

Wolfhart Pannenberg's Systematic Theology (vol. 1)

- (1) Opening conceptual question: would you believe me if I told you that the future could define the present? You might if it were announced that after our session today there was going to be an exam worth 50% of your final grade. In this way an announcement about a future reality – and the goal of our session – contains information and instruction about the present – take notes!
- (2) Perhaps the principal idea in Wolfhart Pannenberg's theology is that God's vision of the eschaton (the final goal and end for creation) is the concept that informs or completes our knowledge about Him. That future, which has not come, can be known in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who, in his history on earth, realized the goal through his obedience to God and resurrection to life.
- (3) Historical Sketch
 - Born 1928 in Stettin, Germany which now belongs to Poland
 - Mid 1940s experienced a flood of light on the street that he described as 'Jesus Christ claiming him as his own.'
 - Mid 1940s encountered Friedrich Nietzsche's work. It sparked an enduring interest in the deep issues of philosophy.
 - ca 1946 had an teacher of literature who had been a part of the Confessing Church during the Third Reich convince him of the need for a closer look at Christianity
 - 1948 studied in Göttingen under Nicolai Hartmann
 - 1950 studied in Basel under Karl Jaspers (philosophy) and Karl Barth (theology)
 - 1951 studied in Heidelberg; founded the 'Pannenberg circle' with Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff, Martin Elze, and Ulrich Wilkens in an effort to bridge the divide between theological specialties and produce "a unified comprehensive vision of theology." Produced the volume *Revelation as History* in 1961 as a collection of essays and defined his essential stance.
 - 1953 earned doctorate with a dissertation on the doctrine of predestination in Duns Scotus
 - 1954 began to teach after receiving *habilitation* with book on the idea of analogy from early Greek philosophy to Thomas Aquinas
 - 1958-61 professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran church seminary in Wuppertal
 - 1961-1968 University of Mainz
 - 1968-1993 University of Munich
 - Died September, 2014.
- (4) Inquiry into theological method; it conceives of:
 - a. Theology from below → inductive, takes the subjective experience of revelation as a source of theological knowledge. Opposed to the Patristic/Medieval deductive method which understands particulars by general concepts, e.g. unity ('from above').

- b. Theology from manifestation → the inductive approach requires that general concepts are not formed before the experience of revelation takes place. Pannenberg held that revelation did not require the interpretation/authority that comes with inspiration in order to be received as truth about God. Opposed to the Reformation-initiated programme of giving authority to the text by verbal-plenary inspiration. The content of revelation is in itself a compelling force. (ST1 p. 249)
 - c. Theology from without → is formed by an objective source of truth that is neither the product of nor determined by the one who receives it. Opposed to Schleiermacher and the Liberal tradition. "I am certainly not a Pietist."¹
 - d. Theology as the result of a scientific investigation of the materials of history that God has made available to human beings.
- (5) Pannenberg is intensely interested in the course of human history and takes many passes at the history of theology in order to draw out how his positions arise from the dialogue of history. What follows is a summary of the first chapter.

Historical efforts to ascertain the truth about God have approached the task as one that is chiefly objective and, alternatively, chiefly subjective. Neither approach in itself can adequately accomplish the task. Objective truth claims, as the project of Enlightenment has demonstrated, place certain individuals in positions of power and cause conflict. If the Church may authorize certain interpretations of Scripture and then use that authorization as the means to manufacture a consensus, it is not God's truth that is of central concern, but power. The attempt in the period of the Reformation to wrest authority from the institutional Church and invest the Scriptures themselves with divine authority also fell under the critique of Enlightenment thinking. As an source of objective truth, the completely inspired words of Scripture succumb to various forms of rational criticism that point out inconsistencies and even failures. If in fact the fully inspired Scriptures are what they are because of the coherence of God, then when errors are found God's own integrity is called into question. Neo-Protestant theologians, trying to find a way to deal with the results of rational criticisms turned to an overtly subjective approach. Schleiermacher, Semler, Ritschl, and others emphasized the domain of religion. The truth of God became the result of the concept of pious feeling and action (and sometimes only the experience of conversion.) God was to be found at the end of moral actions and community and wholly derived from what is immediately accessible to the individual. Karl Barth, through personal experiences having to do with the both World Wars, issued a decisive retort to this subjective-dominated tradition. Barth's response, according to Pannenberg, turned too sharply against the legitimate place of human subjectivity. The Swiss theologian determined that, in the shadow of the failure of both the divine inspiration of Scripture and the neo-Protestant recourse to experience to secure the authority of God, a new source of authority was needed. He offered the reality of the Word of God as fixed in faith. Pannenberg's criticism was that Barth committed the same error in a different form: he established a means by which "the truth of Christian doctrine must be established in advance of all discussion of its content."

