

# THE CHRISTOLOGY OF WOLFHART PANNENBERG

Donald Macleod

Donald Macleod is Principal of, and Professor of Systematic Theology at, Free Church College, Edinburgh. He has also recently been appointed to a special chair of Systematic Theology at Glasgow University. In this article, he offers a critical exposition and assessment of the christology of perhaps the most significant systematic theologian since Karl Barth, the German Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Wolfhart Pannenberg (born in 1928) began his career as a Professor of Theology at the University of Heidelberg. After brief spells first at Wuppertal (where he was colleague to Jurgen Moltmann) and then at Mainz he became Professor of Systematic Theology in the Protestant Faculty of the University of Munich in 1968. He retired in 1993.

Throughout his life Pannenberg has had two major, inter-linked preoccupations. One has been the philosophy of history. The other has been Christology. The latter is the subject of his best-known monograph, *Jesus – God and Man*,<sup>1</sup> but it is also extensively covered in *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*<sup>2</sup> and in Volume 2 of his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>3</sup>

## Christology 'from below'

Pannenberg's name has become closely associated with the debate over the relative merits of a *Christology from above* and a *Christology from below*. The former was dominant in classical Christology from Ignatius to Chalcedon and finds modern representatives in Barth and Brunner.<sup>4</sup> It takes its starting-point in the eternal, pre-existent deity of Christ and sees it as the task of Christology (in the language of Barth) to describe the journey of the Son of God into the Far

<sup>1</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 1968). Translated from the German *Grundzüge der Christologie* (Gutersloher, 1964). Hereafter cited as *Jesus*.

<sup>2</sup> W. Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (London: SCM Press, 1972. From the German, *Das Glaubensbekenntnis ausgelegt und verantwortet vor den Fragen der Gegenwart*, Hamburg, 1972). Hereafter cited as *The Apostles' Creed*.

<sup>3</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, 277–396 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994. From the German, *Systematische Theologie*, band 2, Göttingen, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> For Barth, see *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 12 vols, 1936–62), Vol. IV, Part 1, Section 59 and Vol. IV, Part 2, Section 64. For Brunner, see *The Mediator* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), 201–327. Brunner, however, took a different approach in his *Dogmatics*. See Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 322–78.

Country. Pannenberg, rather unfairly, compares Barth's position to the Gnostic Redeemer Myth<sup>5</sup>, involving a circle of descent and ascent. But he also offers more solid criticisms.

First, a Christology from above presupposes the divinity of Jesus, whereas the primary task of Christology is to *vindicate* our confession of that divinity. Secondly, a Christology that starts from above finds it hard to do justice to the real, historical features of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. For example, it almost invariably shows little interest in his relationship with the Judaism of his day. Yet that relationship was definitive for his teaching and personality. Thirdly, Christology from above, is, as far as we are concerned, a closed book: 'we would need to stand in the position of God himself in order to follow the way of God's Son into the world'.<sup>6</sup>

By the same token, however, Pannenberg himself is precluded from a consistent 'Christology from below'. Such a Christology would have to assume that the study engaged in is concerned not only with a real man, but with a mere man, and would feel bound to account for everything in the life of Jesus without any recourse to the hypothesis of his divinity. Pannenberg cannot logically do that because before he is a theologian he is a believer. In effect, he is already looking at 'below' from above, approaching the whole task of Christology from the standpoint of the resurrection.

More important (and this is the strongest argument for a Christology from above), this is where the NT itself begins. Not only do the writers themselves set out from the standpoint of faith: their narratives characteristically start 'above'. This is most apparent in John's Prologue, the opening verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Christ-Hymn in Philippians 2: 5-11. But it is also apparent in the Synoptic Gospels, including the earliest of them, the Gospel of Mark. His theme, as stated unashamedly in his opening sentence, is 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God' and all the subsequent material merely expounds and illustrates this central thesis. This exactly parallels the approach of the Gospel of John: 'these things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (John 20:31).

The same standpoint is reflected in Matthew and Luke. The former introduces Jesus as Immanuel; the latter as the Son of the Most High, the Son of David and the Son of God. Both writers clearly intend us to understand from the outset that it is no mere man who is the subject of the story that follows.

<sup>5</sup> *Jesus*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Jesus*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> The text here is disputable, but the words *hulou theou* are well attested.

## The virgin birth

In both Matthew and Luke, of course, the symbol of 'Christology from above' is the Virgin Birth. With this idea, Pannenberg has no patience, as can be seen from his treatment of the subject in *Jesus – God and Man*, 141–50.<sup>8</sup> He forthrightly denies its historicity, describes it as a legend and emphatically rejects Barth's attempt to place it on the same level as the resurrection. The two events, he argues, differ radically both in their historical basis and in their significance for Christianity. The story of the virgin birth originated in the Hellenistic Christian community and represents no more than a preliminary attempt to explain the divine sonship of Jesus. By contrast, argues Pannenberg, 'the traditions of the resurrection, as well as that of Jesus' empty tomb, are of a completely different sort: (even) where they have undergone legendary influence, something historical has been expanded in a different way'. Besides, the virgin birth has nothing like the same significance for Christianity as the resurrection. Here, Pannenberg rests his case on a quotation from Paul Althaus: 'There has never been a message about the Christ that was not an Easter message, certainly, however, there can be witness to Christ and faith in Christ without the virgin birth.'<sup>9</sup> He might equally well have rested on St Paul: 'if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins'. It is impossible to imagine a similar apostolic statement on the virgin birth.<sup>10</sup>

Pannenberg is also sharply critical of Barth's portrayal of the virgin birth as a sign of the secret of the incarnation. To some extent, this is a continuation of his argument against historicity. If the virgin birth is mere legend then the sign is a mere human one, with no divine legitimacy. Unless it is first of all historical, it cannot be a sign. Conversely, however, if the virgin birth is (as Barth believes) historical, then it is also, like all miracles, a sign: a notable part of the process by which God attested Jesus by 'miracles, wonders and signs' (Acts 2: 22). In this connection, the comparison with John 1:13 is instructive. If the exclusion of human will and initiative from the new birth is a sign of the total sovereignty of grace, so the exclusion of human will from the birth of Jesus was a sign that the human race was not able to produce its own Saviour or to initiate its own salvation.

But Pannenberg's criticism also extends to the details of Barth's argument, in particular to the idea that Mary's virginity is the negation of man before God: a sign that man has no capacity for God.

<sup>8</sup> Compare *The Apostles' Creed*, 71–77; and *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 315–19.

<sup>9</sup> P. Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit*, 443 (quoted in *Jesus – God and Man*, 149).

<sup>10</sup> I have looked more closely at the problems associated with the birth narratives in D. Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 25–43.

