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THE 'NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL' AND ITS PROBLEMS'

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Mark Seifrid is Professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is an expert on the theology of Paul and one of a number of scholars who has recently argued against the so-called 'New Perspective' on Paul as developed by E.P. Sanders and others. The following article, adapted from a forthcoming book for IVP, highlights some of the major weaknesses in the New Perspective.

It has now been more than twenty years since E.P. Sanders published his massive comparison of the apostle Paul with early Judaism, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.² Supplemented by further monographs and articles, this work has shaped much of the interpretation of Paul for the past generation. It has had at least two major effects. In the first place, Sanders provided a new paradigm for understanding the soteriology of early Judaism, which he named 'covenantal nomism'. With only minor exceptions, the early Jewish sources suppose that all those who belong to the covenant God established with Abraham are destined for salvation. Only those who rebel openly and without repentance are excluded from this covenant. Secondly, and as a result, Sanders abolished those portraits of Paul which imagined that his conversion had to do with relief from anxiety over the securing of his eternal state through his good deeds. This was by no means the only picture of Judaism which Christian biblical scholarship had produced, but it was the most prominent by the end of the nineteenth century and served for many as the unexamined basis for the interpretation of Paul. Sanders pointed to the numerous places in early Jewish writings in which God's gracious election of Israel was regarded as the sole and secure basis of salvation. In his reading of the materials, the concept of grace in early Judaism came out looking much the same as that which Christians attribute to Paul. Consequently, Paul's break with his past appeared inexplicable on the basis of the older paradigm. Some new explanation had to be found for the change of direction in Paul's life, and for the dispute he carries out in his letters with other Jewish Christians concerning the Law, righteousness, faith and the salvation of Gentiles. As one might imagine, the new proposals which have emerged generally have drawn upon corporate ideas,

¹ The following essay is drawn from a forthcoming book, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, which is to be published in the UK by Apollis.

² See especially, E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE - 66 CE* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1992).

eschewing or explicitly rejecting the attribution of an individualistic conception of salvation to Paul because of its association with the older Protestant portraits. In an odd, but perhaps not entirely accidental way, the existentialist interpretation of Paul from the earlier part of the twentieth century has been replaced at its end by that of Paul as the moral leader, who with his Gospel mounts an assault upon the malaise of the world. While the 'new perspective on Paul' by no means commands universal assent, most scholars would accept 'covenantal nomism' as an accurate description of the Judaism which Paul knew, even if they disagree with details of Sanders' work. The displacement of a soteriology oriented toward the individual by a corporate understanding is likewise pervasive, even though a variety of competing readings Paul have emerged within the 'new perspective'.

This new paradigm for the interpretation of Paul has been with us now for a generation. Although it would be premature or even presumptuous to speak of the crumbling of its structure, sufficient time has elapsed for some cracks to appear in its foundation. Our interest here is to trace the lines of some of those cracks.

'Covenantalism' and 'Nomism' Not 'Covenantal Nomism'

Just as earlier Protestant works interpreted the rabbinic materials solely in terms of their expectations of recompense at the final judgement, Sanders reconstructs the early Jewish understanding of salvation through the lens of God's election of Israel. In a very thorough and careful study, Friedrich Avemarle has shown that rabbinic Judaism tolerated a certain tension between affirmations of Israel's unconditioned election and God's demand for righteous conduct.³ Although Sanders' emphasis on 'electing grace' enjoys broader support in the materials than the older view, it is also quite clear that the rabbis also could speak of salvation as being contingent upon obedience. They could even speak of the salvation of Gentiles (those outside 'the covenant') on the basis of good deeds.⁴ Rather than striving to produce a system in which all contradictions were eliminated, the rabbis viewed salvation from (at least) these two independent perspectives. In other words in the rabbinic materials, 'covenantalism' (Sanders' 'covenantal nomism') stands alongside 'nomism' without the overarching synthesis which Sanders has proposed.

³ See F. Avemarle, *Tora und Leben: Untersuchungen zur Hellsbedeutung der Tora in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 55), (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996). See also F. Avemarle, 'Bund als Gabe und Recht', in F. Avemarle and H. Lichtenberger, eds., *Bund und Tora: Zur theologischen Begriffsgeschichte in alttestamentlicher, frühjüdischer und urchristlicher Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1996), 163-216, F. Avemarle, 'Erwählung und Vergeltung: Zur optionalen Struktur rabbinischer Soteriologie', *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999), 108-126.

⁴ See F. Avemarle, *Tora und Leben*, 575-84, and Avemarle, 'Erwählung und Vergeltung', 108-126.

This correction of Sanders' thesis has enormous implications. Although we shall never know precisely how the tension between Israel's election and the requirement of obedience worked itself out in the life and thought of individual rabbis, there is no hint in the sources that it was felt as a burden. In this sense Sanders' critique of the older Protestant interpretation of Paul stands. Nevertheless, Avemarie's work makes it clear that early Jewish thought was more complex than Sanders has allowed. Once we recognise that obedience could be regarded as a prerequisite to salvation despite Israel's election, a writing like 4 Ezra (2 Esdras), which Sanders had to regard as a strange exception to his rule, fits quite well within early Jewish thought. Jews in this period, sometimes did speak of salvation as being contingent upon human works, as this writing (along with others, in my judgement) clearly does. Obviously, this soteriology need not lead to uncertainty concerning one's final destiny, nor need it exclude notions of grace and election, as is evident from the Qumran writings. Paul's brief descriptions of his own preconversion piety give indication that he marked his status before God not only by his heritage within the chosen people, but also by his obedience (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5-6). Although we may not know the calculus by which he integrated the two, it is clear that he did not regard works as a mere proof of election, but as a distinct indication of his standing. This juxtaposition, which is incomprehensible within Sanders' systematisation of Jewish thought, makes sense given Avemarie's correction of his work. In the light of this new paradigm, Paul's coming to faith again becomes explicable as a conversion. His rejection of 'works of the Law', which (against the 'new perspective') he viewed as religious (and not merely national) boundary markers, has its basis in the cross.⁵ In it he came to see God's judgement upon him and his works:

I have been crucified with Christ, I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me. What I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself up for me. I do not set aside the grace of God. For if righteousness is through the Law, Christ died for nothing. (Gal. 2:19b-20).

