OF HIS SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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With the appearance of volume 3 in 1998, Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* is now available to English readers in its entirety—all sixteen hundred pages of it. The multivolume project is a fitting capstone to a brilliant theological career. Theologians variously draw praise for originality, for careful arguments, for sweeping theological vision, and for extensive scholarship. However, Pannenberg's work is impressive on all counts. Since he first attracted international attention nearly forty years ago with his revisionary—many thought revolutionary—interpretation of Christian eschatology, Pannenberg has steadily worked his way across a wide front of theological issues, moving his thought forward, as well as outward, in the process. The culminating work of his career is much more than a summary of what he has done before.

Indeed, Pannenberg's offering is arguably the most impressive *systematic* theology to emerge during the last quarter century. Other influential theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jungel, have produced noteworthy studies on various doctrinal themes, but no one in Pannenberg's league has produced a full-fledged system, an integrated presentation that encompasses the entire scope of Christian faith. Moreover, Pannenberg's endeavor succeeds by every relevant standard of theological importance. It is biblically based, historically informed, ecclesiastically sensitive, philosophically sophisticated, *and* contemporary and constructive. Like the best of what Paul Tillich calls "apologetic theology," Pannenberg's work takes seriously the task of addressing the modern world. In fact, that is one of the distinguishing themes

of his work: theology must demonstrate the credibility of its claims.

In spite of the title, Pannenberg does much more than assemble the various themes and issues that Christian theology must face. He brings to them his own unifying vision. Thus, what we have in this work is not merely systematic, but constructive, theology at its best. It reflects on the whole range of Christian beliefs from the perspective of a powerful, original mind.

There is no way a single article can do justice to Pannenberg's sweeping project, of course. Immense in scope and meticulously constructed, this work will no doubt generate doctoral dissertations and technical discussions for years to come, and eventually all its positions will receive careful analysis. Our objective here is to convey a general feel for Pannenberg's overall project, a general sense of the basic dynamic that moves through the various parts of his system. We will first sketch some of the ideas that pervade Pannenberg's work, then describe one or two of the salient points in his treatment of each major doctrine, and finally step back and critique his overall proposal, noting one or two of its problematic aspects.

Pervasive Themes in Pannenberg

Three pervasive themes in Pannenberg's thought are eschatology, Trinity, and truth. What would happen if we started our theology at the end instead of the beginning? If we turned the traditional sequence of doctrines upside down and made eschatology basic to everything else? As a recent book on Pannenberg indicates, *Beginning with the End*, that is exactly what he does in his *Systematic Theology*. He interprets the entire range of Christian belief as an outworking of the basic conviction that history will end in the full and final establishment of God's reign. "The eschatological future of God in the coming of his kingdom is the standpoint from which to understand the world as a whole" (2:146). So, even though he takes up the major doctrines in more or less their traditional order, starting with God and concluding with last things, the concept of a coming consummation permeates the entire scheme. It affects his understanding of revelation, God, humanity, salvation, and church. Perhaps most important, it affects his understanding of truth.

For Pannenberg, there is a close connection between eschatology and truth, because events, like words, acquire meaning only in context. When someone utters a word, we don't know precisely what the word means until we hear the entire sentence. We need the whole context in order to understand each part. Similarly, we need to see the entire course of history in order to understand the meaning of each event.¹ This is why

¹This illustration is particularly apt of the German language, which in certain constructions places the verb or an important part of the verb at the end of the sentence.

eschatology is basic to Christian theology. The final future makes history a totality, so it determines the meaning of all that comes before.

Pannenberg's theological system is also marked by a concern for truth, in particular the truth about God. And this distinguishes him from many other theologians today. For neo-orthodoxy and the more recent "postliberal," "confessional," or "nonfoundationalist" approaches to Christian thought, truth is the presupposition of theology. The contents of Christian theology are more or less self-authenticating, and the theologian's task is to explicate or bear witness to them. But for Pannenberg, Christian claims must be established, not merely assumed. Evidence and argument play an important role in theology.

Pannenberg joins a long tradition of theologians in seeking to establish the truth of Christianity, but there is nothing traditional in the way he goes about it. For one thing, assessing the truth of Christian claims is not a separate discipline for him. Unlike older natural theologies or more recent theological "prolegomena," Pannenberg discusses the truth of revelation throughout his theological program. Moreover, he not only develops arguments by appealing to our common human experience, as does traditional natural theology; he also turns to the contents of faith and develops rather striking arguments from them. In the case of God, for example, he appeals to religious history, not the classical arguments for God's existence. In the case of Christology, he argues for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. And in the case of eschatology, he argues for the rationality of a general resurrection of the dead.

Another important theme in Pannenberg's system is the Trinity. Along with a number of contemporary theologians, Pannenberg finds a rich resource for Christian thought in the church's ancient reflections on God as Father, Son, and Spirit. He, too, sees salvation history as a disclosure of God's eternal reality and views God's inner life as the ultimate context for all the major concerns of Christian faith—creation, salvation, and the final consummation. Love leads God to create a finite reality, which he loves and cares for, to redeem this world and restore it to the divine life. So, there is an intimate relation between God's saving actions and the divine essence. God's great love propels him into the world, so to speak, and he seeks to bring the world into his embrace.