Here, Pannenberg argues, Barth is moving along the line of Mariological thought, deducing from the mere elimination of the male that woman has the greater capacity for God. In Pannenberg's view there is no warrant for this: 'in no case can it be asserted that the path of divine grace in actual history was, so to say, shorter to woman than to man'.<sup>11</sup> It is doubtful whether this is fair to Barth, who does not portray Mary as in any sense a meritorious contributor to the incarnation. She does not volunteer, or even, strictly speaking, consent. She is pregnant before she knows it and simply resigns herself to the *de facto* situation. On the other hand, Pannenberg is correct to point out that even a totally passive role (letting herself be acted on) could no more be sinless than an active one. Human beings lie under God's judgement on sin 'no less in their receptivity than in their creative activity'.<sup>12</sup>

Is the virgin birth an alternative to the idea of the pre-existence of Jesus? Pannenberg certainly thinks so. Whereas in St Paul, Jesus is the eternal, co-equal Son sent into the world on a mission of redemption, in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke he is the Son of God only by virtue of his birth from the virgin.<sup>13</sup> The whole point of these narratives is that Jesus had no father apart from God. Pannenberg does not believe that the idea of the pre-existent sonship arose out of the story of the virgin birth. On the contrary, the story was an 'aetiological legend' developed to explain the title 'the Son of God', which had already been conferred for other reasons. Unfortunately, according to Pannenberg, the legend contradicts what came to be the primary explanation of Jesus' sonship: the doctrine of the incarnation. 'If Jesus', he writes, 'was God's Son in that he was created in Mary by God, then he could not be already God's Son before, in the sense of pre-existence'.<sup>14</sup>

But it is difficult, surely, to see how anything in the birth narratives contradicts the idea of pre-existence. The humanity of Jesus must have had a point of origin somewhere. It was certainly not pre-existent. It is that origin that is described in the accounts of the virgin birth, an idea which is totally compatible with both the idea of pre-existence and the idea of incarnation. This is not to say that the virgin birth is proposed either in the birth narratives or anywhere else in the NT as a rationale of incarnation (or even of sinlessness). Nor is it to say that the incarnation required a virgin birth. But it certainly required a supernatural one. The very fact that he was pre-existent and that therefore his birth could not mark the beginning of his existence seems by itself to demand something extraordinary. Besides, a child born in the normal way from two human parents would have been an independent person in his own right and any union between him/her and the eternal Son of God would have involved either Adoptionism or Nestorianism (and

<sup>11</sup> *Jesus*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> *Jesus*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 76.



probably both). The argument that the rest of the NT knows nothing of the virgin birth requires to be treated with caution, but if the incarnation is to be described as a 'becoming' (with St John) or as an 'assumption' (with St Paul) the idea of a supernatural birth accords perfectly well with such wording.

On the other hand, the language used with regard to Jesus' humanity is extremely careful. There is no suggestion of any kind of physical relationship between God the Father and the virgin mother. Indeed, the Father's role is not even prominent. It is the activity of the Holy Spirit that is emphasised (Matt. 1:18, Matt. 1:20, Luke 1:35). The exclusion of human paternity does not by itself explain the birth of Jesus. It merely creates space for the work of the Holy spirit, who 'overshadows' the virgin (Luke 1:35).

Yet Jesus is never called the Son of the Holy Spirit. Nor in the Matthaean birth narrative is he even once referred to as the Son of God. He is Mary's son (Matt. 1:21, 22, 25), he is given the name 'Jesus' because his calling is to be the Saviour and he is described (in a quotation from Isaiah 7:14) as 'Immanuel' because he is 'God with us'. Neither of these names is linked to divine paternity or to the Virgin Birth.

In the Lucan narrative Jesus is actually referred to as both the Son of the Most High and the Son of God. Equally clearly, however, he is referred to as the son of Mary and, by implication, as the Son of David. In Luke 1:35, his divine sonship is directly linked to the circumstances of his birth: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.' (RSV) Even here, however, the link is not with God the Father, but with the Spirit. He is God's Son, first, in the negative sense that he is not Joseph's and, secondly, in the positive sense that on the human level, no less than on the divine, he is 'of God'. Far from ruling out a prior sonship, it could be argued, as we have seen, that it was exactly this prior sonship which made necessary a supernatural birth.

## The resurrection

But if Pannenberg dismisses the virgin birth as legend his attitude to the resurrection is in total contrast. Here is a historical event which left Jesus' tomb empty and made it possible for him to be seen by his disciples.

This confidence in 'the facticity of the resurrection of Jesus as the Christian faith proclaims it' (*Jesus*, 352) rests, according to Pannenberg, on three considerations.

First, the resurrection appearances. Pannenberg has considerably less confidence in the Synoptic accounts of these than he has in the Pauline, but he remains assured that behind all the accounts lies a historical core. These appearances were visual, but they were not in the psychological sense 'visionary'. Visions in that sense require a psychiatric point of contact which is totally lacking in the case of the disciples, who, prior to the appearances, were in no excited state.

On the contrary, their faith had been shattered by the resurrection. Consequently, 'the Easter appearances are not to be explained from the Easter faith of the disciples; rather, conversely, the Easter faith of the disciples is to be explained from the appearances'.<sup>15</sup>

The second reason for confidence in the historicity of the resurrection is the empty tomb. Pannenberg agrees that at first sight this is of less evidential value than the appearances since the emptiness of the tomb admits of more than one explanation. For example, it is possible, *a priori*, that the body was stolen. Nevertheless the empty tomb, he argues, is a *sine qua non* of the resurrection: 'a self-evident implication of what was said about the resurrection of Jesus'.<sup>16</sup> He quotes, again, from Paul Althaus, this time to the effect that the resurrection kerygma 'could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned'.<sup>17</sup> He also argues<sup>18</sup> from

*the fact that the early Jewish polemic against the Christian message about Jesus' resurrection, traces of which have already been left in the Gospels, does not offer any suggestion that Jesus' grave had remained untouched. The Jewish polemic would have had to have every interest in the preservation of such a report. However, quite to the contrary, it shared the conviction with its Christian opponents that Jesus' grave was empty.*<sup>19</sup>

But the empty tomb is not significant merely as a self-evident adjunct to the resurrection. It also has significance for the event itself. For example, 'it creates difficulty for the theory that the appearances of the risen Lord might have been mere hallucinations'.<sup>20</sup> It also tells against any superficial spiritualising of the Easter message. Easter faith by itself could not have emptied the tomb. Neither could hallucinations. The emptiness reinforces the belief that what was seen was the real Jesus. It also implies time-and-space historicity. If the resurrection were *super-history* it would not involve an empty tomb: 'the event took place in this world, namely, in the tomb of Jesus in Jerusalem before the visit of the women on the Sunday morning after his death'.<sup>21</sup>

The third reason for confidence in the facticity of the resurrection, according to Pannenberg, is that it is an indispensable link in the chain of historical events which explains the origin of Christianity. Christianity itself is a historical fact and as such it involves certain other facts: the resurrection message of the early church, the

<sup>15</sup> *Jesus*, 96

<sup>16</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 359

<sup>17</sup> *Jesus*, 100.