Paul's conversion probably did not involve the rejection of an entirely self-attained righteousness, but it surely represented the rejection of self-righteousness, in favour of the righteousness which he found outside himself in Christ. For Paul, the election of Israel and the demand of the Law meet in Christ, the crucified and risen. The tension within early Jewish thought between grace and demand was resolved in an event, not a higher idea.

⁵ I have discussed this matter at greater length in *Christ, Our Righteousness*. Here it suffices simply to note that in his letter to Rome Paul rejects the 'works of the Law' because they subvert the Law's purpose of bringing condemnation and the 'knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20-21).

The Cross: More Than a Moral Lesson on 'Community'

As we have mentioned, the 'new perspective' in its various forms represents a criticism of the Protestant reading of Paul which emerged in the nineteenth century. In concrete terms, this has meant that the Bultmannian reading of Paul has been the main target of attack, since his approach, which dominated discussion in the middle part of the century, mediated basic aspects of the older reading of Paul. Actually, Bultmann himself broke with the liberal portrait of Paul, and produced a much more nuanced interpretation than interpreters usually acknowledge.⁶ Nevertheless, Bultmann's reading of Paul is unquestionably problematic, since among other things he supposes that Paul rejects 'works of the Law' because they represent self-striving to attain life: in faith one yields oneself to God, and receives life as a gift. Despite the partial truth in this description of Paul's theology, it is one-sided in at least two ways. In the first place, the event of Christ's cross and resurrection is reduced to an existential insight. Although Bultmann (with many in his school) never regarded it as such, the cross thereby becomes dispensable. It merely mediates an insight at which a human being might arrive by other means. Secondly, the Bultmannian approach limited its view of the human being to the relation between the person and God, leaving out of consideration our relation to the creation, particularly the community of persons within which we have been placed. The existentialist portrait of Paul reduced the biblical triangle of God-person-world to a lopsided duality.

As we have noted, Sanders' criticism of the older Protestant approach has shifted the focus of interpretation of Paul's soteriology from the individual to the community. In varying ways, scholars now argue that Paul primarily was concerned to defend the inclusion of Gentiles within the people of God. Over against other Jewish Christians who insisted upon the circumcision of Gentile believers, Paul called for the abandonment of all nationalistic pride, all 'boundary-markers' which separated Jew from Gentile. He wanted to do away with the ethnic boundaries which troubled the Church of his day, in favour of a Gospel which includes all who believe.⁷ Although there is again a measure of truth in this characterisation of Paul, it is just as one-sided as the Bultmannian portrait. It merely removes a different leg from the biblical tripod. Now Paul has become the defender of an ethical insight rather than an existential one. The ideal which he defends again is accessible to every human being. Paul didn't need the cross to tell him that a proud and prejudiced nationalism was

⁶ See the discussion in M. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (NovTSupp 68), (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 25-37.

⁷ See J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 353-54, 354-71; J.D.G. Dunn and A.M. Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 25-29.

wrong. He could have gained this much from the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. Moreover, it is not clear that Jewish 'ethnocentrism' is wrong when it is understood in biblical terms. The Scriptures themselves envision the streaming of the nations to Zion (Is. 2:1-4)! Paul is quite arguably no less ethnically particularistic than his opponents.⁸

If we derive our conception of 'community' from the apostle himself, rather than bringing our own ideas to the material, we shall find it impossible to speak of community apart from individual persons, and vice versa. In Paul's understanding, as in biblical thought more generally, the person is not subordinate to the community, nor does the community exist simply to serve the persons within it. The body is composed of many members, which must remain in their diversity if there really is to be a body and not some absurdity. At the same time, the body of Christ constitutes a reality which transcends the mere collection of the parts. Obviously, we cannot here provide a thorough analysis of Paul's ecclesiology, for which fresh work is needed. We may suggest, however, that in the broad sweep of Paul's thought, there are only two fundamental human communities, Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12-21). Israel and the nations represent a temporary bifurcation in human history, which God shall yet join together, not merely conceptually, but in substance: 'in Christ' there is neither 'Jew nor Greek' (Gal. 3:28). This arrival of the new creation is not merely a matter of eschatology, as if Paul were only one salvation-historical step ahead of his opponents. In Christ the world has been judged:

May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14).

The cross, upon which a *person* was crucified, encompasses both Paul (his person and his works) and his community. The 'new perspective' on Paul legitimately emphasises the social dimension of Paul's gospel, the announcement that God has included the Gentiles. Taken by itself, however, such inclusivism is nothing more than the embrace of an ideal. It does not fundamentally differ from the earlier portraits of Paul which supposed that he came to understand the idea of 'grace' or authentic existence through faith in Christ. Paul's Gospel transcends such ideals in that it announces the advent of a new being in the resurrection of the crucified Christ in whom the world has been judged.