1. Ed. L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 127.

2. Carl E. Braaten, "Wolfhart Pannenberg," in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, enlarged edition, ed.

So, while Barth's identification of the problem was correct, he merely established another general truth claim by which the content of theology should be deduced. Pannenberg's solution, in contrast, recognized the objective truth as the end of an inductive handling of the content of revelation. If God is true, then he can and will be found at the end of a critical investigation of His historical revelation. Faith is at the end of the journey for Pannenberg instead of at the beginning for Barth. Moreover, God has given himself to be found in this manner because it is proper to the finite human being who finds him or herself in the course of time with the powers of sensation. God as an objective truth can be found, but not mastered, through a process of careful, comprehensive, and provisional scientific investigation because his story is true. His perfection rises from imperfection – as infinite he is not bound by finite constraints but takes them into himself.

- (6) Theological study is scientific and it should not impose or assume any starting place. If truth is true it can be found and will stand up to scrutiny. (ST1 pp. 53, 58, 60)
- (7) *Revelation as History*
- a. "Revelation is an indirect self-disclosure of God in the course of historical events. ... The Word of God declares what God has been doing in the actual sequence of events open to historical investigation."²
 - b. Revelation is accessible to investigation and will stand up to its scrutiny.
 - c. A complete picture of God's revelation can be found in the complete picture of history. This means
 - i. the past, present, and *future* are descriptive of God and only together can form the complete revelation. We have access to only a part. It also means,
 - ii. God's revelation is not contained in any private, exclusive locations that are not given to regular historical investigation.
 - d. At any given time the work of philosophers and theologians to grapple with the big questions is a valuable contribution. God does not only give Himself to a select few.
 - e. Pannenberg makes the case that philosophers in the Greek tradition introduced the idea of one God to the advantage of Christian theology. They formed the idea of a Creator of everything apart from the pantheon of gods associated with specific functions and/or specific nations. In this way theology that seeks after the nature of God is indicative of the proper seeking after God. (ST1 p. 95)
- (8) The tendency, historically, has been to change the quest for God's nature into a method of finding God in the natural abilities of humankind. Not only did this occur in philosophical-theology but in Liberal Christianity and the history-of-religions school.
- a. This school defined religion as the human criteria for what determines the content of revelation and doctrine. (ST1 p. 120)

2. Carl E. Braaten, "Wolfhart Pannenberg," in *A Handbook of Christian Theologians*, enlarged edition, ed. Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 641.

- b. Anything said of the God/gods is a reflection/projection of human values. The religious method bypasses the *content* to look at the *effect*. That is, the content of religion always goes in the direction of human → god and cannot have its source in god. (ST1 152)
 - c. Pannenberg argues that, in fact, the God/gods may affect human life. Subjective experience of the content of a divine message or action is testable – and if the subjective experience corresponds to the objective message of the God, then it proves its existence. (ST1 160, 168, 187)
- (9) Revelation history as the test of God.
- a. What is the test of God's legitimacy as an objective being? How can our experience of him be shown to not just rise from ourselves?
 - b. *Answer:* for God to be self-determining reality He had to demonstrate his glory in a universal way. He said he would in the future (Isa. 40:5). His glory/existence was demonstrated in the event of Easter. It was a subjective event that demonstrated an objective content, acting upon or creating effects for humans.
 - c. God's glory and his eschatological/final vision for creation is manifest in Jesus' obedience and resurrection. The history of Christ is the proleptic future of creation. Anyone with eyes to see can see the eschaton in the gospel accounts.
 - d. God's complete revelation is hidden because it is unfinished, but it exists as if it were complete in Christ's history.
- (10) The Trinity is likewise known not from a pre-established idea (of unity) but from the revelation of Christ. From the economic inter-Trinitarian relationships we can know the immanent relationships. (ST1 310, 358)
- (11) God overcomes the antithesis of infinite-finite by reaching into the finite and making a place for it in Himself. This is especially poignant in the relation of Son to Father in the Trinity. (ST1 400, 410, 415)