

# Resurrection and Spirit: Pannenberg's Method in Two Doctrines<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article investigates the doctrinal impact of Wolfhart Pannenberg's theological method as it is demonstrated in the German theologian's Christology and Pneumatology respectively. Pannenberg's theological method can be summarized in his oft repeated phrase, "truth as a theme within theology." The impact of this is that each individual doctrine requires the use of critical method that aims toward a verifiability criterion necessary to determine the truth of theological argument. It is then argued that given this methodological criterion, Pannenberg's mature theology unintentionally results in a christological adoptionism and a lack of adequate Trinitarian recognition of the Spirit's personhood in his Pneumatology. Although there is much worthwhile in Pannenberg's systematic investigations, it will be concluded that the initial methodological moves directly impact his work with unsatisfactory doctrinal results.

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## Introduction

Since the 1960s Wolfhart Pannenberg has been one of the most influential voices in modern, Protestant theology. His initial forays into modern historiographical method and its relevance for a post-Barthian approach to the doctrine of revelation<sup>2</sup> proved to have an impact well beyond his native Germany. Pannenberg

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1 This article draws upon my earlier work on the role of science in Pannenberg's pneumatology but relocates that discussion within the broader methodological context of Pannenberg's theology. See Timothy Harvie, "God as a Field of Force: Personhood and Science in Wolfhart Pannenberg's Pneumatology," *The Heythrop Journal* 52, no.2 (March 2011): 250–259.

2 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Problemggeschichte der neueren evangelischen Theologie in Deutschland*

has consistently sought to locate theological discourse in traditional dogmatic assertions and to make these intelligible to the modern mind through the critical disciplines. For Pannenberg, theology must adhere to the strictures of modern criteria for intelligible, academic discourse if it is to maintain its relevance in both the academic guild and the daily life of contemporary adherents to the church whose intellectual and existential loyalties are often in conflict with theological assertions. This article will offer a critical reflection on this conversation Pannenberg maintains with the academy and the church. Pannenberg's conviction is that theology must not shy away from the methodological strictures to be found in the modern academic disciplines. He couples this with a theological desire to affirm the traditional doctrines of Christianity. This twofold methodological approach will be examined from the standpoint of two doctrines: the doctrine of the resurrection and of pneumatology.

The article will proceed to outline some of the basic methodological choices exhibited in Pannenberg's earlier Christology and his mature pneumatology. First, his method of truth verification and its role within theology will be examined from the standpoint of his "Christology from below." The impact of this method will be viewed from the standpoint of his doctrine of the resurrection insofar as it relates to history, truth verification, and eschatology. Second, his methodology will be applied to his pneumatology and to the use he makes of the physical sciences in this doctrine. In both instances, his method will leave open questions regarding the particular issues of divine nature and of personhood, respectively.

## Pannenberg's Method

Pannenberg's method has developed considerably during the four decades of his prodigious theological career. However, the foundational insight of his method can be found in his famous seven theses on revelation. In this early essay, Pannenberg insists that revelation occurs not only in the particularity of divine acts in history. It is also broadened to include all of history as such. "The history that demonstrates the deity of God is broadened to include the totality of all events . . . This broadening of the *Heilsgeschichte* to a universal history is in essence already accomplished in the major prophets of Israel."<sup>3</sup>

Pannenberg moves beyond an idea of history as merely the theatre of God's revelation where specific acts of God constitute the content of revelation. Similar to Hegel, he argues that history as such is divine revelation. It may be instructive to compare the above statement on history with the following statement from

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(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 176–189.

3 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," in *Revelation as History* (ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg; trans. David Granskou; New York: Macmillan, 1968), 133.

Hegel's lectures on history: "World history is the exhibition of spirit striving to attain knowledge of its nature."<sup>4</sup> The inherent revelatory content of history itself is given much weight in the doctrine of God, Christology, and pneumatology.<sup>5</sup> It is not new to argue that Pannenberg's account of the relationship between history and divinity is Hegelian.<sup>6</sup> However, the charge of Hegelianism has been called into question. Iain Taylor, for instance, has argued that neither German Idealism nor Hegelianism forms the central matrix within which to understand Pannenberg's thought. Taylor states, "Pannenberg is not a Hegelian."<sup>7</sup> As his understanding of the relationship between divine being and historical development matures, Pannenberg remains convinced that the two are integrally related. The idea of religious consciousness and the universal religiosity of the human being occupy a more central place in his mature work.<sup>8</sup> Throughout, Hegel remains a close conversation partner in Pannenberg's understanding of the development of religious consciousness in the history of religions.<sup>9</sup>

The increased emphasis on religious consciousness was also present in his early theses on revelation where Pannenberg argues that the *perception* of revelation is universally accessible. This is found in his third thesis, which states, "In distinction from special manifestations of the deity, the historical revelation is open to anyone who has eyes to see. It has a universal character."<sup>10</sup> Appeals to universal history and to universal perception are methodologically necessary, for Pannenberg, and are coupled with objective verification. "God has proved his deity in this language of facts."<sup>11</sup> Historically and scientifically verifiable phenomena dictate theology's own impetus and the methodology governing what constitutes the validity or invalidity of its discourse.

It is a combination of Hegelianism and an increasing emphasis on verifiable perception that is expanded in the first volume of his mature systematic theology. Tracing the historical trajectory of the use of the term "theology" in both ancient Greek philosophy and theological discourse, Pannenberg makes some core asser-

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (trans. Robert S. Hartman; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 23.