The Gospel as the Beginning of Exile Not the End

Paul's thought also has been interpreted in corporate terms in another way. The thesis that many or most first-century Jews

⁸ Against T.L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). Paul does not regard believing Gentiles as proselytes who have joined the nation of Israel. Believing Jew and Gentile alike have entered into the Israel of promise which has come to reality in Christ.

regarded the Babylonian exile of Israel as continuing into their own day currently is receiving considerable interest and acceptance.⁹ According to this construal of early Judaism, Israel's promised forgiveness of sins and restoration from exile were thought to be yet to come. Paul announced in his Gospel that the hour of fulfilment had arrived in Jesus' cross and resurrection, or so it is argued. It must be said, however, that this reading of Paul is a mere variation on an older theme. To shift from speaking of the burden of personal guilt to that of the nation represents no real movement away from psychologism. Whereas Paul was once thought to have been plagued by personal sins, now the nation, or at least many within it, are thought to have lamented their corporate failures.

The thesis also involves a large claim concerning the self-understanding of first-century Judaism. Not surprisingly, it is exceedingly difficult to sustain across the various witnesses to Jewish thought from this period, especially within Paul's letters.¹⁰ The attraction which Judaism held for Paul's churches in Galatia is very difficult to understand if one assumes that Jews generally were lamenting their condition. The attractiveness of Judaism to Paul's readers is felt throughout the letter.¹¹ Paul's assertion that the heavenly, not the earthly Jerusalem, is the 'mother' of believers presupposes that the earthly city bore considerable influence in the minds of his converts (Gal. 4:21-31). His declaration that the earthly Jerusalem 'is enslaved with her children' does not derive from the ongoing Roman occupation (of which his converts would have been aware), but because of its failure to believe the Gospel (cf. Gal. 5:25).

Furthermore, 'Israel' is divided frequently into the pious and the wicked in the Jewish writings from this period. Those who adhere to the demands of the Law in the present shall be prepared for the restoration which is yet to come. The rest will suffer punishment with the enemies of God's people.¹² The 'sin' of the people is no longer absolute and all-encompassing, as the 'exilic' reading of Paul requires. Those who are obedient may await the future with confidence, as for example in the book of Baruch, where the author claims,

⁹ See, e.g., N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 1), (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 268-79; F.J. Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 48-68; J.M. Scott, 'Restoration of Israel', in G. Hawthorne, R. Martin, and D. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1993), 796-805.

¹⁰ See, F.G. Downing 'Exile in Formative Judaism' in *Making Sense in (and of) the First Christian Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, forthcoming).

¹¹ See Gal. 1:10 - 2:10; Gal. 2:11-21; Gal. 6:16.

¹² See O. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten*, (WMANT 23), (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1967), 189-92.

*We praise you from our exile because we have turned away from our hearts all the unrighteousness of our fathers who sinned before you.*¹³

This development is of considerable significance, since now the piety of some within the nation is decoupled from its outward condition.

The early Jewish materials often present the exile as having ended in some sense or another, even if they also regard it as continuing or recurring. The book of Judith speaks directly of the end of the exile.¹⁴ The conclusion of the pseudepigraphal book of Baruch suggests that the return from exile is already in progress.¹⁵ The Qumran community regarded itself as the remnant, delivered from the continuing guilt of the nation, even if they entered a new exile in their separation from Jerusalem.¹⁶ The book of Tobit appears to envision a two-stage conclusion to the exile: by God's mercy some return from the exile and rebuild the Temple in an imperfect way; later all return from exile and rebuild Jerusalem in splendour. The exile has ended for some, but the 'times of fulfilment' are yet to come.¹⁷ Philo can speak of God himself as 'homeland, kinsfolk and inheritance' and regard the exile as the Jewish colonisation of the world, even though he also expects an end of exile.¹⁸ Josephus can treat the exile as having ended after 70 years, only to be followed by subsequent 'exiles', including the one he himself experienced.¹⁹

Quite understandably, those in the land could regard themselves as not being in exile. The Mishnah contains a saying ascribed to Abtalion, who lived in Jerusalem under Herodian rule in the first-century BC. He warns teachers of the Law to guard their words so that they may not become guilty of the punishment of exile, and be exiled to the place of 'bad waters', i.e. bad teaching. Despite subjugation to Rome, he obviously did not regard himself to be in exile.²⁰ The form of the Passover Seder recorded in the Mishnah is significant in this regard, since it may reflect something of the

¹³ Baruch 3:7. See also the Prayer of Azariah 18. Among other early Jewish writings 1 Enoch, Tobit, the Psalms of Solomon, 4 Ezra and the Qumran writings (despite their emphasis on unconditioned grace) display this sort of thinking.

¹⁴ Judith 4:1-5; 5:17-19.

¹⁵ See Baruch 4:36; Baruch 5:5-9.

¹⁶ See, e.g., the Cairo Damascus Document 1:1-17; 3:10-21.

¹⁷ Tobit 14:1-9. Note that only the obedient shall be saved, 14:7-9.

¹⁸ See Philo, *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things*, 26-27. Here Abraham (who perhaps represents all Diaspora Jews like Philo) acknowledges God as his homeland, kinsfolk, and inheritance, even though he is a pilgrim and a wanderer. Philo's expectation of an end of exile appears in *On Rewards and Punishments*, 162-72.

¹⁹ *Antiquities* 4:314; 10:112-13; 10:247-77; 11:1-4. For his own reasons, he regards exile positively and seems to lack an expectation of a return. See L. Feldman, 'The Concept of Exile in Josephus', in J. Scott (ed.), *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 145-72.

²⁰ m. 'Aboth 1:11.

common practice and thought of early Judaism. A father is to instruct the son concerning the redemption from Egypt from Deuteronomy 26, 'beginning with the disgrace and ending with the glory' (Deut. 26:5-9). No mention is made of the subsequent description of exile and return in Deuteronomy 28-32.²¹

It is not at all clear, therefore, that there was a widespread sense among Jews of Paul's day that Israel remained in exile in the way that this theory demands. The pervasive sense of national guilt and lament which it requires is lacking in the sources. Undoubtedly many Jews in Paul's day regarded the exile as in some sense continuing. Yet many Jews also supposed that the exile had in some sense ended or that its effects had been ameliorated, even if it remained. The return to the land, the reconstruction of the Temple, and the adjustment by many Jews to life in the Diaspora brought forth varied perspectives on Israel's experience.