These are not the only themes that concern Pannenberg. Nor does he strive to weave them into a tight logical fabric. He doesn't deduce all his conclusions from basic premises, or tie all his doctrinal points into a tidy bundle. Different topics require different methods of inquiry, he argues. Nevertheless, he does relate his central concerns to each other. Both truth and Trinity have an eschatological character.

Truth and eschatology are closely related, because only with the final consummation will the full meaning of history appear² and the truth about God, humanity and creation be fully manifest. Short of the consummation, our grasp of these realities is provisional, not just because our understanding is limited, but also because their identity is not fixed until history has run its full course. "Creation will be complete," Pannenberg asserts, "only with the eschatological consummation of the world" (2:xvi).

God's divinity is an eschatological reality, too, for God's lordship, or reign, is fully established only with the final consummation. To put it starkly, only then is God fully God! Because the drama of God's inner life unfolds in creaturely history, God's life becomes complete only when history reaches its conclusion. Love takes God into the world and finds fulfillment when all creation enters its embrace. With these "Pannenbergian" themes in mind, let us follow his path through the major Christian doctrines, noting some highlights along the way.

Volume 1: Theology and God

Pannenberg's discussion of the truth of Christian faith serves as a counterpart to the natural theologies or theistic arguments that abound in traditional theological tomes. While he agrees with neo-orthodox thinkers that all knowledge of God depends on revelation,³ he also insists, with liberal or Enlightenment thinkers, that the truth of revelation must be argued for, not merely asserted. The experience of revelation is not self-authenticating. It requires confirmation from the sphere of our larger experience. To achieve this, Pannenberg attempts to show that revelation and God are inextricably linked and that we can argue for God's reality on the basis of this connection.

Pannenberg reverses the conventional understanding of religion and God. For many in the modern age, religion is a purely anthropological phenomenon, a function of human nature, and God is merely a particular manifestation of religion. But for Pannenberg, religion doesn't produce God; God produces religion. If we look at the actual content of religion—not to an abstraction like "human religiousness"—we see that concrete religions have an intentional quality; they point to the divine which evokes them. Therefore, we cannot give religion a purely anthropological basis.

A close inspection of "religion" leads to the same conclusion. The idea that religion is a function of human experience presupposes that human nature is a unity. And the idea of human unity derives from a sense of divine

²This does not mean that the end is a complete mystery until it occurs. Because God's saving activity contains "proleptic" manifestations of the end of history, we can develop an understanding of the end as it "arrives" ahead of time in the great events of salvation history.

³"God can be known," he asserts, "only if he gives himself to be known" (1:189).

unity. But this is the culmination of God's self-revelation in human history, particularly the history of Israel. Thus, the history of religion is a manifestation of the unity of deity, not the other way around (1:149-150).

The crucial question, of course, is whether concrete religions establish the truth of God. And the answer, says Pannenberg, lies in their capacity to interpret human experience. "The gods of the religions must show in their experience of the world that they are the powers which they claim to be" (1:167). If God is "the all-determining reality," our experience will confirm it. And if it doesn't, then God will seem to be no more than a human concept, "a purely subjective human idea" (1:159). Monotheism overcame its rivals because it provided a superior interpretation of human experience. With it came the conviction that the God of Israel is the God of all humanity, the world's ultimate sovereign, the one "all-determining reality." Therefore, theism is the culmination of a religious quest, not a philosophical one.

Pannenberg's doctrine of God also underscores the priority of revelation. According to a familiar theological tradition, the unity of God is accessible to rational inquiry, while the Trinity is hidden. But for Pannenberg, this is backwards. The distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit are disclosed in the event of revelation; "What is hidden is the unity of the divine essence in these distinctions" (1:341). Consequently, he discusses the Trinity before the divine unity. This approach echoes a theme found in many contemporary works on the Trinity—the idea that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity." And it reflects the concern that our understanding of God should come primarily from God's self-revelation, not from human speculation.

Like others who have commented on the Trinity in recent years, Pannenberg bemoans the tendency to detach God's essence from his historical actions. When the thought of the eternal and essential Trinity "broke loose from its historical moorings," people began to think of God as "untouched by the course of history and as inaccessible to all creaturely knowledge." Accordingly, he prefers the patristic doctrine, which begins with the revelation of the Father in the Son through the witness of the Spirit, and only then moves on to the doctrine of the eternal consubstantiality of Father, Son, and Spirit in the unity of God's eternal essence (1:332).

For Pannenberg, then, God's actions in salvation history define the divine essence, revealing that God's inner reality consists of "concrete life relations" (1:335, 323). Consequently, the Trinity is not derived from God's essence; the Trinity *is* God's essence. We never get behind the Trinity to something more basic or original. God's fundamental reality is Father, Son, and Spirit. It is not a single divine essence. Nor is it a single divine person. Consequently, we should not apply the notion of derivation to the persons of the Trinity. The Father is not the source or origin of the Son and the Spirit. The persons of the

Trinity are united to each other, not by derivation, but by self-distinction. This view of divine relations is basic to the idea that love is the defining quality of God, for love is supremely relational. So, if God is truly love, there must be relations in the very depths of the divine being.