5 This can be seen in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (ed. Richard John Neuhaus; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

6 See Roger Olson, "The Human Self-Realization of God: Hegelian Elements in Pannenberg's Christology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13 (1986): 207–223; and perhaps more effectively, Anselm K. Min, "The Dialectic of Divine Love: Pannenberg's Hegelian Trinitarianism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 3 (July 2004): 252–269.

7 Iain Taylor, *Pannenberg on the Triune God* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 16.

8 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology 1* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 119–187.

9 In a work published after his *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg states, "die göttliche Wirklichkeit in der Geschichte der Religion schon irgendwie am Werke ist . . . im Sinne einer im Gang dieser Geschichte sich entfaltenden Idee wie bei Hegel." Pannenberg, *Problemgeschichte*, 315.

10 Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, 135.

11 Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, 137.

tions regarding his own methodological path. From the outset, theology is a discourse with God as its object and “all theology is dependent on God’s knowledge of himself.”<sup>12</sup> The question remains as to how finite human knowledge and speech may participate in a discourse that pertains to a divine, ineffable, and transcendent being beyond the scope of human ability to conceive and express in language. This leads Pannenberg to address the issue upon which he first established his theological reputation: the doctrine of revelation.

Revelation is the necessary bridge into the sphere of human experience, understanding, and speech. Through grace, it conveys the fact of God’s care, covenant, and indwelling among human beings for their betterment, healing, and salvation. Pannenberg follows Barth in affirming that for modern theology to understand this, the key emphasis must be placed on the incarnation.<sup>13</sup> However, Pannenberg’s understanding of the relevance of the incarnation for the doctrine of divine revelation is radically different from Barth. This is due to an eschatology that requires that the truth of the incarnation remain an open one. How may theology understand the content of this doctrine as “true”? Pannenberg argues that in the NT, Christian dogmatics convey a legal decision that is binding on the adherent communities.<sup>14</sup> This is problematic for modern theology because of the intellectual and political history of conveying truth in terms of consensus. It is possible that Christian doctrine can be determined by the will of the majority. This ought to be critiqued because consensus does not constitute truth and is often constructed by those with power. Pannenberg states, “The consensus theory of the truth of dogma shares the weakness of a mere consensus theory of truth in general. Consensus can express and denote the universality of truth but it can also express mere conventionality among the members of a group, society, or culture.”<sup>15</sup>

An example of such consensus occurred in the sixth century when Justinian declared the *dogmata* of the first four centuries were of equal authority to Scripture.<sup>16</sup> Pannenberg argues that rather than allowing theological debate to be carried out in open forums, the edict of Justinian unilaterally dictated a contested theological tenet be held as universally true. This is an example of theological consensus arising from convention and power rather than from rational argument and lively debate. Pannenberg counters this by arguing for an eschatological caveat in regard to Christian truth claims. He writes, “As regards both its content and its truth, dogma . . . is an ‘eschatological concept.’ Only God’s final revelation

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12 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 4.

13 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 6.

14 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 9; Acts 16:4.

15 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 12.

16 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 10.

at the end of history will bring with it final knowledge of the content and truth of the act of God in Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>17</sup>

The same is true of theological traditions that cite experience as the location from which the truth of Christian doctrine can be made. This affirmation is equally unsatisfactory due to the realization of the conditioned nature of human beings. Human understanding is derivative of tradition and culturally embedded motifs that are antecedent to experience. Additionally, there are also the hermeneutical difficulties in deciphering and understanding one’s own experience. Pannenberg’s solution to the dilemma is to alter theological method that may then influence the content of theology.

The truth of Christian doctrine cannot be established prior to a discussion of its content.<sup>18</sup> Pannenberg argues that the truth of Christian doctrine must itself become a theme of systematic theology. He develops a model where the various Christian doctrines must be given provisional status until they are verified through universal revelation. This accords theological statements a role within a continuum of verification analogous to that found in the scientific method of the natural sciences. Pannenberg states,

In this regard we should not think it strange if epistemologically the statements of dogmatics and the theses of the Christian doctrine which it presents are given the status of hypotheses . . . Thus the statement that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate is a historical statement the truth of which we have to judge by ordinary historical standards. The statement that Jesus rose from the dead is more complex since it presupposes an event like resurrection from the dead.<sup>19</sup>

Since the concept of a resurrection from the dead cannot be verified, its status as truth must await future confirmation in the eschaton. For Pannenberg, that which is true is that which is “lasting and reliable.”<sup>20</sup> He develops Hegel’s philosophy of history in a more specifically theological way. “The meaning that we ascribe to the data of our own individual histories and to the events of social history *depends on anticipation of the totality which is developing in history* . . . Thus as time advances it brings to light what is constant and true in the world.”<sup>21</sup> This also applies to the knowledge of God on the basis of God’s historical revelation. The result of this method may be summarized in the following way:

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<sup>17</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 56.

<sup>20</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 54.

<sup>21</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 55 (emphasis added).