There is no evidence that Paul, who returned from the Diaspora to Jerusalem in his youth and refers to his practice of the Law as 'blameless' considered himself part of a nation suffering in exile for its guilt. Furthermore, when Paul speaks of Israel's failure in his letters, he treats the nation as a whole. We therefore cannot suppose that he regarded part of the nation as being in exile or as thinking itself to be in exile, as the early Jewish sources might allow. The judgement which he formed concerning his people was all-encompassing. It is derived not from an assessment of Israel's outward condition, but from its rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

This observation brings us to Romans 9-11, where Paul himself cites biblical texts which have to do with Israel's exile. His perspective is nearly the opposite of that attributed to him by the 'exilic' interpretation. A 'remnant' of Jewish believers in Christ has come about in the present effectuation of God's word in Christ (Rom. 9:28; Rom. 11:1; Is. 10:22; Is. 28:22). Israel's rejection of Jesus is the 'stumbling against the stone of offence', which leads to exile (Rom. 9:33; Is. 28:16). The believing community of Jews and Gentiles represents 'a provocation to jealousy by a nation which is not'. That is to say, it represents the effectuation of the 'exile' of which the book of Deuteronomy speaks (Rom. 10:19; Dt. 32:21). The servitude to which Israel is now subjected is its failure to believe the Gospel (Rom. 11:7-9). The image of the exile stands behind the figure of the olive tree branches, 'who' were broken off because of their unbelief (Rom. 11:20). Paul wants his Gentile readers to know 'this mystery', this once-hidden truth of Scripture now revealed: 'a hardening in part has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles enters in'. In this strange way, by its present hardening, *all* Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:25).²² The nation is presently consigned to disobedience, in order that it may know the justification of the ungodly by the Redeemer who shall come 'from Zion' to

²¹ m. Pesa. 10:4.

²² One need not, and should not, adopt a temporal reading of the adverb here.

'remove ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom. 11:26). He shall effect the new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, taking away their sins (Rom. 11:27).²³ It is on account of the gospel, not some past failure, that God now treats the Jewish people as enemies (Rom. 11:28). The time of proclamation shall come to an end. At the arrival of the *eschaton* the nation shall be saved. Paul sees the Deuteronomistic sequence of apostasy, exile and return in Israel's *present* rejection of Jesus as Messiah and future salvation. Israel's history itself bears prophetic significance, and is fulfilled in Christ in an eschatological recapitulation of the exile and return.

Justification as the Justification of the Creator Not Covenant—Faithfulness

Present discussion generally has assumed that Paul's terminology for righteousness and justification derives its meaning from the realm of covenant and election. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find in the literature the expression 'covenant righteousness' applied to Paul's usage. As a human attribute and requirement for salvation, righteousness then may be said to entail the fulfilment of those demands which God has set in his covenantal relation with his people. It does not imply the demand for perfection, only (it is said) the desire to obey God, a certain standard of behaviour, and repentance for any failures that occur. Once this understanding of righteousness is applied to Paul, his soteriology becomes indistinguishable from that of early Judaism, and the basic impetus toward national categories, which is inherent to the 'new perspective', is given.²⁴ In a similar manner, the covenantal interpretation of 'God's righteousness' often reduces it to the idea of 'salvation'. This equation, which has roots going back to the end of the nineteenth-century, became influential in the middle of the twentieth century, especially through the OT theology of Gerhard von Rad. References to 'God's righteousness' which appear frequently in the Psalms and the Book of Isaiah generally do signify his saving action, and may be justifiably rendered as 'salvation' (as the New Revised Standard Version often does) even if some meaning is thereby lost. Nevertheless, we cannot properly turn 'salvation' into a definition of the idea of divine righteousness, even if it is an acceptable gloss in a good number of contexts. The 'righteousness of God' which brings salvation to his people also means retribution for his enemies!²⁵ Furthermore, there are a number of instances in the Hebrew Scriptures in which the idea of a retributive righteousness appears. The most significant of these are the confessions which appear in association with a contention in

²³ Paul here freely conflates Is. 59:20 and Jer. 31:33–34.

²⁴ We may note in passing that Luther – much maligned and misunderstood by the 'new perspective' – found in Paul's understanding of justification the basis for rejecting a covenant theology which is scarcely distinguishable from the one many scholars now attribute to Paul!

²⁵ E.g. Ps. 7:1–18; Ps. 11:5–7; Ps. 35:24–28; Is. 10:22; Is. 51:4–8.

which the guilty party, who is subject to retribution acknowledges, 'Yahweh is righteous' (*ʿaddiq*)²⁶ This adjectival usage, which seems to have been largely overlooked in modern research, clearly signals that something wider than the notion of 'salvation' is involved in the biblical understanding of God's righteousness.