<sup>18</sup> *Jesus*, 101.

<sup>19</sup> Similar sentiments are expressed in *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 357-58.

<sup>20</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 359

<sup>21</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 360

worship of Jesus, the writing of the gospels, the emergence and development of Christology and the disciples' belief that they had seen the risen Jesus. This body of facts does not explain itself. It requires another fact, equally historical, to explain it. That, argues Pannenberg, can be no other than the resurrection: 'it was only through the resurrection that it was possible to believe in him again at all after his death on the cross'.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the resurrection was, 'historically speaking, the point of departure for the history of Christendom'.<sup>23</sup> Without it, faith in this man who had experienced rejection and suffered crucifixion would have been impossible.

Pannenberg is obviously aware of the relativism of historical judgements and his language clearly reflects this. 'Assertion of the historicity of an event', he writes, 'does not mean that its facticity is so sure that there can no longer be any dispute regarding it. Many statements of historical fact are actually debatable'.<sup>24</sup> Such relativism is not confined to the resurrection, as Pannenberg makes clear in the every same paragraph: 'In principle, doubts may exist regarding all such statements'. The caution bred by such relativism is reflected in the guarded language Pannenberg uses to express his conclusion:

*It is perfectly possible to arrive at the opinion that, when one has subjected the early Christian traditions of Jesus' resurrection to a critical examination, the description of the event in the language of the eschatological hope still proves itself to be the most plausible, in the face of all rival explanations.*<sup>25</sup>

Such language concedes too much to historical scepticism. However impossible it may be for 20th century scholars to achieve certainty on events which took place 2000 years ago it was not impossible for those who lived through the events themselves. They were able to check things out; and as Luke makes clear in the preface to his Gospel this is exactly what they did (Luke 1:1-4). Conversely, their contemporaries were in a position to falsify their claims. We are not. The modern historian is not only in a worse position than the first-century believer. He is in a worse position than the first-century sceptic. The time for rebuttal is past.

Yet for all his deferential nodding in the direction of historical relativism, Pannenberg is not prepared to suspend judgement on the question of the resurrection. To do so would be to abandon all hope of giving a coherent account of Christian origins. 'If we ask about the

<sup>22</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 96. Cf. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 343-44: 'The resurrection of Jesus from the dead ... forms the starting-point of the apostolic proclamation of Christ and also of the history of the primitive Christian community. Without the resurrection the apostles would have had no missionary message, nor would there have been any Christology relating to the person of Jesus.'

<sup>24</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 360.

<sup>25</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 113.

origins of Christianity,' he writes, 'not merely in the sense of enquiring what the first Christians believed, but in the sense of a present-day evaluation of what was really at the bottom of the story which started Christianity off, then we have to face up to the problem of the Easter events'.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time he is acutely aware that the modern, 'scientific' concept of reality presents an almost insuperable barrier to belief in a historical resurrection. Twentieth-century man thinks it impossible that a resurrection of the dead could take place in any circumstances. But, Pannenberg argues, biblical culture saw reality not as a closed circle but as 'a field of divine action'.<sup>27</sup> In any case, it is not the task of the historian to decide what is possible. His task is to evaluate facts. In this particular instance, rather than allow our view of reality to determine our attitude to the resurrection we must allow the resurrection to modify our view of reality.

For Pannenberg the resurrection constitutes the very core of his 'Christology from below'. It is this that distinguishes him, at least in his own view, not only from 'Christologies from above', but also from other 'Christologies from below'.<sup>28</sup> He views the resurrection as part of 'below': part of the earthly history of Jesus. It is as such that it is the basis of our perception of his divinity. We move from it to the belief that in Jesus we meet God.

Yet it can be questioned whether this is really a Christology 'from below' at all. Is it not a Christology which takes the resurrection as its starting-point and therefore views everything from above?

But Pannenberg does not begin with the resurrection: at least, not professedly. He begins with the NT data, treating these data not as canonical but as ordinary public, historical records, moves from these records to the resurrection and then moves from the resurrection to affirming Jesus' deity. In such a procedure, the resurrection is a 'below' event: as much so, for example, as the crucifixion.

But would Pannenberg ever have chosen this route were he not starting from above in the first place. Psychologically, a believer cannot start from below. On this, we had better not delude ourselves.

What then is the precise function of the resurrection? Pannenberg first makes the point that only through the resurrection was it possible to believe in Jesus at all. The cross, on the face of things, falsified all Jesus' claims and invalidated all his work. 'Without the

<sup>26</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 113.

<sup>27</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 362.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the statement in *Jesus - God and Man*, 108: 'The thesis presented in this paragraph that Jesus' resurrection is the basis for the perception of his divinity, that it means above all God's revelation in him, stands in contrast to the way in which a Christology "from below" is set up elsewhere in contemporary theological work.'

resurrection', he writes, 'the apostles would have had no missionary message, nor would there have been any Christology relating to the person of Jesus'.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, the resurrection was 'The Justification of Jesus by the Father'.<sup>30</sup> This blanket-statement involves several key elements.

At the most fundamental level, the resurrection was a vindication of Jesus' expectations. These expectations were frankly apocalyptic, and Pannenberg is at pains to stress that they were by no means peripheral to Jesus' message. They lay at its very centre: 'it is self-deception to think that one can separate the real heart of Jesus' message from his expectation of the imminent coming of the rule of God as the impending transformation of the world'.<sup>31</sup>

But 'has not Jesus' expectation already been refuted, in as much as the end of the world, far from having broken in on Jesus' own generation, has not taken place at all?'<sup>32</sup>

No! according to Pannenberg: not if we take the resurrection seriously. If we do, we can no longer say that Jesus was mistaken. On the contrary, we can maintain that 'although Jesus' expectation of the imminent end of the world was certainly not fulfilled in the world as a whole, it was certainly fulfilled in his own person'.<sup>33</sup> This means that in the risen Jesus the end of the world has already begun<sup>34</sup> and the universal resurrection has, in principle, already taken place. This in turn is a divine confirmation, first, that Jesus spoke the truth when he proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom and, secondly, that he himself was the bearer and inaugurator of that kingdom. He completely fulfilled the Jewish hope, in which the idea of the resurrection has its roots and from which the Easter message derived its linguistic expression and its conceptual framework.

It has been suggested, however, that this argument is valid only if we accept the 'horizon of the apocalyptic expectation' of later Judaism. If we do not, we have to reject the whole thesis and admit that we cannot see God's revelation in Jesus.