Dogmatics as systematic theology proceeds by way of both assertion and hypothesis as it offers a model of the world, humanity, and history as they are grounded in God, a model which if it is tenable will “prove” the reality of God and the truth of Christian doctrine, showing them to be consistently conceivable, and also confirming them, by the form of presentation.<sup>22</sup>

Any term used in theological discourse must have a prior understanding in general human speech and, in so doing, be verifiable as potentially “true.” For example, Pannenberg states, “The designation of Yahweh as God and the Christian attributing of deity to Jesus Christ make sense only on the condition of an established pre-Christian and extra-Christian use of the word ‘God.’”<sup>23</sup> This is because Pannenberg’s “determination to think about reality as a whole” is even more fundamental than his earlier emphasis on the ontological priority of eschatology.<sup>24</sup> As his thought matures, the desire to think of reality as a whole becomes increasingly reliant upon a the necessity of public verifiability for theological claims. This emphasis on public verifiability and adherence to the standards of modern scientific criteria make Pannenberg’s theology foundationalist.<sup>25</sup>

This is also true of the methodological arguments found in ethics. Pannenberg argues that because the kingdom of God must be understood in more general terms of “the good,” theological ethics must be conducted via “a pretheological anthropology” and “under the concept of the good.”<sup>26</sup> The impact of this method can be felt in two doctrines that feature prominently in his systematic theology: the doctrine of the resurrection and of pneumatology.

## Resurrection as Retroactive Force

Pannenberg’s methodology can be seen in his earlier work where he argues that a Christology “from above” is untenable due to the fact that it: (1) presupposes the divinity of Jesus rather than making Christology an explication of the reasons for confession of Christ’s divinity, (2) begins with a *logos asarkos* rather than the historically particular Jesus of Nazareth, and (3) methodologically presupposes a God-like stance in relation to eternity and to history.<sup>27</sup>

22 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 60.

23 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 68.

24 So Christiaan Mostert, *God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Eschatological Doctrine of God* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002), 57.

25 Contra F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

26 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundlagen der Ethik* (Stuttgart: Uni-Taschenbücher GmbH, 2003), 86.

27 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (trans. Lewis L. Wilkens and Duane A. Priebe;

Therefore, Pannenberg opts for a Christology “from below” by adapting an interpretation of history where revelation is not a singular act of divine subjectivity intersecting the historical plane.<sup>28</sup> History itself is a dynamic that acts as revelation through ongoing teleological progression that results in the resolution of history in the divine being. History is proleptic in its present confirmation and its eschatological constitution in the future. This provides the theoretical basis to argue for the universality of revelation through historical-critical inquiry. Christology from below begins with the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth and examines what theology may say about Jesus from historical inquiry. It then discerns a connection between Jesus and divinity. Beginning with historical verification of Jesus, soteriology becomes secondary to concerns regarding the person of Jesus himself. For Pannenberg, the divinity of Jesus is a conclusion of Christology, not of its presupposition.

Pannenberg traces the trajectory of theological thought connecting Christology with soteriology. He concludes that the conflation of Christology and soteriology has either: (1) presumed a Christology from above inherited from the Cappadocians and the theologians from the fourth and fifth centuries, or (2) it has developed a moralistic conception of Jesus’s significance inherited from Kant and culminating in Schleiermacher. The result is that “the question about Jesus himself . . . must remain prior to all questions about his significance, to all soteriology. Soteriology must follow from Christology, not vice versa.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, soteriology must take its cue from a Christology engaging the person of Jesus from the historical particularity of the rabbi from Nazareth in the time of the Roman Emperor Tiberius.<sup>30</sup> Pannenberg proceeds to articulate a Christology that can be historically assessed from modern criteria yet maintains classical Christian claims regarding the connection of God with Jesus of Nazareth. He does this via a “two-stage Christology.”<sup>31</sup>

Such a Christology begins by emphasizing the significance of Rom 1:3–4 for understanding how the early church conceived of the relationship between the resurrection of Jesus and his identity as the Christ.<sup>32</sup> In these verses, Paul declares that Christ “descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be

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London: SCM Press, 1980), 34–35.

28 Pannenberg, *Problemggeschichte*, 176–189.

29 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 48.

30 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 48–50.

31 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 116–118.

32 The issues surrounding personhood, identity, and Christology are complex. In Pannenberg’s Christology, the terms “identity” and “person” tend to be subsumed under a discussion of nature. For example, see Svein Rise, *The Christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: Identity and Relevance* (trans. Brian MacNeil; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997). Despite the title referring to the concept of “identity” in Pannenberg’s Christology, the work almost entirely consists of discussions engaging the issues of divine and human natures.

Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Pannenberg comments on this passage by saying,

Here the divine Sonship that is established by the divine Spirit has not yet been accorded to the earthly Jesus (although as the Son of David he has already been chosen for it), only to the exalted Lord. The connection of the Spirit with the resurrection from the dead, which is present here, is inherited from Jewish eschatology.<sup>33</sup>

The result is a “pattern of a double assessment of Jesus, according to the flesh and according to the Spirit.”<sup>34</sup>

Romans 1:3–4 figures prominently in offering an account of the significance of the resurrection for Jesus’s person in a Christology from below. It is clear that Pannenberg does not wish to affirm a type of Ebionite Christology where the divinity of Jesus is only affirmed at some point subsequent to birth, be it baptism or resurrection. However, it remains unclear how he may proceed to give the resurrection ontological status as constituting the divinity of Christ.