As these observations already suggest, the use of the category of 'covenant' to conceptualise 'righteousness' is flawed and has led to distortions in interpretation. In fact, the usage of righteousness terminology itself is rarely brought into close connection with covenantal terms in the biblical literature, and nowhere yields the idea of a saving covenantal act, which interpreters now generally presuppose.²⁷ It rather appears often in association with the idea of 'ruling and judging', as in the expression 'do to justice and righteousness'.²⁸ The salvific overtones which are attached to the biblical use of righteousness terminology derive in the first instance from the context of contentions and lawsuits, in which the 'right' of an injured party is established by one with authority to 'rule and judge', frequently a royal figure.²⁹ In such instances, the judicial and executive functions are joined, so that verdicts are inseparable from vindicating actions in which justice is established.³⁰ When the psalmists appeal to God for justice, they want more than a mere pronouncement!³¹ Ultimately, this juridical context is bound up with the understanding that God has determined a 'right' order for the world.³² As Creator he intervenes again and again to establish this order, particularly when the rights of the poor have been violated. It was the appointed task of the anointed king within Israel to mediate the judgements of God for the oppressed, and so to establish this righteousness:

*Give, O God, your just judgements to the king
And your righteousness to the son of the king
He will judge your people with righteousness
And your oppressed ones with just judgement (Ps. 72:1-3).³³*

When this obligation was repeatedly violated, as the prophets charged the house of David with doing, God determined to establish justice for himself, and to bring retribution on those who opposed

²⁶ E.g. Ex. 9:27; 2 Ch. 12:6; La. 1:18. Cf. P. Bovati, *Re-Establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures in the Hebrew Bible*, (M. Smith, trans.; JSOTSup 105), (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 103.

²⁷ I have surveyed the biblical usage in 'Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism' forthcoming in a volume edited by D.A. Carson.

²⁸ E.g. 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Ki. 10:9; Is. 9:6; Is. 33:5; Jer. 22:3.

²⁹ E.g. Ps. 72:1-4; 2 Sam. 15:4; Is. 9:6; Jer. 22:3.

³⁰ E.g. 1 Kgs 8:32; Ex. 23:7; Dt. 25:1-2; Ps. 82:3.

³¹ E.g. Ps. 9:5-7; Ps. 35:23-28; Ps. 71:1-24.

³² On this topic, see H.H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung: Hintergrund und Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gerechtigkeitsbegriffes*, (BHT 40), (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1968).

³³ See also, for example, 2 Sa. 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; Je. 22:3; Pr. 31:8-9.

³⁴ See for example Is. 1:10-26; Is. 58:1-14; Am. 5:1-27.

him.³⁴ It is within this framework that the Messianic hope comes to expression. God promises his people a 'new' David who, unlike the previous rulers of Israel, will work justice and righteousness.³⁵

Correspondingly, hope came to be more directly fixed upon God himself and his action as Creator within biblical thought. It is this background which informs Paul's allusion to Psalm 98 in Romans 1:17, where he declares that the 'righteousness of God' has been revealed in the Gospel. The psalm itself runs as follows:

*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has worked wonders,
His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him,
The Lord has made known his salvation,
To the eyes of the nations he has revealed his righteousness
He has remembered his constant love and his faithfulness to
the house of Israel
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God
(Ps. 98:1-3).*

The psalmist envisions God intervening on behalf of his people against unnamed enemies before the eyes of all the nations. We might well say that the Lord is moved to action *on account* of his covenantal relation with Israel, since he 'remembers his constant love and faithfulness' to them. But he acts *as King* of creation, a ruler who first intervenes to save his own children before going on to further works (Ps. 98:6). The following lines of the psalm call upon the nations to rejoice as they anticipate the Lord's coming to judge them (Ps. 98:4-9). God's saving act on behalf of Israel foreshadows the righteousness which he shall effect for the earth, the rectification of the created order.³⁶ For this reason the very elements, the sea, the rivers and the hills celebrate his coming.³⁷ 'God's righteousness' is bound up with his role as ruler and judge of creation. The covenant fidelity which he displays toward Israel is only one manifestation of the saving righteousness which he exercises as ruler of all.

We should not allow the first lines of this psalm to go unnoticed. The contention which implicitly informs the psalmist's statements involves not merely 'the house of Israel', but God himself: his 'holy arm and right hand' gain salvation *for him* (Ps. 98:1). In revealing his righteousness, God was not only delivering his people, but establishing his own cause against those who contend against him. The violation of the created order is simultaneously a violation of God's right as Creator. In bringing justice, he insists on his rightful claim to be God against the world which denies him:

³⁵ See, e.g., Is. 9:1-6; Jer. 23:5-6.

³⁶ A similar image appears in Is. 51:4-8: 'My righteousness is near, my salvation has gone forth, and my arm shall judge the peoples. Upon me shall the coast lands wait, and for my arm they shall hope' (Is. 51:5).

³⁷ See also, for example, Ps. 96; Is. 42:10-13; Is. 49:13; Is. 51:4-11.

*The heavens shall vanish like smoke,
the earth shall wear out like a garment,
and its inhabitants shall likewise die,
but my salvation shall be forever,
and my righteousness shall not pass away (Is. 51:6).*

The punitive action which appears in this text obviously corresponds to God's saving activity, but clearly is not necessary to it. God need not destroy the world to save his people. He acts not merely for them, but also for his own sake. His ruling and judging the world includes his absolute right to be God, even to the point of the destruction of the old and the establishment of a new creation.³⁸ For this reason, when God has a contention with his people, it is only through wrath and condemnation that salvation and righteousness may come. Indeed, the prophetic oracles of salvation characteristically announce 'deliverance through destruction'.³⁹

It is important to recognise that the modern, three-party courtroom is not an appropriate model for interpreting the biblical conception of justification, including that of Paul. The administration of justice always is a two-party affair.⁴⁰ A more powerful third party who entered into a dispute took up the cause of one disputant or the other.⁴¹ Therefore, when God enters into a contention, he is not pictured as a judge who stands above the matter, but as a party to the dispute. In effecting justice for the one in the right ('justifying' them) and punishing the one in the wrong, he establishes his own cause, as in Psalm 98.⁴² His verdict, moreover, does not merely bring salvation, but re-establishes moral order within the world and his authority as Creator over it. It is not that 'might makes right' – as one must say, if one reduces 'righteousness' to the idea of salvation – but that God's might restores what is right, especially his right as God. For this reason, we find the occasional confessions by the defeated parties that, 'Yahweh is righteous, we are in the wrong' (Ex. 9:27).