The problem is discussed briefly in Maurice Wiles' *Working Papers in Doctrine*.<sup>35</sup> Wiles believes, against Pannenberg's critics, that he is correct in asserting that we can ascribe absolute significance and full<sup>36</sup> divinity to Jesus only if we accept the apocalyptic context, including the idea of the immediate and dramatic culmination of all

<sup>29</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 54. Cf. *The Apostles' Creed*, 54: 'only the Easter message can answer the challenge presented to the authority of Jesus by his crucifixion'.

<sup>30</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 343.

<sup>31</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> *Creed*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Creed*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> *Jesus*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> M. Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 160–61.

<sup>36</sup> The italics are Wiles'.

history. On the other hand, Wiles argues, if we reject such a context (as he believes we must) this would not necessarily mean that 'we had to abandon all perception whatsoever of God's revelation in Jesus'. It would mean only that we had to abandon our traditional forms of expression. We could no longer speak of Jesus in terms of substantial divinity. Nor could we speak of him as the world's one and only objective Saviour.

It is extremely doubtful however whether we could continue to regard Jesus as in any sense the revelation of God if we had to reject the apocalyptic framework of his message. The apocalyptic element as we saw, was central. It involved a unique understanding of himself, of his mission, of the human condition and of the purposes of God. If he was wrong here, it is difficult to rescue anything of his 'revelation', apart from those elements of human insight common to all sages from Confucius to the *Sun* newspaper.

We may nevertheless question whether the role of Jesus as fulfiller of apocalyptic expectation is as decisive for NT Christology as Pannenberg suggests. As Richard Bauckham has pointed out, what the NT presents is a Christology of *divine identity*. It is not interested primarily in *what* Jesus is (a Christology of substance) nor in what Jesus *does* (a Christology of function). It is interested in *who* he is; and its answer to that is that he is God: a figure clearly distinguished from all creatures and also from all intermediate beings. To say that Jesus is God is to say that he is the one identified in Genesis as the Creator of the universe, the one who made a covenant with Abraham, the one who delivered Israel at the exodus and the one who gave himself the special redemptive-historical name, Jahweh.<sup>37</sup>

It is difficult to see how the resurrection by itself can sustain such a Christology. It could do so only if the question, 'Who is God?' were to be answered by saying, 'God is one who rises from the dead.' This, of course, is not the case. Pannenberg is correct to argue that belief in the divinity of Jesus must be historically grounded: that is, justified (though not compelled) by the facts ascertainable from the public records. This was true even of belief in the divinity of Jahweh himself. It was empirical in the sense that it was produced by Israel's experience of God's involvement and God's commitment. As far as Jesus is concerned, the core historical fact is his own self-consciousness: Who did he think he was? And were the

<sup>37</sup> See R. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998). Bauckham is particularly concerned with the argument that the roots of NT Christology lie in the semi-divine figures allegedly prominent in Second Temple Judaism. See, for example, L. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, Second edition, 1998). Bauckham summarises his own position as follows: 'I shall argue that high Christology was possible within a Jewish monotheistic context, not by applying to Jesus a Jewish category of semi-divine intermediary status, but by identifying Jesus directly with the one God of Israel, including Jesus in the unique identity of this one God'. p. 4.

circumstances and events of his life, taken as a whole, in keeping with who he thought he was? Pannenberg, because of his sceptical approach to the synoptic tradition has cut himself off from such an approach. He cannot accept that Jesus called himself the Messiah, or that by calling himself 'the Son of God' he was making a claim of any particular significance.<sup>38</sup> Yet the historicity of Jesus' use of such titles is as well substantiated as the resurrection; equally indispensable to understanding the origin and life of the early church, particularly its worship of Jesus; and virtually indispensable to understanding how a worship apparently so subversive of monotheism could so easily take hold in a Jewish matrix. When the early church acknowledged Jesus as God they acknowledged him not as *Another* God, but as *God*; as Jahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

We have to remember, too, that however important the resurrection, the roots of this worship lay in the disciples' pre-Easter experience. Indeed, it is surely significant that with the exception of Saul of Tarsus all the resurrection appearances were made to people who were already believers. For men such as Peter, the resurrection was not the birth of their hope, but its re-birth (1 Pet. 1:3).

Yet we cannot allow that the resurrection of Jesus has no more significance, intrinsically, than the resurrection of Lazarus or of Jairus' daughter. It is simplistic to argue that if resurrection in these instances did not prove divinity no more did it do so in the case of Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Pannenberg has fully covered this. The resurrection of Jesus is not the resurrection of just any man. It is the resurrection of *this* man. What matters here, according to Pannenberg, is not the goodness of Jesus, but precisely the opposite. To a Jew, the claims of the pre-Easter Jesus were blasphemous. This was why they had him crucified; and the crucifixion itself would have been seen as a definitive word of divine judgement. Against this background, the resurrection was a vindication of Jesus by the very God whom he had allegedly blasphemed: a dramatic reversal of both the popular condemnation and the apparent divine retribution.

## Resurrection as metaphor

So far, we have assumed that Pannenberg's views on the historicity of the resurrection can be taken at face-value: he believes that the resurrection was a real event: a factual *resurrectio carnis*. But things

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, *The Apostles' Creed*, 55–57, 61–65.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. the comments of James P. Mackey in *Jesus: the Man and the Myth* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 92. Referring to the raising of Lazarus, he writes, 'Whether that story is to be taken as literally true or symbolic of something else, at least it is clear that the writer who tells the story does not even consider that he has involved himself in the kinds of claim to status and function in the case of Lazarus which are present in the case of the risen Jesus. Yet, and here is the question which must cause difficulty ... what could a witness to a raising from the dead see that would constitute a claim to have witnessed more than the revival of a dead man?'

may not be quite as they appear. G.E. Michalson, for example, has argued that whereas, to begin with, Pannenberg seems to be seeking to prove that the resurrection was a physical event involving the resuscitation or re-animation of the body of Jesus, in the end he distances himself completely from such a concept. 'It turns out', he writes, 'that he has *no intention* of defending the notion that the corpse of Christ was resuscitated ... Instead, the term resurrection is to be understood as a "metaphor"'.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Michalson argues, Pannenberg ends up affirming what he expressly set out to deny, namely, that the resurrection is about the experiences of the first Christians, not about the object of their experience. For him, as for the post-Enlightenment theology from which he seemed to be distancing himself, *what* the first Christians experienced is not accessible to historical research.