The love that defines God's inner reality comes to expression in all God's relations to the world, and this has profound implications for his creative activity. It means that God's decision to create is entirely free, and this means that the world he creates is entirely contingent. It exists only because God chose to create it. As an expression of the world's radical contingency, Pannenberg defends the venerable concept of *creatio ex nihilo*—a move that sets him apart from many contemporary thinkers. (He is particularly critical of process philosophers, for whom God creates by interacting with another principle in the universe that is just as basic as he is.⁴)

But if love means that God is free to create or not, it also means that God is irreversibly committed to the world he brings into existence. In fact, he loves the world so much that his very life is bound up with what he has made (1:447). This trinitarian concept of God provides the basis for Pannenberg's entire theological project. Its overarching objective is to show that the love of God comes to expression in creating a finite world and ultimately incorporating it "into the unity of the trinitarian life" (3:646).⁵

Volume 2: Creation and Incarnation

The trinitarian view of God means that God's dealings with creation not only portray his inner relations; they bring these relations to fulfillment. This is particularly vivid in the incarnation, the central act in salvation history. The Son creates a world distinct from God out of his own eternal and free self-distinction from the Father (2:63; cf. 30, 58). Then he fulfills the working of the Logos throughout the world by entering creation in human form. The incarnation, therefore, is "simply the theologically highest instance of creation" (2:114). Again, through the Spirit the Son brings the creatures into his own fellowship with the Father (2:32).

What is true of creation generally is doubly true of human beings, the most highly developed of living creatures. Their appearance brings to light the meaning of all creaturely reality (2:133, 135). The incarnation, in turn, fulfills the purpose of their existence, making possible their ultimate incorporation within

⁴Although he rejects this fundamental aspect of process thought in favor of the more traditional account, Pannenberg approves of the process notion that God works on his creatures by persuasion rather than force (2:15-16).

⁵Cf. 2:75, where he states that the goal of creation is "the participation of creatures in the trinitarian fellowship of the Son with the Father."

the fellowship of God's own being.⁶ Jesus' relation to the Father thus fulfills the destiny of creation generally, and of human beings in particular (2:115).

The incarnation also sheds light on two other aspects of Christian anthropology, namely, personness and destiny. Jesus' message that God reaches out with eternal love to each of his creatures, especially those who have gone astray, led to the idea that each human life in its individual uniqueness has infinite worth to God. Later Christian thinkers related this idea to the unity of Jesus with the divine Logos. As Jesus, the eternal Son, is a "person" in relation to the Father, so "all individuals are persons in virtue of the relation to God, which is the basis of their whole existence" (2:199-200).

As for human destiny, the Son of God came in the flesh in order to overcome sin and death (2:202), so the incarnation lies behind each person's destiny of fellowship with God. The incarnation also enables us to share in the "image of God." According to Paul, the true image of God appeared in Jesus Christ—indeed, only in Jesus with full clarity—and his salvation enables us to participate in it (2:208, 216). So, Jesus Christ brings to fulfillment our destiny as creatures (2:210).

Pannenberg's anthropology has a decidedly eschatological cast. Human destiny, he insists, was not fulfilled at the beginning of human history, but "will come only as the goal and consummation of this history" (2:227). The same is true of creation as a whole: we must view it from the end. "The eschatological future of God in the coming of his kingdom is the standpoint from which to understand the world as a whole" (2:146).

It is also the only standpoint for responding to the problem of evil. Says Pannenberg, "There is no theodicy without eschatology" (2:173). It is a mistake to try to absolve God of responsibility for evil, he says. The attempt cannot succeed, and besides, the cross shows that God accepted responsibility for the world he created (2:166). Because he foresees and permits evil, responsibility for its entrance into the world inevitably falls on God. He risked sin and evil when he created human beings who were free. The important thing is that God cares for his creation and eventually overcomes its suffering. And this, after all, is what innocent and disproportionate suffering cries out for—"a real overcoming of evil" (2:164).

Human sin has its origin in our situation as finite beings who are "open to the world" and destined for fellowship with God. We achieve this destiny when we accept our status as creatures and distinguish God from everything finite, including ourselves. As finite beings, however, we are naturally self-assertive; we arrogate to ourselves a share of the divine life. Only by accepting our finitude as God-given do we attain to

⁶"In the incarnation of the Son, creaturely existence in its distinction from God, but also in its destiny of fellowship with him, comes to fulfillment" (2:231).

fellowship with God. In other words, we must be fashioned into the image of the Son, who accepted self-distinction from the Father (2:230-31).