It is this context of creation and judgement which lies behind Paul's understanding of righteousness and justification. Obviously there is much to be said on this matter for which we do not have space or time here. The most we can do is briefly comment

³⁸ Cf. Is. 41:21–29; 45:18–25; 48:1–12 and see Pss. 11:1–7; 7:3–5; 97:1–6; 50:1–23.

³⁹ E.g. Is. 1:24–28; Is. 5:1–30; Is. 9:1–21; Is. 51:1–23.

⁴⁰ N.T. Wright, despite his appeal to the 'Hebrew law court' and its two-party form, effectively turns it into the image of the modern courtroom, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford/Grand Rapids: Lion/Eerdmans, 1997), 96–9.

⁴¹ With reference to the poor, see e.g. Ps. 72:4; Prov. 31:9.

⁴² This thought is prominent, for example, in the latter chapters of the book of Isaiah. See especially Is. 41:1–13; Is. 49:23–5; Is. 50:7–11; Is. 51:4–8.

⁴³ I have treated the topic in greater detail in the forthcoming book, *Christ, Our Righteousness*.

upon Romans 1:16-17, as a way of sketching the outline of Paul's thought.⁴³

Here the connection between God's saving intervention on behalf of Israel and the salvation of the world which we find in Psalm 98 recurs. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation 'for the Jew first, and also for the Greek' (Rom. 1:16). The 'revelation of the righteousness of God' recalls not only God's promises for his people, but also his purposes for the nations. In speaking of 'God's righteousness' Paul has in view God's role as 'ruler and judge', who shall savingly bring about 'justice and righteousness' for the world which he has made. It is 'in the Gospel', which announces the crucified and risen Christ, that the 'righteousness of God' is revealed. By its very nature, this localising declaration suggests that Paul here refers to Christ's resurrection, employing biblical language in order to convey its saving significance. 'God's righteousness' is his 'vindicating act' of raising Christ from the dead *for us*. The biblical themes of God's deliverance of the oppressed, his vindication of his Servant, his faithfulness to Israel and his salvation of the world are implicitly present. That which is to take place at the day of judgement for those who believe is manifest here and now in him.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it is God's righteousness which has been revealed. In Christ's resurrection God has been vindicated and has defeated his enemies.

The broader context confirms this interpretation. In the opening verses of the letter, Paul names the resurrected Christ as the content of his Gospel, which he likewise describes as the fulfillment of promise (Rom. 1:1-4). Even more significantly, he subsequently connects the justification of believers with the resurrection of the crucified Christ: ... 'who was delivered up on account of our transgressions, and raised on account of our justification' (Rom. 4:25).

Just as our sin brought Christ's condemnation and death, his resurrection announces our justification. The close connection between verdict and vindication which one finds so prominently in the usage of the Hebrew Scriptures reappears here. The divine verdict 'for us' is present and manifest in the resurrected Christ. Later in Romans, Paul identifies the risen Christ with the revealed 'righteousness of God' to which Israel refused to submit (Rom. 10:4).

It is, of course, in the resurrection of the *crucified* Christ that our redemption is found. The biblical references to God's saving acts of righteousness imply that his enemies receive retribution in those

⁴³ Rom. 2:6; Rom. 2:16; Rom. 3:5-6.

⁴⁴ The two final occurrences of 'God's righteousness' in this passage stand in immediate parallelism to references to God's patience and justice (Rom. 3:25, 26). They undoubtedly signify 'God's own righteousness', just as Paul speaks in Romans 3:5 of God's righteousness in his 'contention' with humanity. Note that Paul here employs the simple pronoun, 'his righteousness'.

same acts. Paul gives that underlying assumption full expression in his elaboration of Romans 1:17 in Romans 3:21–26, particularly in the latter part of this passage.⁴⁵ Christ's atoning death constitutes a 'demonstration of God's *own* righteousness', which has been hidden until 'the present time' (Rom. 3:25–26). This delay has taken place on account of God's 'patience', in which he passed over the sins which human beings have committed (Rom. 3:25). As similar expressions in Romans indicate, in speaking of God's 'patience' Paul has in view the 'forbearance of God intended to lead human beings to repentance' (Rom. 2:4). Paul here refers to God's earlier suspension of his wrath, not to some former forgiveness of sins. Whereas Paul's earlier usage of the 'righteousness of God' refers the act of God for us in Christ's resurrection, the latter occurrences of the expression have to do with God's own righteousness manifest in Christ's death. God 'demonstrates his righteousness' in the crucifixion of his Son (Rom. 3:25). In variance from his earlier language of 'revelation', Paul now speaks of the 'demonstration' of God's righteousness. There shall come a time when God the Creator shall 'demonstrate his wrath and make his power known' (Rom. 9:22).⁴⁶ The cross is the prolepsis of that day of judgement, when God's contention with the world comes to its conclusion. In justifying the sinner God does not set aside his contention with humanity. He brings it to completion in his own Son.

God wills that this completion take place not merely outwardly in Christ's cross, but also in us. Paul concludes this passage with the striking statement that the demonstration of God's righteousness, i.e. his right in his contention with humanity, took place in order that God might 'become just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus' (Rom. 3:26). In its context, the clause clearly bears a telic sense: God demonstrated his righteousness so that he might 'come to be just'. In this concluding statement we may suggest there is a reflection of the 'confessions' which appear at the resolution of biblical 'contentions'. There God 'becomes' righteous in that his adversaries confess his right and their guilt. In the same way, the justification of the one who believes in Christ and the justification of God are bound together. Christ's death represents an atonement (with implicit notions of fulfilment of promise), in which guilt is both acknowledged and removed: 'God set him forth as a place of propitiation through faith in his blood' (Rom. 3:25).⁴⁷ Faith is thus

⁴⁶ The terminology for 'revelation' varies between Rom. 3:21 and Rom. 3:25–26. Very likely there is a semantic distinction between the two words for revelation, with *endexis* conveying especially the sense of 'public exhibition' (as opposed to more mental notions of revelation).