It is certainly true that Pannenberg repeatedly uses the word *metaphor* in connection with the resurrection. He does so, for example, in his *Systematic Theology*: 'The language of the resurrection of Jesus is that of metaphor'.<sup>41</sup> As such, it rests on the underlying metaphor which speaks of death as sleep. This is part of the reason that Pannenberg prefers Paul's account of the resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:5-7) to the Synoptists: the latter have a tendency 'to underscore the corporeality of the encounters' and therefore offer no firm basis for historical considerations'.<sup>42</sup> He further denies that the resurrection was a return to earthly life and describes it instead as a 'transition to the new eschatological life'.<sup>43</sup> He is therefore at pains to distinguish the personal resurrection of Jesus from the resurrection-miracles performed in the cases of Lazarus, the young man from Nain and Jairus' daughter. These were mere resuscitations: the restoring of life to corpses. Jesus' resurrection was on an altogether different plane. It was a radical transformation. This is clear, he argues, from Paul's account of his experience of the risen Jesus. What he saw could not be confused with a resuscitated corpse: 'it confronted him as a reality of an entirely different sort'.<sup>44</sup> It was no mere return to life as we know it, 'but a transformation into an entirely new life'.<sup>45</sup> On the question of what precisely is meant by this new life Pannenberg, like the rest of us, must remain agnostic. He has to resort to the *via negativa*: it is 'an immortal life no longer bounded by any death, which must therefore be in any case different from the form of life of

<sup>40</sup> From G.E. Michalson, 'Pannenberg on the Resurrection and Historical Method' in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 33 No 4 (1980), 345-59.

<sup>41</sup> Vol. 2, 346. Cf. *Jesus*, 75: 'To speak about the resurrection of the dead is not comparable to speaking about any random circumstance that can be identified empirically at any time. Here we are dealing, rather, with a metaphor'.

<sup>42</sup> *Jesus*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 348.

<sup>44</sup> *Jesus*, 77.

<sup>45</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 97.



organisms known to us'.<sup>46</sup> The transformation is so radical that nothing remains unchanged.

Other indications in Pannenberg point, however, in a different direction and seem quite incompatible with a merely 'spiritual' resurrection.<sup>47</sup> For example, despite his reliance on Paul's description of the resurrection body as 'spiritual' (*pneumatikon*, 1 Cor. 15:44), he explicitly repudiates the view that this points to 'a disembodied spirituality, in the sense of some Platonic tradition or other'. Instead, he takes the position that 'in Paul's sense God's "Spirit" is the creative origin of all life, and a spiritual body is a living being which, instead of being separated from this origin – as we are in our present existence – remains united with it; so that it is a life which no death can end any more'.<sup>48</sup> It is also important to note Pannenberg's stress on the empty tomb, which, as he says, rules out any superficial spirituality of the Easter message.<sup>49</sup> No merely 'spiritual' resurrection (and certainly no resurrection 'occurring' only in the minds of the disciples) could have resulted in the disappearance of Jesus' body from its burial place.

Above all, Pannenberg stresses that it is Jesus himself who was the subject of the resurrection. His thesis is 'that Jesus rose again, that the dead Jesus of Nazareth came to a new life'.<sup>50</sup> This involves an explicit repudiation of the idea that the change took place only in the minds of the disciples; and an equally explicit repudiation of the idea that the early kerygma announced merely 'that something took place that transcends human history in space and time'.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, the resurrection was an 'event' which occurred at a specific time and at a particular place.

<sup>46</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 100.

<sup>47</sup> For a consistent spiritual/metaphorical understanding of the resurrection, see James P. Mackey, *Jesus: the Man and the Myth*, 94–120. For example, commenting on Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15, Mackey writes, 'It is highly unlikely, then, that Paul in this chapter understands the resurrection of Jesus primarily as an event of Jesus' own personal destiny ... It is much more likely, from both the wording and the logic of his argument here, that he understands by the resurrection of Jesus primarily the Christian experience of Jesus as Spirit or Lord in the lives of his followers.' (97). For the opposite point of view see Robert H. Gundry, 'The Essential Physicality of Jesus' Resurrection' in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Eds.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 204–219.

<sup>48</sup> *The Apostles' Creed*, 98–99.

<sup>49</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 359.

<sup>50</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 359.

<sup>51</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 360. Cf. Pannenberg's explicit rejection of the view expressed by Karl Barth in the second and subsequent editions of his commentary, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ET, London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 195 'that the raising of Jesus from the dead is not an event in history elongated so as still to remain an event in the midst of other events. The Resurrection is the non-historical relating of the whole historical life of Jesus to its origin in God.' This, comments Pannenberg, is reminiscent of 'Bultmann's controversial thesis that Jesus' resurrection is only "The expression of the significance of the cross."' See *Jesus: God and Man*, 111.

We should be careful, too, about drawing hasty conclusions from Pannenberg's use of the idea of metaphor in connection with the resurrection. It is one thing to suggest that the resurrection itself is a mere metaphor (a figure of speech for something else) and quite another to suggest that *language* about the resurrection (and even the word *resurrection* itself) is metaphorical. It is the latter course that Pannenberg is taking and (as he is careful to point out) the metaphorical nature of the language 'comes directly from the inner logic of the concept itself'.<sup>52</sup> It rests, as we have seen, on a prior metaphor: the comparison of death to sleep. We rise from sleep. Jesus rose from death. From this point of view, to describe the language of the resurrection as metaphorical no more denies the reality of the event itself than the NT description of believers as 'sleeping' (for example, in 1 Thess. 4:13) denies the reality of their deaths. Many NT concepts are defined in metaphorical language. Christian initiation, for example, is described in a variety of terms, all of them metaphorical: conversion, regeneration and new birth, to name but a few. To recognise the metaphorical nature of such language is not to deny the reality of the experience. Similarly, if Pannenberg argues that the NT uses metaphorical language to explain the post-crucifixion appearances of Jesus this in no way undermines the central point that the appearances themselves were real. Pannenberg points out, for example, that the references to resurrection in Jewish apocalyptic works were metaphorical: 'Yet in spite of the metaphorical language, a real event was in view, as also in the case of the resurrection of Jesus'.<sup>53</sup>

Christology cannot escape from metaphorical language, whether these metaphors be spatial (advent, ascension), political (king, servant) or ceremonial (coronation, anointing). What matters is that the metaphor points to reality. I do not deny a man's existence by calling him a brick.

In the last analysis we have to accept, with Pannenberg, that however real the resurrection it was not merely a return to life as we know it. He is quite correct to distinguish it from the resuscitation of corpses sometimes alluded to in ancient literature and even from the resuscitations accomplished by Jesus himself in the course of his earthly ministry.<sup>54</sup> These were merely temporary restorations to the old life and all who experienced them subsequently died. Jesus' resurrection was completely different. He rose to a permanent life of absolute immortality. Death has no more dominion over him (Rom. 6:9).

The NT data on the resurrection body of Jesus are extraordinarily complex. It would be hazardous, therefore, to read too much into the language of Luke 24:39, 'a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have'. The risen Jesus was certainly no mere apparition. But then neither need he have had the exact same biochemistry as

<sup>52</sup> *Jesus*, 74.

<sup>53</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 346.