Pannenberg argues that “Jesus’s resurrection is not only constitutive for our perception of his divinity, but it is ontologically constitutive for that divinity. Apart from the resurrection from the dead, Jesus would not be God.”<sup>35</sup> The affirmation that the resurrection of Jesus not only confirms the message of the pre-Easter Jesus but also constitutes his person as divine appears to conflict with Pannenberg’s prior denial of adoptionist motifs. Paul Molnar has argued this is due to prior methodological choices in Christology. Molnar maintains that because Pannenberg claims that affirmations of Christ’s deity are the conclusions drawn from the history of Jesus’s life, he cannot affirm the *logos asarkos*.<sup>36</sup> What Molnar does not discuss is that Pannenberg’s christological method is the result of antecedent methodological choices governed by the latter’s reliance upon Hegel and desire for a scientifically verifiable theology. Pannenberg gives precedence to the ongoing development of history as constitutive of being. This works out christologically through the interaction between history and the Trinitarian self-differentiation he perceives in the divine Son. This occurs not only within the framework of Pannenberg’s theological epistemology, but also as part of the divine ontology. How is

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33 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 117–118.

34 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 117.

35 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 224.

36 Paul D. Molnar, *Incarnation & Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 261–310.

Pannenberg able to avoid an adoptionist Christology? He does this by introducing the category of “retroactive force.”

Pannenberg’s method of a universally recognizable revelation, which occurs in and through history, entails that Jesus could not be known as the Son of God prior to resurrection. He argues that the resurrection acts as divine confirmation of Jesus’s pre-Easter activity. “Jesus did not simply become something that he previously had not been, but his pre-Easter claim was confirmed by God.” Pannenberg attempts to hold this together with the claim that the resurrection constituted the divine activity of Jesus. “However, as confirmation, the resurrection has retroactive force for Jesus’s pre-Easter activity, which taken by itself was not yet recognizable as being divinely authorized and its authorization was also not yet definitively settled.”<sup>37</sup> This notion of “retroactive force” moves beyond the divine activity and explores theological claims regarding the divine being of Jesus. He argues a little later,

In retrospect from the perspective of the resurrection, it is true that Jesus in his person was one with God also in his life before Easter. However, when Jesus’s pre-Easter life is conceived as having been already divine-human in a direct sense, our conception of Jesus falls back into the mythological realm. Jesus’s resurrection is not only constitutive for our perception of his divinity, but it is ontologically constitutive for that divinity. Apart from the resurrection from the dead, Jesus would not be God.<sup>38</sup>

The notion of retroactive force begins from historically discernible acts that impact not only the perception of history, but also the nature of being in history. In other words, the notion of retroactive force does not merely impact human epistemology regarding the divine, but also the divine ontology itself. It affects Jesus’s status as a divine person. Therefore, where such historically determined acts are acts of God, they also entail a retroactive force applicable to the constitution of the divine being and its interaction in the creaturely realm. The result of this nuanced account is one where the divine being is in history and develops with history. Pannenberg explores these ideas in terms of the doctrine of the incarnation using the analogous term “retroactive activity.” For Pannenberg, the truth of an assertion regarding the incarnation

is dependent upon the temporal actuality of . . . the incarnation.  
What is true in God’s eternity is decided with retroactive

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<sup>37</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 224.

validity only from the perspective of what occurs temporally . . . Jesus' unity with God . . . is also decided only retroactively from the perspective of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>39</sup>

Pannenberg's method argues that human knowledge and theological affirmations may only be confirmed eschatologically at the end of history. The eschatological future has not only hermeneutical weight, but also ontological weight. When this is coupled with the methodological claim to universally verifiable criteria, it forces him to maintain both the incarnation and a time when it was quite possible Jesus was not yet divine. He attempts to overcome this by developing his doctrine of the resurrection in such a way that he maintains Jesus's divinity in unequivocal terms, but he still capitulates to the criterion of universal verifiability. The ontological impact of the resurrection upon the divine personhood of Christ appears to move in a reverse historical trajectory and, in doing so, alters what was in the past. In other words, Jesus may or may not have always been divine from the historical standpoint, but "from the perspective of the resurrection" one may speak in ways that describe him as such.

Pannenberg's method of maintaining the truth of theology as an ongoing critical mechanism within theology stipulates verification as a test of Christian doctrines *qua* hypotheses. The divinity of Christ prior to the resurrection event cannot be perceived outside of the status of the resurrection even in the post-Easter history. Therefore, the resurrection must carry ontological force for events that are historically prior. This brings Pannenberg to propose that the resurrection has a "retroactive force" that ontologically constitutes the divinity of Jesus. The result of these proposals is a reduction of theological ideas to anthropological and scientifically verifiable propositions.<sup>40</sup> It may also minimize the importance of the crucifixion as the death of God's divine son, that was central to the early theologians of the fourth century and that is central to much of modern theology as well.<sup>41</sup> The outcome is that Pannenberg is unable to avoid the adoptionism he so stridently seeks to avoid. The methodological structure making truth a theme within theology also gives quasi-normative status to the physical sciences in his pneumatology just as the historical-critical sciences had in his Christology. This has implications for the status of the Spirit's personhood.

## Pneumatology

The basic direction of Pannenberg's work on pneumatology and science can be

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39 Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 321.