⁴⁷ This interpretation of Christ's death goes back through early Christian tradition to Jesus' own words at his last Passover meal with his disciples. See Stuhlmacher 1986: 16–29. It is not at all surprising, then, that Paul's language here shows connections with Hebrews, 1 Peter, and the Johannine writings. N.B. God put Christ forward as a 'place of propitiation'. Paul does not speak of Christ appeasing an unloving God on our behalf, but of a God who redeems humanity in his own Son.

directed to the *crucified* and risen Jesus. In faith, one takes the side of God in his claim against one's self, giving God justice. At the same time, one takes hold of God's gift in Christ, whom he has 'put forward' as an atonement and in whom he has taken the side of the sinner. In Christ and in faith, the justification of God the Creator meets the justification of the godless. For Paul, the latter cannot take place without the former.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly the 'new perspective on Paul' in its various forms shall be with us for some time to come. Despite its current attractiveness, however, its problems appear to be fundamental. One can only predict, therefore, that the cracks in its base shall widen until the entire structure crumbles. Whether this shall take place in our generation or one to come is impossible to tell.

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*,¹ but it is also extensively covered in *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*² and in Volume 2 of his *Systematic Theology*.³

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.⁴ 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

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

² 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*.

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

⁴ 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 Myth⁵, 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'.⁶

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'⁷ 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.

⁵ *Jesus*, 33.

⁶ *Jesus*, 35.

⁷ 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*, 141–50.⁸ 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.'⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.

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

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

¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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'.¹²

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.¹³ 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'.¹⁴

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

¹¹ *Jesus*, 148.

¹² *Jesus*, 148.

¹³ *The Apostles' Creed*, 63.

¹⁴ *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'.¹⁵

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'.¹⁶ 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'.¹⁷ He also argues¹⁸ 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.*¹⁹

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'.²⁰ 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'.²¹

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

¹⁵ *Jesus*, 96

¹⁶ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 359

¹⁷ *Jesus*, 100.

¹⁸ *Jesus*, 101.

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

²⁰ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 359

²¹ *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'.²² Consequently, the resurrection was, 'historically speaking, the point of departure for the history of Christendom'.²³ 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'.²⁴ 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.*²⁵

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

²² *The Apostles' Creed*, 53

²³ *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.'

²⁴ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 360.

²⁵ *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'.²⁶

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'.²⁷ 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'.²⁸ 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

²⁶ *The Apostles' Creed*, 113.

²⁷ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 362.

²⁸ 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'.²⁹

Secondly, the resurrection was 'The Justification of Jesus by the Father'.³⁰ 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'.³¹

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?'³²

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'.³³ This means that in the risen Jesus the end of the world has already begun³⁴ 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*.³⁵ Wiles believes, against Pannenberg's critics, that he is correct in asserting that we can ascribe absolute significance and *full*³⁶ divinity to Jesus only if we accept the apocalyptic context, including the idea of the immediate and dramatic culmination of all

²⁹ *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'.

³⁰ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 343.

³¹ *The Apostles' Creed*, 52.

³² *Creed*, 52.

³³ *Creed*, 53.

³⁴ *Jesus*, 67.

³⁵ M. Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 160-61.

³⁶ 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.³⁷

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

³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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

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

³⁹ 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".'⁴⁰ 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'.⁴¹ 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'.⁴² He further denies that the resurrection was a return to earthly life and describes it instead as a 'transition to the new eschatological life'.⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴ It was no mere return to life as we know it, 'but a transformation into an entirely new life'.⁴⁵ 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

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

⁴¹ 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'.

⁴² *Jesus*, 92.

⁴³ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 348.

⁴⁴ *Jesus*, 77.

⁴⁵ *The Apostles' Creed*, 97.

organisms known to us'.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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'.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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'.⁵⁰ 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'.⁵¹ On the contrary, the resurrection was an 'event' which occurred at a specific time and at a particular place.

⁴⁶ *The Apostles' Creed*, 100.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ *The Apostles' Creed*, 98–99.

⁴⁹ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 359.

⁵⁰ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 359.

⁵¹ *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'.⁵² 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'.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ 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

⁵² *Jesus*, 74.

⁵³ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 346.

⁵⁴ *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 proleptic 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.⁵⁶

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.

⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁶

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'.⁵⁷

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'.⁵⁸ 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'.⁵⁹ 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'.⁶⁰ 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'.⁶¹ On this view, Creator, Saviour and Spirit are not distinct 'persons'

⁵⁶ 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).

⁵⁷ *Jesus*, 121.

⁵⁸ *Jesus*, 123.

⁵⁹ *Jesus*, 124.

⁶⁰ *Jesus*, 125.

⁶¹ *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'.⁶² 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.*⁶³

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

⁶² *Jesus*, 127.

⁶³ *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.⁶⁴ 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?

⁶⁴ *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 Christ⁶⁵ and his whole discussion of the question of the unity of Jesus with God presupposes the incarnation.⁶⁶ 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.*⁶⁷

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'.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹ 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

⁶⁵ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, ch. 10.

⁶⁶ *Jesus*, 133–58.

⁶⁷ *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1, 368.

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹

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.⁷²

Hebblethwaite has described Pannenberg's thinking at this point as characterised by extreme difficulty and roundabout conceptuality;⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 273 (change of case, mine).