<sup>54</sup> *Jesus*, 77.

you and I. The same caution should be applied to Luke 24:42. The fact that Jesus ate the fish no more proves that his corporeality was identical with ours than the fact that Abraham's Three Visitors shared a meal with him (Gen. 18:8) proves they were not angels.

There are two points of special interest.

First, in the period between his resurrection and ascension Jesus' appearance, according to the gospels, showed remarkable variations. Mary mistook him for a gardener (John 20:15). The disciples in the Upper Room recognised him instantly. The travellers on the road to Emmaus did not recognise him at all. Mark (admittedly in the Longer Ending) explicitly states that he appeared to two disciples 'in a different form' (Mark 16:12). No ordinary body would have been capable of such variation.

Secondly, descriptions of the post-Ascension Jesus portray a Christ radically different from both the pre-crucifixion Jesus and the Jesus of the resurrection appearances. Paul could never have mistaken the Christ of the Damascus Road for a gardener. Neither could John in Patmos (Rev. 1:12–20) have imagined that what he was seeing was a ghost, far less a resuscitated corpse. Paradoxically, however, these two descriptions accord perfectly with the account of the Transfiguration, which was surely, at one level, a prophetic disclosure of the glory of the risen saviour.

It is clear that the risen Christ is a transfigured Christ. That is not to deny his corporeality. It is only to say that his corporeality, now, is of a different order from ours. It belongs to the age to come: to the new heavens and the new earth (2 Pet. 3:13). In this respect Pannenberg is absolutely right to portray Christ as the revelation in history of the consummation of history. In him, humanity (and indeed the whole of created reality) has already reached their Omega-point. His is a body whose glory now accords fully with the divine glory in which it shares. That immediately creates a discontinuity with our present corporeality. Yet we, in him and even now, share in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4); and in the moment of resurrection we shall receive a corporeality as glorious as his.<sup>55</sup>

## The mode of God's presence in Jesus

But, granting the historicity of the resurrection, what, exactly, does it illuminate? What is the nature of Jesus' relationship to God? Pannenberg devotes a substantial section of *Jesus: God and Man* to the question of the 'Mode of God's Presence in Jesus', beginning with a brief survey of the various formulations proposed in the patristic period. One of the earliest of these was the attempt to define God's presence by means of the Spirit. This took its cue from the close relation between Jesus and the Spirit indicated by the NT itself.

<sup>55</sup> The question of the nature of the resurrection body has not received much attention. W. Milligan, *The Resurrection of our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1890) is still worth consulting, especially 7–38.

It appears for example in the 'double movement' or 'two-stage Christology' of Romans 1:3 f., which speaks of Jesus 'according to the flesh' and 'according to the Spirit'. It also appears in accounts of Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9–11 and parallels). Clearly, then, Jesus was a bearer of the Spirit. But later Adoptionism (as represented first by Theodotus the Tanner and subsequently by Paul of Samosata) went a stage further and argued that this was the only way in which he was the Son of God. He was a Spirit-filled man who differed from Moses and the prophets only in degree. In the event, however, Pannenberg's treatment of Adoptionism is left hanging in the air. He refrains from any clear critique.<sup>56</sup>

Pannenberg also rushes through three other options: Substantial Presence, Mediation Christology and Presence as Appearance. He recognises that the first was the dominant understanding in patristic Christology (mainly because it was adopted by Nicea), but does little more than define it: 'According to this, God himself is fully and completely present in Jesus; Jesus Christ is not a mere man, but a divine person'.<sup>57</sup>

Mediator Christologies are those which discount any substantial presence of God in Jesus and portray him instead as a median being who 'is subordinated to God, but stands higher than man'.<sup>58</sup> The early church, argues Pannenberg, rejected this for soteriological reasons: 'we can have full community with God through Christ, we can have deification, only if he is God in the fullest sense'.<sup>59</sup> This is true, of course, but it is not the whole truth and perhaps not even the most important truth. There were also powerful liturgical reasons for rejecting Arianism, the most important form of Mediator Christology. To worship a creature, however exalted, would have been pure paganism. Christian worship required a Christology of divine identity.

Pannenberg also dismisses the idea of Presence as Appearance; or, as he expresses it more precisely, 'an epiphany of God or of a divine being without, however, accepting as a consequence an identity in essence of this with Jesus'.<sup>60</sup> The prime example of this was Gnosticism, but it also found expression in the Modalism of Sabellius, who denied the presence in Jesus of a particular divine hypostasis distinct from the Father and portrayed him instead as 'a particular mode of the efficacy of the one deity in saving history'.<sup>61</sup> On this view, Creator, Saviour and Spirit are not distinct 'persons'

<sup>56</sup> Outside of his specific treatment of Adoptionism, Pannenberg does express himself strongly, asserting that in contrast to 'the patristic idea of a substantial presence of God in Jesus' 'a mere presence of the Spirit remains just as inadequate as the mere presence of an appearance of a being who is still to be distinguished from his appearance' (*Jesus*, 132).

<sup>57</sup> *Jesus*, 121.

<sup>58</sup> *Jesus*, 123.

<sup>59</sup> *Jesus*, 124.

<sup>60</sup> *Jesus*, 125.

<sup>61</sup> *Jesus*, 126.

within the godhead, but successive phases of the divine activity. But here again Pannenberg contents himself with summary and offers little by way of critique.

The reason for the almost impatient treatment of these four approaches is that Pannenberg wants to propose a fifth: a *Revelational Presence of God in Christ*. This, he claims, is the only appropriate understanding of the presence of God in Jesus. At the same time he is at pains to point out that the idea of revelatory presence is not to be seen as an alternative to identity of essence. Instead, it includes 'the idea of substantial presence, of an essential identity of Jesus with God'.<sup>62</sup> Appearance and essence belong together. This rests, as far as Pannenberg is concerned, on what he calls the 'modern' understanding of revelation as *self-revelation*. It is not the communication of religious truths by supernatural means, but God's self-disclosure. This includes the idea that the Revealer and what is revealed (the Revelation) are identical. If, then, Christ is the revelation of God he can only be the *self-revelation* of God; and if he is the self-revelation of God he must be the *self* who is revealed:

*Thus to speak of a self-revelation of God in the Christ event means that the Christ event, that Jesus, belongs to the essence of God himself ... Then Jesus belongs to the definition of God and thus to his divinity, to his essence.*<sup>63</sup>

From an evangelical perspective this stress on the essential divinity of Jesus is welcome. But Pannenberg's approach still raises serious problems. For one thing, in biblical thought the self-revelation of God is not confined to Jesus. As the Writer to the Hebrews points out, revelation took place at different times and in different ways (Heb. 1:1) and this remains true no matter how firmly we may wish to emphasise the uniqueness of Christ as the exclusive way to God. Does it follow then, that all prophets and apostles were also revelations, identical in essence with God? If not, how in the case of Jesus, are we to make the leap from revealer to revelation and from revelation to revealed-one?