Pannenberg's position on death is somewhat ambiguous. According to the Bible, he observes, death is a consequence of sin. It is not a penalty imposed from without, but the natural result of breaking our relationship with God, the source of life (2:270). At the same time, however, he says that death is intrinsic to human finitude, since all physical organisms come to an end. For many contemporary theologians, this connection severs the link between death and sin, and only our consciousness of sin leads us to see death as punishment (2:267-268). But Pannenberg rejects the idea that death is a natural consequence of finitude. Because Christian hope expects a life without death (1Cor 15:52ff), it is clear that finitude does not always have to include mortality. "Only of existence in time," he says enigmatically, "is it true that the finitude of life and mortality go together" (2:272).

Pannenberg's soteriology includes some of the most familiar aspects of his work—his Christology from below and his insistence on the historicity of Jesus and the reality of the resurrection.⁷ For him, who Jesus was is basic to what Jesus did.⁸ Pannenberg's Christology also provides a good example of his theological method, for he often arrives at somewhat traditional conclusions by strikingly contemporary arguments. In this case, he begins where modern approaches to Christology do, with the history of Jesus. Yet he concludes with the "high Christology" of the Fathers that Jesus is both divine and human. There is an inner continuity, he insists, between the message of the historical Jesus and the apostolic preaching of Christ, and Jesus' resurrection is the necessary connection between the two. Indeed, the resurrection is utterly basic to Jesus' identity. "Only by his resurrection from the dead did the crucified attain to the dignity of the Kyrios (Phil. 2:9-11). Only thus was he appointed the Son of God in power (Rom. 1:4)" (2:283). "Only Easter determines what the meaning was of the pre-Easter history of Jesus and who he was in his relation to God" (2:345). It confirms that Jesus was the Son of God as far back as the beginning of his earthly existence (2:365-366).

Pannenberg's position on Jesus' resurrection is one of the best-known aspects of his thought.⁹ He insists, as he has throughout his career, that the resurrection was a historical, factual event (2:285). Otherwise, he argues, there

⁷It was Pannenberg's position on the resurrection that catapulted him to international prominence years ago while he was still in his thirties. See, for example, his article, "Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead," in *Dialog* 4 (1965):128-135.

⁸Pannenberg devotes two chapters to the person of Christ and one to Christ's work.

⁹Pannenberg's discussion here recapitulates many of the points made in his earlier work, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968).

is no way to account for the history of the church's confession of Christ. He appeals to the traditions of the resurrection appearances and the empty tomb, and he connects Jesus' resurrection to the idea of a general resurrection of the dead. Without the background of a general resurrection, he maintains, the claim that Jesus has risen from the dead cannot make sense. Conversely, Jesus' own resurrection supports belief in a general resurrection of the dead. Thus, Jesus' resurrection points to the universal transformation of humanity and the world that is still to come (2:531).

As Pannenberg understands the Trinity, we have seen, the events of salvation history mirror, express, and fulfill the inner life of God. Accordingly, the incarnation is basic to every aspect of Christian faith, particularly our understanding of humanity and divinity. The incarnation shows that there is a basic compatibility between human existence and the divine. The Son's self-distinction from the Father, which is central to the divine life, comes to expression in all creation, but particularly in human beings. So, "human nature as such is ordained for the incarnation of the eternal Son in it," and "the self-distinction of the Son from the Father can take shape in us" (2:385-86).

The Son's role in the Trinity reaches its fullest expression in the supreme moment of salvation history. "The remoteness from God on the cross," Pannenberg asserts, "was the climax of his self-distinction from the Father." Jesus' obedience unto death thus fulfilled the mission God gave the eternal Son. Contrary to widespread misunderstanding, Jesus did not abandon his divine essence as the Son of God when he "emptied himself." Instead, he actively expressed it. "Hence the end of his earthly path in obedience to the Father is the revelation of his deity." As the great hymn of Phil 2 indicates, the path of Jesus to the cross was that of the preexistent Son of God (2:375, 377).

The event that most fully expresses God's inner nature also reveals the kind of sovereignty God exercises. Christ brings God's kingdom, not by gaining political power over the nations, but by his death. God establishes his rule in the world "without oppression and with respect for the independence of creatures" (2:394).

The incarnation also fulfills the reciprocal movement in the history of salvation. It not only brings to expression God's inner reality; it also brings human beings, and ultimately all creation, into the inner life of God. Says Pannenberg, "By the incarnation of the Son, sinners . . . are brought into the trinitarian fellowship of God, and thus made participants in eternal life" (2:390).¹⁰ His soteriology thus embraces the ancient idea that the goal of salvation is to divinize humanity.

¹⁰The incarnation "brings creation into the trinitarian fellowship" (2:389).

Volume 3: Church and Consummation

Three long chapters on the church form the bulk of vol. 3. One of the most interesting features of his ecclesiology is the way Pannenberg treats individual salvation. The longest chapter of his *Systematic Theology*—338 pages!—is entitled “The Messianic Community and Individuals.” By incorporating the discussion of individual experience of salvation within the framework of the church, he counteracts the widespread impression that salvation is primarily an individual, if not private, experience, and church membership is secondary if not incidental.¹¹ Since both are essential, he argues, it is a mistake to think either that church participation precedes individual salvation or that the church is somehow secondary or supplementary to an individual’s faith (3:97).