40 Olivier Riaudel, *Le Monde comme histoire de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 171–175.

41 Michael Korthaus, *Kreuzestheologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co., 2007).

seen in an essay originally published in 1972. In this essay, the importance of avoiding subjectivity by having an “empirical correlate” for pneumatological statements is made forthright.<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg seeks to move beyond both the subjectivism of the seventeenth century and the speculative tendencies contained in notions of history found in Idealism. To do this Pannenberg relies upon the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>43</sup> He develops Teilhard’s notion that there is a “spiritual inside of every material phenomenon” and that “all energy is spiritual in character.”<sup>44</sup> Pannenberg does not criticize this aspect of Teilhard’s thought, but argues that the problem with Teilhard is his close association of energy with specific material bodies located in time and space along with the resultant interaction of forces between these bodies. Such a body exerts force upon another with the empirically measurable energy being observed through this interaction of force.<sup>45</sup>

Pannenberg’s dispute with Teilhard’s association of energy and force with physical bodies in space–time is motivated by a twofold concern. First, Teilhard is unable to fully account for Einstein’s theories of general and special relativity.<sup>46</sup> According to Pannenberg, “This marks the definitive turning point from a conception of natural force on the basis of the model of the moving body to an autonomous idea of energy conceived of as a field.”<sup>47</sup> The second motivation for Pannenberg is theological. The concepts of energies and forces as a field enable Pannenberg to argue empirically for the presence of nonembodied causality, which makes plausible Christian claims regarding the Spirit’s presence in creation. Pannenberg states that “if Teilhard had conceived of energy in terms of a field, this would have been in perfect concordance with his idea of a transcendent spirit whose creative power dominates the entire process of evolution.”<sup>48</sup>

This theological motivation is important for Pannenberg in order for theology to make intelligible claims regarding the universe as creation and God as creator. “If theologians want to conceive of God as the creator of the real world, they cannot possibly bypass the scientific description of that world.”<sup>49</sup> Pannenberg goes on to address the doctrine of creation specifically:

42 Wolhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 127.

43 Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 128–137.

44 Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 130.

45 Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 130.

46 Robert John Russell, *Time in Eternity: Pannenberg, Physics, and Eschatology in Creative Mutual Interaction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 224–280.

47 Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 130–131, 141.

48 Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 131. It is important to note that at this juncture Pannenberg is not seeking to refute Teilhard, but rather argues that the field concept puts his theological ideas on surer scientific footing.

49 Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 33. Pannenberg precedes this comment stating that scientific theories have “such a high degree of common recognition of validity that in public consciousness the primary, if not exclusive competence for valid assertions about the reality of the world is attributed to the sciences.” Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 32–33. It has already been noted that

If all forces would proceed from bodies or masses, then the understanding of nature would be so thoroughly separated from the idea of God—who is not a body—that theological language about a divine activity in the processes of the natural world would become simply unintelligible and absurd.<sup>50</sup>

For Pannenberg, the notion of the Spirit as a field of force is able to maintain Christian conceptualities of God as spirit who nevertheless is able to act in such a way that the physical realm of the universe is affected. The concept of a field of force may be employed to illustrate the ongoing nature of God's work in the world in preserving grace and within the life of piety in the Church.<sup>51</sup> Understanding the Spirit as a field of force allows Pannenberg to conceive of pneumatology in terms coherent with physical descriptions of the world. It also provides a framework to address biblical language of *pneuma* and to downplay the theological appropriation of the Spirit understood as *nous*.

Pannenberg's discussion of this issue begins, "It is a widespread notion, and almost taken for granted, that God, if he is real at all, is a self-consciously acting and in this sense 'personal' being."<sup>52</sup> Pannenberg notes that the incomparability of human corporeality with the divine spirituality aided the close association of *pneuma* with reason, or *nous*.<sup>53</sup> For Pannenberg, this distancing of the notion of spirit from reason provides greater coherence with the biblical terms *ruah* and *pneuma*. "Ruah is described as a mysteriously invisible natural force which declares itself especially in the movement of the wind."<sup>54</sup>

Problems begin to arise at this point in the argument. In bringing together a scientific understanding of the Spirit as a field of force, describable through natural phenomena, and understanding *ruah* as "natural force," does the personhood of the Spirit become dangerously underemphasized? Pannenberg is quick to respond to this critique in stating that *ruah* is the breath of Yahweh.<sup>55</sup> However, this does not completely assuage the possibility of delimiting the nature of the Spirit in terms less amenable to personhood. As the breath of Yahweh, it is possible to understand the Spirit solely in terms of power, efficacy, and action, rather than in

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Polkinghorne would dispute the validity of this claim. John C. Polkinghorne, *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Pannenberg, *Theology of Nature*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> The link between the scientific description of nonembodied intentional causality and of ecclesial life is missing from Kärkäinen's analysis. See Veli-Matti Kärkäinen, "The Working of the Spirit of God in Creation and in the People of God: The Pneumatology of Wolfhart Pannenberg," *The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 17–35.

<sup>52</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 370.

<sup>53</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 372.

<sup>54</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 373.

<sup>55</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 373.

terms of personhood. This concern is seen more clearly when Pannenberg brings field theory together with a theological understanding of the divine will.

Pannenberg attempts to define a new starting point for understanding the idea of will in terms that are not dependent on analogies to human subjectivity or an assertiveness arising from a deficit.<sup>56</sup> The notion of will

is to be found in the experience of a reality which presses in upon us with power, which with this dynamism wants something of us, or seems to do so, even though what it wants is not very precise . . . What is primary is the idea of being contacted by an unknown power which we learn to know more precisely only when we ascribe the experience to a deity that is identified by name.<sup>57</sup>

Such a description of will coincides well with Pannenberg's understanding of the Spirit in terms of a field of force. The divine will is effective and is able to impress itself upon the universe and upon human beings in discernible terms that are present and accessible to universal experience.<sup>58</sup> What is less clear is how Pannenberg is able to transpose such a notion of will to the particularity of Christian claims concerning God as Triune or in relation to Jesus Christ. Although this definition of will has ample room to allow for the perceived force to be understood in terms of personhood, this need not be the case. It is notable that the divine will is "not very precise."<sup>59</sup> Given this, it is left unclear how a manifestation of the divine will in terms of a field of force is identified by name. Is the identification self-identification? If this is the case, then why is there such a lack of precision and understanding in the giving? If this is not the case, then why does the human act of identifying this field of force necessitate a description divinity? Pannenberg does not address such issues with certainty, but rather argues for the *plausibility* of such notions cohering with ideas of personal divinity.