The answer, according to Pannenberg, is, inevitably the resurrection. This proves that Jesus was the revelation of God (part of the definition of God) not only from the resurrection onwards but from the beginning of his life on earth and even from eternity itself. It does so because it is a vindication of his earthly life and ministry: despite having made the apparently blasphemous claim that he himself was the kingdom and despite suffering the fate appropriate to such blasphemy God vindicated him; and this could be nothing else than his vindication as the self-revelation of God.

But from Pannenberg's chosen stand-point this is highly problematical. The earthly life vindicated in the resurrection was purely human. Jesus had no consciousness of being divine and

<sup>62</sup> Jesus, 127.

<sup>63</sup> Jesus, 129 f.

never defined himself as divine. He never, for example, claimed to be the Son of God, the Son of Man or even the Messiah. In fact, in classical Liberal fashion Pannenberg repeatedly insists that the message of the pre-Easter Jesus (unlike that of the post-Easter church) was not about himself at all. How then could the resurrection be about himself?

Pannenberg's answer is that it is precisely in making no claims for himself that Jesus is God. But this requires us to believe that the defining characteristic of God (what identifies him as the one he, uniquely, is) is that he is the one who makes no claims for himself. In fact this leads to a fundamental cleavage within the deity. As the Father, God is the one who requires submission. As the Son, God is the one who renders submission. Is this simply God being God in two different ways? Or is it a pointer to two incompatible deities?

Pannenberg's overriding concern is to build up his Christology from below: to move from the earthly, historical Jesus to the modern theologian's final synthesis, *Jesus: God and Man*. *A priori*, this would suggest a determination to start with the public records (the gospels), create from these a picture of the historical Jesus and then use that picture as the core element in Christology. But what Pannenberg delivers is nothing like that. Had he really taken a route through the gospels it would surely have dawned on him that far from deducing his identity from the fact of his being the revelation of God the NT has an exactly opposite approach: it treats Jesus as the revelation of God because of his divine identity. Nor is this a matter merely of the post-Easter kerygma. According to the gospels (our only public records) the pre-Easter Jesus was conscious of authority to forgive sins, to legislate for the Sabbath and to set aside tradition. He even claimed (on the specific basis of his divine sonship) that the very things which had been hidden from the wise and prudent had been revealed to him (Matt. 11:25).

Pannenberg's answer is that none of this material is historical. The story of the baptism, no less than the virgin birth, is legendary.<sup>64</sup> So too, is everything else that might suggest any pre-Easter consciousness of deity on Jesus' part.

It seems to me that this leaves Pannenberg in a hopeless position. How can the resurrection narratives be the sole survivors of the solvents of biblical criticism? How can we argue that the stories of the appearances are history while all around them is myth and legend? More fundamentally, how can there be a Christology 'from below' if we have no reliable records of Jesus' life 'below'? Pannenberg is building up his Christology not from the public records (part of 'universal history') but from the abstract truth of Jesus' humanity. But what progress is possible when all we know is that he was a man and when we know nothing of the kind of man he was?

<sup>64</sup> *Jesus*, 139.

On the other hand, were Pannenberg to take the records seriously rather than selectively he would find that they are inconsistent with the whole tendency of his thought. In them, the presumption that Jesus is divine comes before the perception that he is the revelation of God. This is true not only of his disciples, but of himself. The Christ of the records can offer to teach all the illiterate and to relieve all the oppressed precisely because he is the Son of God (Matt. 11:28, 29).

## The incarnation

Does Pannenberg then believe in the incarnation? He certainly thinks he does, and much of his language accords with it. He clearly affirms his belief in the deity of Christ<sup>65</sup> and his whole discussion of the question of the unity of Jesus with God presupposes the incarnation.<sup>66</sup> He also believes, in some sense, in the pre-existence of Christ, which, he thinks, follows from the revelatory presence of God in Jesus. He writes

*If the relation of the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth in eternity characterises the identity of God as Father, then we must speak of a pre-existence of the Son, who was historically manifested in Jesus of Nazareth, even before his earthly birth. Then we also must view the earthly existence of Jesus as the event of the incarnation of the pre-existent Son.*<sup>67</sup>

Yet Brian Hebblethwaite can write, 'Wolfhart Pannenberg only retains an incarnational Christology by the skin of his teeth'; and Colin Gunton can even say, 'Pannenberg belongs in the tradition of liberal and Kantian Christology'.<sup>68</sup>

There are two main problems.

First, Pannenberg's definition of the deity of Jesus. He insists that it is as man that he is God. That, of course, can bear a perfectly orthodox meaning, but when he asks, 'In what sense is Jesus God?' he comes perilously close to answering that his manhood is his deity.<sup>69</sup> Part of the paradox of Pannenberg's 'Christology from below' is that he dispenses with the Christ of the gospels and takes as his 'below' the Christ of historical research. This Christ, as we have seen, never used divine titles, never made divine claims and never asserted his equality with God. But far from being a problem, this, according to Pannenberg is the very core of his deity. Had he not avoided

<sup>65</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, ch. 10.

<sup>66</sup> *Jesus*, 133–58.

<sup>67</sup> *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, 368.

<sup>68</sup> B. Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 155; C. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: a Study of Continuities in Christology* (London: 2nd edition, SPCK, 1997), 25.

<sup>69</sup> Hence the remark of Gunton (*Yesterday and Today*, 22). 'Despite all his careful safeguards and detailed conversation with tradition, it is difficult to see how Pannenberg can avoid an outcome similar to that of degree Christology, of making Jesus into a divinised man.'

making himself equal with God, Christian faith could not recognise his sonship. He makes this plain in a crucially important passage:

*For Christian faith much depends on whether Jesus avoided making himself equal with God. That is, it depends on whether, as a creature of God, he subordinated himself to the imminent rule of God that he announced with just the same unconditionality as he required of others. Only in this subordination to the rule of the one God is he the Son. As he gave his life in service to the rule of God over his creatures – namely, to prepare the way for its acknowledgement – he is as man the Son of the eternal Father. Rejection of any supracreaturely dignity before God shows itself to be a condition of his sonship.<sup>70</sup>*

Part of the meaning of this is that Jesus' divine sonship is 'indirect'. It is not a relationship between his human nature and his divine or between his human nature and the Logos. Neither of these statements gives any difficulty. But when he goes on to limit the sonship to a relationship between the man Jesus and the Father and to state that it consists, exclusively, in his human, filial submission to the Father, things become more problematical. This submission climaxes at Calvary, seen, not in terms of traditional understandings of the atonement, but as the failure of Jesus' mission:

*only in the dedication to God's will in the darkness of his fate on the cross – which meant first of all the failure of his mission – did Jesus' dedication to God take on the character of self-sacrifice ... This relation of dedication to the point of self-sacrifice was the personal community of the man Jesus with the God of his message, the heavenly Father.<sup>71</sup>*

It is precisely this that is confirmed in the resurrection. Jesus is the man who 'reserved nothing for himself in his human existence', but lived for God and for the men who must be called into his kingdom.<sup>72</sup>

Hebblethwaite has described Pannenberg's thinking at this point as characterised by extreme difficulty and roundabout conceptuality;<sup>73</sup> something of an understatement. One result is that there must always be some doubt whether we have grasped his meaning. It does seem clear, however, that whenever Pannenberg speaks of the man Jesus as submitting to the will of God and even enduring failure as an act of self-sacrifice what he is really doing is stating his own ideal for humanity, reading that off into Jesus and then transforming it into a definition of deity. It is as the Ideal Man that he is divine, the Son of God. This justifies Runia's suggestion that Pannenberg's Christology 'from below' really issues in a deification of man.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 273 (change of case, mine).