Nevertheless, Pannenberg gives the individual’s experience priority. Jesus addressed individuals when he proclaimed the imminent rule of God, he observes, and the church directs its missionary message and liturgical proclamation primarily to individuals (3:98). Moreover, confession and baptism are basic to church fellowship, and these are the actions of an individual. On the other hand, Pannenberg rejects the “individualistic Jesuspiety” that characterizes the attitudes of a good many Christians (3:125-126). Jesus surrounded himself with disciples during his earthly life, and after Easter belonging to Jesus was mediated by the fellowship of his church (3:125).

Pannenberg’s discussion of salvation gives a prominent place to trinitarian themes, especially the work of the Holy Spirit. The life-giving function of the Spirit consummates God’s work in both creation and salvation (3:1-2). And, the Spirit plays an important role in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. The Father gives the Holy Spirit to the Son, who gives the Spirit back to the Father at his death (3:11). The most vivid manifestation of the Spirit is Jesus’ resurrection, but it also filled his pre-Easter life (3:6).

Just as it affects the relation of the Son and the Father, the incarnation reflects and modifies the relation between Son and Spirit in eternity. The Son receives the Spirit from the Father in eternity, but in the incarnation the Holy Spirit comes in the form of a gift. Both the life- and gift-giving work of the Spirit are evident in the recipients of salvation, too. Christ’s resurrection signifies to believers their own resurrection from the dead, and God’s Spirit provides lasting endowments to the church (3:9, 11).

The Spirit’s most important soteriological work is to connect believers with the Son and thus incorporate them in the inner life of God.

¹¹At times, however, Pannenberg’s way of phrasing the relation between salvation and church gives priority to the individual’s experience. In the foreword to volume 3, for example, he places the focus of the discussion “on individual participation in salvation, with the church and sacraments simply as signs of its future consummation.” “It is only in the immediacy of the personal relation to God,” he states, “that future salvation is already at work” (3:xiii).

The experience of believers mirrors trinitarian relations in several ways. The same mutual love that unites Father and Son in eternity appears in believers. They likewise receive the gift of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, and when they are linked to the Son by faith and baptism, they become members of his body. As a result, they share in Jesus' own sonship and participate in the intratrinitarian life of God. Like Jesus, they receive the Spirit from the Father, and return it by offering prayer and praise (3:11). And they enjoy eternal life through their union with God. "The Spirit binds himself to the lives of his recipients so that even death can no longer separate their lives from his creative power" (3:12).

As the Spirit unites believers with God, it also unites them with each other and thus creates the church. And the fact that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all believers identifies this community as the recipient of end-time universal salvation (3:13). The fellowship of the church prefigures the eschatological fellowship of humanity in the coming kingdom of God (3:134-135).

Pannenberg's comments on the church and the kingdom reflect classic Protestant positions. Jesus addressed his proclamation of God's imminent reign directly to individuals, he observes, and did "not attempt to gather together an eschatological remnant community or any other form of historical manifestation of the true people of God" (3:27). Therefore, there is a clear distinction between the church and the kingdom of God. The church is not the kingdom, but the "sign," "tool," or "sacrament" of the kingdom (3:45). The kingdom itself is an eschatological reality. It is the future which Christian hope anticipates. Nevertheless, it is a future that is already to a degree present and accessible through the church, "through its proclamation and its liturgical life." The Lord's Supper, in particular, anticipates human fellowship in the saving future of God's rule. Indeed, "nowhere else in the church's life does the nature of its whole existence as a sign find such clear expression as here" (3:31). The reason is the way it continues Jesus' own table fellowship, which was open to all members of society, particularly the poor and the outcast.

The distinction between church and kingdom means that we can never identify the kingdom with any development this side of the future consummation, for only then will the righteous will of God be established. It is not the church's task to "bridge the distinction between spiritual and secular," Pannenberg insists. And liberation theology "rests on an illusion" if its advocates believe that revolutionary action can actualize God's kingdom (3:55).

Pannenberg describes faith and love as "the basic saving works of the Spirit in individual Christians" (3:135). His discussion of faith recapitulates some of the themes for which he is well known. Faith is not its own foundation. It does not guarantee the truth and reality of its contents, but

relies instead on a basis outside itself—on God and on his revelation in the history of Israel and its fulfillment in Jesus. So, faith depends on the truth of its historical claims (3:142, 153). Pannenberg knows full well the tremendous challenges facing such a position since the rise of the historical-critical method, but he is insistent. The basic claims at the heart of Christianity can be established by reasonable arguments, he holds (1:154). And, assurance is possible for believers when they place these claims, and their lives, within the broad context of the cosmic reality of which we are part (3:170).

Both faith and hope have an ecstatic quality that finds fulfillment in love. Love unites us to God and gives us a share in his own nature. Thus, the love we experience is not primarily a human act, but the activity of the Spirit through which God reaches out in and through us. As a result, love for the neighbor is not something we do, but something God does through us. Because we participate in the divine life, the love that God is in his "intratrinitarian life" flows through us into the world. Thus, we become part of God's movement toward the "creation, reconciliation, and consummation" of the world" (3:193).