Pannenberg takes the argument for the personhood of the Spirit even further. He argues that if the Spirit is a field of force, this includes both divinity and an understanding of the Spirit as a divine person.<sup>60</sup> This assertion receives fuller explanation in the second volume of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*. He expands

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56 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 380.

57 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 381.

58 For similar themes regarding the universality of perceiving divine action in Pannenberg's doctrine of God and history, see Berthold Klappert, "Tendenzen der Gotteslehre in der Gegenwart," *Evangelische Theologie* 35 (1975): 196–200.

59 This lack of precision is a somewhat surprising claim given the importance of the Kingdom of God in Pannenberg's thought and considering his association of the kingdom with the divine will. He states elsewhere that "where men comply with the will of God, there is the kingdom of God." Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 51.

60 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 383–384.

these themes and brings them to bear on pneumatology in a more robust way. Pannenberg moves to narrow the discussion of the divine essence as a field of force to the specificity of the Holy Spirit at work in creation and in the Triune existence. “The person of the Holy Spirit is not himself to be understood as the field but as a unique manifestation (singularity) of the field of the divine essentiality.”<sup>61</sup> However, Pannenberg still maintains that due to the self-distinction of the Spirit from the Father and the Son within the divine essence, the Spirit’s “working in creation has more of the character of dynamic field operations.”<sup>62</sup>

Pannenberg notes how a theological appropriation of the scientific description of field theory is amenable to various biblical accounts of the Spirit’s work in creation. Pannenberg’s use of Ps 104, Job 34:14, and Gen 1:2 is noteworthy. “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.”<sup>63</sup> This passage is interpreted as a description of the Spirit’s work in creation as a field of force. The resultant work of this force is that the Spirit is the principle of life. Conversely, Pannenberg sees this also as being affirmed in v. 29 where the removal of God’s Spirit entails the cessation of life. Despite these interpretations, the relevant biblical passages do not mandate an interpretation of Spirit as a person when understood in terms of field theory. It is possible to interpret these passages in terms of a divine attribute or power rather than of the divine God. However, Pannenberg does not think this is the case. He argues that the Spirit is necessarily understood as God when viewed in terms of Gen 1:2. The biblical description of creation describes the *ruah elohim* hovering over the waters. Pannenberg is aware of the controversy surrounding the translation of this passage. Debates pertaining to the understanding of *ruah elohim* in this context have engaged biblical scholars for decades. Pannenberg argues that the debates over translation and understanding are overemphasized. He argues that wherever the phrase occurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures it is rendered “Spirit of God.”<sup>64</sup>

Pannenberg argues that such biblical descriptions require an understanding of the phenomena in which the resultant force of an action not be associated with a physical body or mass from which the energy was exerted. Nonembodied causality more aptly allows a coherent modern understanding that conforms to scientific descriptions of the world and to a more apt interpretation of the biblical texts. For Pannenberg, the subjectivity seen in descriptions of the Spirit as *nous* is not able

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61 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology 2* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 83.

62 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology 2*, 84.

63 Psalm 104:30 NRSV.

64 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology 2*, 77. Pannenberg cites Exod 31:3; 35:31; Num 24:2; 1 Sam 10:10; 11:6; 2 Chr 15:1; 24:20; Job 33:4 with the acknowledgement that in Job the citation is *ruah ‘el*. Similar constructions are also used with *ruah ybrwb*.

to clarify the details of the universality of the Spirit's work or to offer an understanding of the Spirit's role as giver of life.

Pannenberg's related notions of personhood and of pneumatology are not without supporters. For example, Charles Gutenson argues for the potential of Pannenberg's proposal of the Spirit as an infinite field of power to include talk of personhood. Gutenson mentions "four elements of personhood." These are: (1) that a person "possesses knowledge and self-awareness," (2) that a person "performs intentional actions," (3) that a person is free, and (4) that a person "is capable of entering relationships."<sup>65</sup> Gutenson then relates these criteria to the scientific field theories associated with pneumatology. He argues,

Theories advanced by today's physicists conceive enduring material objects as the results of the convergence of lines of force within overarching fields. This means that all material objects are composed of fields, including human beings. Consequently, all human persons, who actualize those characteristics constitutive of personhood, are manifestations of prior fields. Can fields be personal? If these field theories are correct, it seems the answer is yes.<sup>66</sup>

Gutenson proceeds to cite the potential evidence to be found in near death experiences. He argues that the commonality of features among many narrated experiences of "a light" that offered a sensation of presence, love, and acceptance from an entity dissociated from corporeality may prove to be a valid example of a field of force being personal. Although Gutenson acknowledges that such evidence is "admittedly slender," he maintains that a rejection of such narrated experiences would be "intellectual snobbery."<sup>67</sup>

The cumulative effect of these argument results in an advocacy for the reasonable association of field theory with attributes of personhood. Gutenson acknowledges that "most 'commonsense' intuitions will find the concept of field, particularly as deployed in the natural sciences, difficult to conceive in personal terms."<sup>68</sup> However, he states, "it is plausible to conceive a field of force as personal."<sup>69</sup> Gutenson admits that subsequent debate will surround the issue, but that insofar as misunderstanding in interpreting Pannenberg is avoided, the potential cogency of ascribing personhood to a field of force will remain intact.