<sup>71</sup> *Jesus: God and Man*, 335.

<sup>72</sup> *Jesus*, 335.

<sup>73</sup> B. Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> K. Runia, *The Present-day Christological Debate* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 38.



Gunton makes a similar assessment, using different terminology. He classifies Pannenberg's position as 'degree Christology' and continues: 'We cannot then speak of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus, or of a uniqueness in kind: rather, we must teach that he differed from us only in degree.'<sup>75</sup>

This becomes all the more pronounced if we recall Pannenberg's understanding of the resurrection. At one level, it is the vindication and illustration of the deity of Jesus. At another, it is an anticipation of the end-time. The risen Christ is the end-point, from which alone history can be understood. In him, universal history has already achieved its goal, the future has already been revealed, the end of the world has begun and the resurrection of other men will immediately follow.<sup>76</sup> In the process the empty tomb has declared Jesus to be the definitive form of humanity, the eschatological man.

The question is: Will the general resurrection do for all of us what his personal resurrection did for Jesus? Will it declare each one of us to be definitive forms of humanity and thus vindicate and illustrate our divinity?

A second difficulty with Pannenberg's doctrine of the incarnation is that the man Jesus, when 'below', did not know that he was God. This explains why he never used divine titles and never even addressed God as 'Abba'. Indeed, had he, as man, taken such liberties and claimed equality with God this would have been blasphemy and clear proof in itself that he was no Son of God. Only in the light of the resurrection (proleptically, the moment when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that he is Lord) could he know his own deity.

The assumption behind such reasoning is that it would have been psychologically impossible for Jesus to live a truly human life if he had known he was God. Surely, however, this is taking us beyond what we can reasonably claim to know? How can our human wisdom pronounce on the psychological conditions of incarnation?

Besides, the argument can be reversed: how could Jesus be God (incarnate) and not know it? Pannenberg is rightly critical of 19th century Kenotic theories which argued that in laying aside the

<sup>75</sup> C. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 15.

<sup>76</sup> Jesus, 67. See further Alister McGrath's comments on Pannenberg's use of the apocalyptic world-view as a hermeneutical grid for interpreting the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (article 'Pannenberg' in A.E. McGrath, Ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought*, [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], 420-22). Behind this lies Pannenberg's espousal of a neo-Hegelian philosophy of history (another of his life-long preoccupations). Cf. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 28: 'Underlying all that Pannenberg writes is a view of the meaningfulness of universal history released, by anticipation, in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth ... Will the outcome be very much different from the reflection of the face of neo-Hegelian man in the well of universal history?' On the other hand, we should recognise the value of Pannenberg's stress on revelation as occurring in *history*, that is, in such publicly accessible events as the exodus and the resurrection.

form of deity Christ divested himself of such divine attributes as omniscience. But is this not precisely what he himself is doing? Could there have been any greater eclipsing of divine omniscience than the spectacle of the Son of God moving about the streets of Jerusalem not knowing who he was? Memory and self-consciousness are essential components of personal identity. To deny them to Jesus is fatal to the idea of his being God incarnate. If he is God as *this man* (as Pannenberg holds) then, precisely as *this man* he knows that he is God. Indeed, this self-understanding is the only possible basis for a Christology 'from below'. That the early church believed him to be God is beyond dispute. But if that belief cannot be traced back beyond the kerygma to the self-understanding and self-disclosure of Jesus then history is fatal to the doctrine of the incarnation. It leaves a chasm between Jesus and the early church which no emphasis on the resurrection can overcome. According to the public records, recognition of Jesus' deity was already in place before Easter; and it was in place precisely because he had not concealed from his disciples his unique relation to God. Without such prior belief (and without Jesus' own predictions of his resurrection) there would have been no interpretative framework for news of the empty tomb. Had Jesus of Nazareth lived a totally non-notable life, characterised by no extraordinary deeds and marked by no unusual claims, the resurrection by itself could never have launched or sustained the idea of his being God incarnate. We cannot create a supernatural-free zone from Virgin Birth to Crucifixion and then suddenly introduce mega-miracle. It is only as the resurrection coheres with all that has gone before that it has any significance. It is the resurrection of *this man*.

We should note, too, that it is possible to put Pannenberg's argument from psychology to a use that he himself does not consider. If it is inconsistent with truly human activity and authentic human attributes to know that one is God, that must be as true of the post-Easter Jesus as of the pre-Easter one. The risen Christ is human. Yet, Pannenberg himself being judge, this cannot mean that he is unaware of his divine identity. He knows that he is the Son of God. This is a clear admission, is it not, that it is in fact possible for Jesus to be aware of his deity and yet to live an authentic human life, albeit a glorified one?

## Conclusion

Pannenberg's work clearly raises important issues relating both to theological method and to the details of theological formulation. But it also raises, incidentally, serious questions as to the nature of the theological task itself: particularly the task of Christian theology. Pannenberg is heavy-going. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the impression that he glories in it.

This raises four specific questions.

First, is it not the responsibility of theologians to be elucidatory and expository? If so, then they should be more lucid and accessible

than what they are trying to expound. Otherwise they are useless. What is the point of our Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture if our expositions of it are impenetrable?

Secondly, is it not the duty of the theologian, as of any other author, to be interesting? If not, why should we expect people to read us?

Thirdly, is it not the duty of Christian theology to be ministerial: and in being ministerial to serve not merely one's fellow academics but the whole Christian community? It is hard to see how such work as Pannenberg's falls within the perspective of equipping the saints for ministry (Eph. 4:12).

Finally, is the theologian the one Christian functionary who is not bound by the example of Jesus? He was the teacher *par excellence*. Sometimes, beyond a doubt, he uttered hard sayings. More often, his utterances aimed to tease the imagination and to fill the mind with ideas which no propositions could exhaust. But always, the concern was with people, with life and with practical wisdom (*hokmah*).

It is a curious irony that modern theology, so critical of scholasticism, now finds itself prisoner of its own schools.