Pannenberg provides extensive essays on the sacraments and the ministry of the church, but none of his comments are more thought-provoking than his discussion of the Lord's Supper. By his account, worship is constitutive of the church's life, and the Lord's Supper is central to the church's worship. In fact, the liturgical life of the church brings to fullest expression its essential reality as the "eschatological community," representing the fellowship of all humankind in God's future reign (3:292). The Lord's Supper acquires this significance through the ministry of Jesus. When he instituted the Supper, he brought his disciples together in a way they had never been before. And when he ate with them after the resurrection, he established the Supper as the primary means for his followers to experience his presence all through history (3:291).

To understand the Lord's Supper, Pannenberg maintains, we must bear in mind the role of table fellowship throughout Jesus' ministry. It included his miraculous feedings, the meals he ate with others, especially those marginalized by conventional religious standards, the feast prepared by the father of the prodigal son, and the banquet parables he used to depict the fellowship of the coming kingdom. In light of all this, Jesus' table fellowship points to the coming rule of God and underscores the mutual fellowship of all who share the meal, with each other and with God (3:286). Even the cry, "Come, Lord Jesus," says Pannenberg, "invites Jesus to table fellowship in anticipation of God's coming kingdom" (3:320). This table fellowship also shows us how important the Lord's Supper is to our relationship with Jesus now. People who want the Lord's companionship must seek it where he makes it available—at the supper which he instituted. Jesus says, in effect, this is where I will meet you, and if you want

my fellowship, you must accept the fellowship of those whom I welcome, and those whom I seek, namely, the poor and outcast (cf. 3:330).

Just as God's relation to creation culminates in the final future, Pannenberg's entire project culminates in its final chapter, "The Consummation of Creation in the Kingdom of God." Here he deals explicitly with the principal themes that pervade his discussion. The final future is not the aftermath, but the foundation, of everything that comes before. Everything depends on the way history ends. Until then, all that Christians believe is fragmentary and inconclusive. Says Pannenberg, "Only in the eschaton does the reconciliation of the world come to completion with the new life of the resurrection of the dead in the kingdom of God." And "only the eschatological consummation of the world will bring definitive proof of God's existence and final clarification of the character of his nature and works." Until history finally reaches its conclusion, God's love and wisdom—indeed, his very existence—will always be open to question (3:631).

For this reason, "eschatology is not just the subject of a single chapter in dogmatics; it determines the perspective of Christian doctrine as a whole" (3:531). Indeed, for Pannenberg, the final future has profound epistemological and ontological significance. "As regards its content and truth all Christian doctrine depends on the future of God's own coming to consummate his rule over creation." And, "On the path of their history in time objects and people exist only in anticipation of that which they will be in the light of their final future, the advent of God" (3:531). The final future is also essential to the meaning of every historical event. Events acquire meaning from context, the ultimate context of historical events is the totality of reality, and this is achieved only when history comes to an end.

Pannenberg's reflections on the final future contain a host of intriguing ideas. In the work of judgment, he says, for example, God is not arbitrary; he does not inflict punishment capriciously, but leaves people to the consequences of their own choices. He executes "what is in the nature of the case" (3:611). Pannenberg also has valuable things to say about individual eschatology. He persuasively defends the concept of bodily resurrection against rival notions of life after death, particularly the immortality of the soul. And he helpfully points out that resurrection has a corporate, social dimension that is lacking from traditional views of immortality (3:563-573).

Perhaps most significant, Pannenberg gives the final future a pneumatological character. The work of the Spirit, he says, is "constitutive" of Christ's return. It completes the work that began in the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus. The life of the risen Lord is "wholly permeated by the Spirit and radiates the Spirit." The Spirit's work is fulfilled when Christ renews his fellowship with believers (3:627). This future fellowship will be highly social. It

will incorporate all the redeemed into one encompassing experience. "The new life of the resurrection," he says, is "a removal of the individual autonomy and separation that are part of the corporeality of earthly life, though with no simple erasure of individual particularity" (3:628-629). So, individuality will evidently be preserved in the final future, but without any of the tensions or rights or rivalry that characterize human relations now.

But just what does this final future consist of? Pannenberg's response is the most paradoxical element in his thought—an event he variously identifies as "the coming of eternity into time," and "the dissolving of time in eternity" (3:595, 607).¹² But, however phrased, it is the idea that time gives way to timelessness, and temporal succession comes to an end. The final future is not a transition to a continuing life of temporal experiences, but a single, all-encompassing experience, an endpoint that subsumes the entire course of history that precedes it, a timeless moment which encompasses the entire realm of temporal passage.