However, Gutenson's analysis and assessment of Pannenberg's association of

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65 Charles E. Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 188–189.

66 Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God*, 189.

67 Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God*, 190.

68 Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God*, 190.

69 Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God*, 191.

personhood with field theory raises certain questions. In particular, there are four critical issues to address: (1) the definition of personhood, (2) the use of field theory to describe personhood, (3) the viability of alternative lines of research in assessing nonembodied personhood, and (4) the non-pneumatological use of field theory. First, because Gutenson constructs his definition of personhood with aims to describe universal features that may designate an entity as a person (thereby not adequately differentiating between divine personhood and human personhood), it would be difficult to avoid the marginalization of some segments of the human population on the basis of his definition.<sup>70</sup> For example, it is difficult to envision how the criteria of possessing “knowledge,” of maintaining “self-awareness,” and of performing “intentional actions” would not exclude persons with extreme physical or intellectual disabilities from the category of personhood. It may also be difficult to ascertain how even an infant may be described in terms of personhood given the same criteria. It may be argued that the Triune persons meet such criteria, but when one begins with such limited definitions of personhood, it is possible that this will result in a correlated limitation on how theology understands the nature and the role of divine personhood as well. In other words, with such a limited definition of personhood, the understanding of divine personhood will likewise be subject to such limitations and will thereby be open to critique.

It may be better advised to proceed in the reverse direction as is seen, for example, in the thought of Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Barth, and other Reformed representatives who begin the descriptions of the personhood of the Godhead in revelation and who allow the Triune God to define personhood rather than beginning with antecedent descriptions of personhood and then moving in the direction of a descriptive account of God.<sup>71</sup> By beginning with the particularity of divine revelation in Jesus Christ, one admittedly moves in a different direction than that of Pannenberg’s methodology and more in line with Karl Barth’s, but the interconnectedness of issues of personhood and personal differentiation, of personhood and Trinity, and of personhood of the human require such questions of method be asked.

Second, Gutenson follows Pannenberg’s logic through progressive stages to illustrate the connectedness of human beings and field theory. The progression is as follows: “all material objects are composed of fields, including human beings. Consequently, all human persons, who actualize those characteristics constitutive

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70 Ian A. McFarland, *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).

71 For example, Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 53, 215–243; Konrad Stock, *Anthropologie der Verheißung: Karl Barths Lehre vom Menschen als dogmatisches Problem* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1980), 19; Margaret R. Miles, “Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (1981): 308.

of personhood, are manifestations of prior fields.”<sup>72</sup> Gutenson’s description of the scientific understanding of material objects as being derived from prior conditions explained as fields of force is accurate. However, to argue that because the resultant human beings manifest personhood also entails that the antecedent fields manifest personhood appears to be a misstep in logic. Is it not more accurate to say that it is not the antecedent fields that manifest personhood, but only the objects resulting from the convergences of fields (in this case, the one object of the human) that may be described in terms of personhood? Gutenson’s hasty affirmation that fields can also be described in terms of personhood ignores the foregoing description that it is the material objects of the human being that have personhood.

The third critical point is significantly less important than the preceding two and than the one to follow. This is especially the case as Gutenson minimizes its importance and acknowledges the contested nature of the argument. The example of paranormal experiences<sup>73</sup> potentially carrying evidentiary weight in support of the argument for the personhood of fields is highly debatable. He does not consider alternative explanations for such experiences. Altered brain chemistry and electrical neurology located entirely within the brain could biologically explain the origins of the narrated experience of patients near death. The fact of a particular subjective experience does not entail an accurate facticity of such an experience. Because of the contested nature of such experience these narrations cannot be used in an evidentiary way.

The fourth and final critique of Gutenson’s arguments for the plausibility of field theory being cogently joined with an affirmation of personhood for the Holy Spirit is connected with the above. This final argument deals with Gutenson’s brief comment on angelology within the advocacy of paranormal research. It is somewhat surprising that he makes no mention of Pannenberg’s parallel discussion of angels, specifically as it pertains to field theory. The aim of this point is not to debate the status of angels, the role they play in the created order, or their personhood. Rather, the goal is to analyze the varied uses of field theory in Pannenberg’s theology and to relate them to the personhood of the divine Spirit.

Pannenberg himself directly relates the two discussions in saying, “Describing the divine Spirit as a field that in its creative working manifests itself in time and space sheds a new light on the older doctrine of angels.”<sup>74</sup> Pannenberg affirms the nature of angels as being “*leitourgika pneumata*” (Heb 1:14). This biblical description of angels as spirits brings Pannenberg to explicitly relate this discussion to field theory. The result is differing conclusions pertaining to personhood. Pannen-

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72 Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God*, 189.