As Pannenberg describes the consummation of all things, the crucial idea emerges that God exists in an eternal present. The divine life is characterized by an "eternal simultaneity," says Pannenberg. "To God all things that were are always present." The ultimate destiny of creaturely existence is to participate in the eternity of God, and this happens when time is "taken up" into "the eternal simultaneity of the divine life." Only when we enter this simultaneity can we fulfill our destiny as individuals to belong to the whole of human society across all the separate epochs of history (3:607). For Pannenberg, eternity thus consists in "an undivided present" (3:630). This amplifies his description of divine eternity in volume 1. Whereas creatures are "subject to the march of time," "all things are always present to [God]." "The eternal God has no future ahead of him that is different from his present. For this reason, that which has been is still present to him" (1:410). In order for finite creatures to enjoy endless life, Pannenberg indicates, they must "pass through" the temporal sphere. "Only of existence in time is it true that the finitude of life and mortality go together" (2:272).

In the final future, all creatures achieve simultaneous existence in the eternity of God's own life. And as Pannenberg describes it, they will experience in one timeless moment all the events of their historical existence. "The differences of moments of time and the tenses" will be preserved, but they are "no longer seen apart" (3:607). This amplifies Pannenberg's earlier reflections on meaning and totality. As we saw, his view of historical meaning requires a final future, for an event acquires meaning within the whole series it belongs to, and a sequence of temporal events becomes a totality when it

¹²"The relation between time and eternity is the crucial problem in eschatology," says Pannenberg, "and its solution has implications for all parts of Christian doctrine" (3:595).

comes to an end. Now we see that the final future renders history a totality by making all its moments simultaneous. When human beings enter eternal life, then, the final future which brings history to an end, they enter into God's own life, where they experience the full expanse of their historical existence in one simultaneous moment of perception.

This unites, and completes, the trinitarian and eschatological themes that pervade Pannenberg's system. In the words of the final paragraph, the divine economy of salvation from creation to the eschatological future of salvation expresses "the incursion of the eternal future of God to the salvation of creatures." Out of eternal love, God comes forth "from the immanence of the divine life and incorporates the creatures into the unity of the trinitarian life." "The distinction and unity of the immanent and economic Trinity constitute the heartbeat of the divine love, and with a single such heartbeat this love encompasses the whole world of creatures" (3:646).

Observations and Questions

Pannenberg's achievement is noteworthy for many reasons. For one, it is proof positive that systematic theology is alive and well after a rather serious decline. For several decades interest in the central themes of historic Christianity was eclipsed by a preoccupation with methodological issues and the fragmentation of special perspectives. Recently, however, scholars have returned in impressive numbers to the task of constructing a comprehensive interpretation of Christian faith.¹³ Many of these current theological works have interesting things to say, but Pannenberg's expansive offering is in a class by itself, a "systematic theology" in the best sense. It is a comprehensive, constructive reflection on all the basic elements of Christian faith. It achieves an overarching unity, without slavishly following a prescription or forcing material into an artificial scheme. It follows the standard sequence of doctrinal topics, yet engages the tradition with remarkable creativity. And it shows that Pannenberg is versed in all the disciplines that such a task requires in today's world—biblical studies, philosophy, and the history of religions, as well as anthropology and psychology. In short, it is just the sort of work that every theologian dreams of producing.

While studying Pannenberg pays rich dividends, it is also a daunting task. The scope, content, and style of the work present formidable challenges. For the most part, the translation is serviceable, but it could use more clarity in places, and it has produced (like the German) some

¹³Rebecca S. Chopp and Gabriel Fackre surveyed the field a few years ago and found "a remarkable outpouring" of recent theological offerings ("Recent Works in Systematic Theology" *Religious Studies Review* 20 [1994], 7).

very long English sentences. The pages are so densely packed they often yield their meaning only after several readings. And sadly, there are very few "ringing sentences," statements that have you reaching for a pen to copy them or leave you wishing you'd said that.

In spite of the broad scope of this work, there are times when Pannenberg's points need more development. For example, his explicit references to theodicy are rather dismissive. He merely asserts that God is responsible for evil since he foresaw that it would enter the world—a move that leaves a host of important questions not only unanswered, but unacknowledged, including the relation of human freedom and divine foreknowledge and the relation of divine and creaturely responsibility.

On a thematic level, I believe, the most noteworthy feature of the project is the way it draws the entire range of Christian thought into the framework of the Trinity. The Trinity is more than the pervasive theme we mentioned earlier. It is the overarching framework in which all the elements of Christian faith find their setting, just as every aspect of creation finds its ultimate destiny within God's own life.

Over the past twenty-five years or so, Christian theologians have devoted considerable attention to the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁴ In certain ways Pannenberg's project provides a culmination of this development, for it not only clarifies the meaning of this venerable doctrine and reasserts its current value, but it develops from trinitarian insights a full-fledged theological system.

As many recent studies argue, the essential insight of the Trinity is that salvation history provides a portrait of God's own life, indeed the only portrait that should concern us.¹⁵ God's dealings with creation show, contrary to the dominant theological tradition, that God's innermost reality is complex, relational, and dynamic.¹⁶ Indeed, it is temporal.¹⁷ And

¹⁴So many studies have accumulated that there are now books discussing all the books on the topic. See, for example, John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

¹⁵Catherine Mowry LaCugna emphasizes this point: "The quest for knowledge of God or of God's *ousia* 'in itself' or 'by itself' is doomed to fail" (*God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* [Scranton, PA: HarperCollins, 1991], 193). "The very nature of God who is self-communicating love is expressed in what God does in the events of redemptive history. There is no hidden God . . . behind the God of revelation history, no possibility that God is in God's eternal mystery other than what God reveals Godself to be" (LaCugna, 322). Cf. the assertion of Robert W. Jenson: "Each of the inner-trinitarian relations is then an affirmation that as God works creatively among us, so he is in himself" (*The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1982], 107).

¹⁶As Clark Pinnock says, "God's nature is that of a communion of three Persons who exist in mutual relations with one another. Each is distinct from the others, but each is what it is in

they show that creation has intra-divine significance; it makes a difference to God's inner life.

Pannenberg takes this line of thought a step further and asserts that God's dealings with creation not only express, but *fulfill* the divine life. God creates out of perfect freedom, but once the world exists, he so commits himself to it that his own destiny, and his own identity, are forever linked to that of his creatures (1:447). The Son brings into existence a creation distinct from God out of his own eternal self-distinction from the Father (2:63; cf. 30, 58). And through the Spirit, the Son brings the creatures into his own fellowship with the Father (2:32). The goal of creation is thus "the participation of creatures in the trinitarian fellowship of the Son with the Father" (2:75). The future of the world is nothing other than God's own future.

Pannenberg's eschatology is both the most promising and the most disappointing aspect of his proposal. Given what he repeatedly says about the final consummation as the goal toward which creation moves and the significance of its proleptic arrivals in salvation history, we approach the last chapter of his project, which takes up explicitly eschatological themes, with great anticipation. We expect it to provide the culmination of all his reflections, much as the end of history, as he refers to it, will clarify, complete, and fulfill all that comes before. To the contrary, unfortunately, his actual discussion of last things is a disappointment. It is both less extensive and less clear than we hope for.

This may be due in part to the fact that Pannenberg conceives all of theology as eschatology, much as Paul Tillich conceives all of theology as anthropology (which is why his *Systematic Theology* contains no "doctrine of man"). And it may be due in part to the fact that eschatological language

relation to the others. God exists in a dynamic of love, an economy of giving and receiving" (*Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996], 30). Or, to quote LaCugna once again, "The point of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God's *ousia* exists only in persons who are toward another, with another, through another" (LaCugna, 193). Elizabeth A. Johnson makes the same point: "Trinitarian communion itself is primordial, not something to be added after the one God is described, for there is no God who is not relational through and through." "For God as God, divine nature is fundamentally relational" (*She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* [New York: Crossroad, 1994], 227, 228).

¹⁷In Keith Ward's words, the Trinity stresses "the creative, relational, and unitive involvement of God in the temporal structure of the created universe" and "the importance of that temporal structure to the self-expression of the divine being" (*Religion and Creation: Theoretical Approaches* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], 345). Robert Jenson is more emphatic: "The three derive from God's reality in time, from time's past/present/future. . . . The relations are either *temporal* relations or empty verbiage" (Jenson, 125-126).

refers to things that by nature lie "beyond human comprehension."¹⁸ But Pannenberg's account of last things adds little to his earlier comments about the end and, worse, what he does say undercuts some of the fundamental themes of his entire system—the importance of history and the dynamic nature of God's reality.

The central difficulty in Pannenberg's eschatology is his recourse to the concept of eternity as a moment in which all time is compressed. God's mode of existence is an eternal present, and history reaches its final consummation when finite beings are incorporated and united into this single momentary experience.

The difficulties with this notion of divine timelessness are numerous and profound. First of all, Pannenberg simply asserts eternity as the essential mode of God's existence, rather than arguing for it. Second, he leaves us wondering what a non-temporal finite existence would consist of. Temporality is inherent to finite existence as we know it. Indeed, it seems inherent to finite existence as we could possibly conceive it. So, Pannenberg's designation of the final future as timeless seems incoherent. Perhaps most important, the idea of a single eternal moment contradicts the essential insight of the Trinity, namely, that God's dealings with creation express and fulfill God's innermost life. If God's dealings with the creatures are temporal through and through, and God's own life is not temporal, then these dealings do not accurately portray God's inner reality after all. Indeed, they misrepresent God's essential nature. And with this, the basis of Pannenberg's proposal fractures. There are ways, of course, to conceive divine temporality which overcome the standard objections. (An impressive case can be made for a supreme instance of becoming.) Process thinkers and, more recently, proponents of an open view of God are well acquainted with them. Those who see promise in Pannenberg's emphasis on historical revelation and God's intimate involvement with temporal creatures should consult their writings, too.

¹⁸Pannenberg's brief appeal to the metaphorical nature of eschatological language does little to solve the problem. He indicates that the events do not lie in "the sphere of our present experience" and that our language about them is metaphorical. At the same time, he insists that "the matter itself is not metaphor, only the way of stating it," and that the concept of the kingdom of God "contains metaphorical features," but is not "totally metaphorical" (3:621-622). Just where metaphor ends and literal description begins, however, Pannenberg does not say.