73 Gutenson, *Reconsidering the Doctrine of God*, 199.

74 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2, 102.

berg states, “If we understand the description of angels as spirits in analogy to what we have said about the Spirit as field, what is meant is not in the first instance a personal figure but a force.”<sup>75</sup> Pannenberg identifies the description of angelic forces as personal to be the “greatest difficulty with the doctrine.”<sup>76</sup> He states, “Nevertheless, if we remember that the use of personal predicates originates in the experience of being under the influence of not-wholly-explicable forces — an influence that works in a certain direction and thus shows itself to involve will — then the idea should not present us with insoluble problems.”<sup>77</sup> Here the description of angels as a field is similar to his discussion of the Spirit, particularly in the expression of will. Whereas Pannenberg expressed the movement of the Spirit as being “not very precise,”<sup>78</sup> here he describes the influence of angels as fields of force being not-wholly-explicable.

Referring to angels, Pannenberg solves the problem by offering a description of angels as fields of force by which they are associated with natural phenomena. He argues,

Fundamentally the angels of the biblical traditions are natural forces that from another angle might be the object of scientific descriptions. If we define forces like wind or fire or stars as angels of God, then we are relating them to God their Creator and to the human experience of being affected by them as servants of God or as demonic powers that oppose his will. Why should not natural forces in the forms in which we now know them be viewed as God’s servants and messengers, i.e., as angels?<sup>79</sup>

On the one hand, Pannenberg’s descriptions of angels in terms of field theory led him to argue that the most natural interpretation of the biblical account of such creatures should be conveyed in non-personal terms as either natural or cosmological entities. On the other hand, Pannenberg does argue for the personhood of the Spirit in order to maintain a properly Trinitarian account of God.<sup>80</sup> However, given his description of the Holy Spirit as a field of force analogous to other, creaturely phenomena (notably, angels), it is difficult to see how he is actually able to do so. It would appear that, given Pannenberg’s own rendering of field theory, the result must be that an impersonal description of the Holy Spirit would be better

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75 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2, 105.

76 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2, 106.

77 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2, 106.

78 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 381.

79 Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 2, 106–107.

80 Pannenberg’s Trinitarian account relies on a Hegelian description of the divine essence in terms of personal “self-differentiation.” See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1, 259–327.

suiting to the wider framework of his thought. He is unwilling to do this, however, because of its contravention of a truly Trinitarian account of God that is central to his thought.

## Conclusion

Pannenberg's method, which is encapsulated in the phrase "truth as a theme within theology," exemplifies his desire to have theology intelligible to the modern mind. This is seen in the dual emphasis placed upon divine revelation through historical development and scientific positivism in his pneumatology. This method is not merely an apologetic strategy for Pannenberg, but is necessary because of the way he understands the internal considerations made by Christian theology regarding the truth of its doctrinal assertions. It has been argued throughout this work that Pannenberg's methodological moves at the beginning create problems within his theology at various doctrinal points. His expressed desire is to maintain core theological tenets while simultaneously making these tenets rational for the modern mind through universal, scientifically verifiable criteria. This methodological approach results in a Christology that is unable to bypass adoptionism and in a pneumatology that is unable to affirm the Holy Spirit's subjectivity. The connection between Pannenberg's approaches in Christology and in pneumatology are located in his prior methodological reduction of theological discourse to intelligibility within modern scientific disciplines. This is exemplified in his methodological mantra "truth as a theme within theology" in which he understands the demonstrability of each Christian doctrine to be an essential prerequisite for its affirmation by the faithful. Be it in Christology or in pneumatology, the same methodological principles are at work.

If theological problems such as these emerge due to Pannenberg's prior methodological choices, then it could call those choices into question. Given the internal inconsistencies and the doctrinal issues within the key doctrines of Christology and of pneumatology, such a theology may not provide the theological insight necessary to tackle issues pertaining to Christian talk about God. Given its theological outcome, methodological revision is necessary in order to ensure Christian theology is robust enough to respond to the multifarious issues confronting the church in the twenty-first century.

Stated more strongly, the question that must be considered is why the theologian must adhere to a methodology imported from outside its own discourse. For example, the early church did not arrive at its christological affirmations from a perceived need to critically verify a divine nature for Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, such affirmations of divinity arose from a set of practices in which the worship of Jesus was already established and from a store of Messianic categories inherited

from first century Jewish appropriations of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>81</sup> The early belief of Jesus's divinity and of the Spirit's personhood alongside the Father and the Son were not verified by conciliar dogma, but rather were comprised of core material upon which conciliar declarations were based. Such was also the case with St. Augustine's controversy with the Donatists in which dogmatic controversies were not the central issue but rather membership with the catholic community of Christians and participation in the sacramental practices of the church.<sup>82</sup> From these perspectives, it can be argued that Pannenberg's methodology misses an essential feature of Christian theology: Christian communion.

It is an ongoing, engaged communion within the church and the embodiment of its lived practices that provides the methodological parameters of theological discourse. It is the worship of Jesus of Nazareth as the divine Son and the personal presence of the Spirit that provides both the intellectual and existential impetus for theological discourse. In this way, Pannenberg's avoidance of experience as methodologically important is misguided. What Pannenberg does not take into account is that Christian experience is neither individual nor autonomous. Instead, it occurs in communion and in sacramental practice. It is this communion, lived in practices of worship and of charity, that guides theological discourse and not adherence to modern critical disciplines articulated in terms of universality and verifiability—terms that themselves have come under critical suspicion in these very disciplines.

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81 For example, Thomas Kazen, "The Christology of Early Christian Practice," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 591–614.

82 The seminal study by Gerald Bonner remains important reading on this point. See Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine Of Hippo* (3rd ed.; Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002), 237–311.