⁷¹ *Jesus: God and Man*, 335.

⁷² *Jesus*, 335.

⁷³ B. Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation*, 155.

⁷⁴ 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.'⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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

⁷⁵ C. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 15.

⁷⁶ See further Allister 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.

SYSTEMATIC SERIES – A REVIEW ARTICLE

Tony Gray

Tony Gray is the national staff worker for RTSF. He completed his doctoral studies at Oxford, and has published in Themelios on a number of previous occasions. He is currently the systematic reviews editor for Themelios, and this year his cartoon introduction to theology, The Potted Guide to Theology, is published by Paternoster Press.

Over the past few years, it seems that systematic theology has had a new lease of life in the publishing market. Various publishing houses have started important series in the field, and have thus demonstrated a commitment to the topic. This article aims to survey a number of these, in order to help the student make some headway amongst all that is coming out.

Whilst not strictly a series, two recent works by Francis Watson merit mention in this context. *Text, Church, and World*, and *Text and Truth*, chart Watson's argument to bring together systematic theology and biblical theology. The subtitles of the respective volumes speak for themselves: 'Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective' and 'Redefining Biblical Theology'. For anyone involved in theology, whether biblical studies or systematic theology, Watson's work challenges the cherished assumptions of much of the academy, and bring crucial questions to bear on the work of exegetes and systematians alike. Inevitably they also enter the world of hermeneutics, and useful discussion is found of many of the major players in modern debate.

If these two volumes are too much to wade through, then a brilliant and refined version of Watson's thesis can be found in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*. This volume, edited by Colin Gunton, forms the first part of what is turning out to be a very useful series. It is very much a companion, and includes 14 excellent essays by leading international scholars. The essays lean on the orthodox and conservative side of the theological spectrum. Although by no means all of them are evangelical in their approach, it is an extremely welcome sign to see something of a text book in academic theology which is at the very least Trinitarian and incarnational. Contributors include amongst others Colin Gunton (Historical and Systematic Theology, and The Doctrine of Creation), Jeremy Begbie (Christianity and the Arts), Kevin Vanhoozer (on anthropology), Trevor Hart (Redemption and Fall). Stanley Hauerwas brings his customary challenging perspectives to questions of ethics and theology, stressing their inextricable links. Gerald Loughlin likewise outlines current issues in authority, although questions concerning post-liberalism remain. Similarly, Geoffrey Wainwright brings an ecumenical perspective to pneumatology, and David Fergusson delivers eschatology into the

heart of doctrinal concerns. Although this companion may not be the perfect introduction for the non-specialist, it is to be warmly welcomed both as a helpful text and as a sign that Christian doctrinal studies may possibly be on a more positive path. Of course evangelicals will have critical questions to bring to the text, especially concerning the exact understanding of Scripture and the role that it plays in theology, and the precise nature of atonement, but if these are kept in mind then this work can be extremely useful.

The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation, edited by John Barton, follows the same format, with solid essays on major topics by the best in the field. This time twenty essays from the likes of David Jasper, Ann Loades, Anthony Thiselton, Robert Morgan, Robert Alter, John Ashton, James Dunn and Frances Young bring their expertise to bear on a wide range of topics in biblical studies. Thus whilst this title is not strictly one which would come under the heading of systematic, it both falls into the series, and would be a welcome help to the systematician wanting to acquaint themselves with the field. For example, James Dunn is well qualified to describe issues and prospects in Pauline letters research, and Anthony Thiselton summarises very well in 28 pages issues on which he has written thousands of pages! What is disappointing is the lack of a contribution on biblical theology, given what Watson has written in the accompanying volume. Two further volumes boost the series thus far. John de Gruchy has edited *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, and Christopher Rowland *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. Both editors are experts in the respective fields, and again Cambridge University Press are to be commended for enlisting teams of renowned and well versed scholars. Studies in Bonhoeffer and his theology occur in almost every university course, and this volume offers helpful introduction, overview, and comment, on various aspects of his life and theology. Worthy of particular mention are John Moses' essay on the German political context, and Peter Selby's piece on 'Christianity in a world come of age'. The volume on Liberation Theology covers all the major bases expected, and again will serve as a solid and clear introduction, yet at the same time an introduction that offers food for thought. Thus essays by O'Donovan on political theology, and Mary Grey on feminist theology, have such effect. There are more volumes in the offering (Medieval Jewish Thought, Christian Ethics, Karl Barth, and Postmodern Theology), and they are to be eagerly awaited. First year undergraduates may not find all the introduction they wish here, but as reference tools, and collections of short essays to make you think, they are to be highly recommended.

Edinburgh University Press has recently committed itself to two series in theology. The first, the Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology (series editors are Kevin Vanhoozer and Philip Clayton) sets its aims as the following:

In a discipline which is growing weary of ideological critique and the preoccupation with method, Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology returns to the central themes of systematic theology, relating past thought to areas of contemporary concern in a way that is both faithful and

creative. The volumes in this series reflect a confidence in the continuing relevance of Scripture and the Christian tradition.

Like the Cambridge Companion series, while these are not card-carrying evangelical works, such aims and claims are to be enthusiastically welcomed, even if their intentions may not always have the desired result. So, for example, Gabriel Fackre offers a study on *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation*. Although slightly predictable in its employment of the model of narrative to elucidate the doctrine of revelation, Fackre's work is to be welcomed for the Trinitarian way in which it tackles the subject. Thus the three-fold structure examines general revelation, special revelation (with useful attention to the question of Israel), and revelation as reception. Fackre is someone who has always sat on the edge of evangelicalism. This is to be welcomed at least in the fact that he does give due and detailed consideration to evangelical doctrines of Scripture, and indeed includes a detailed analysis of Carl Henry's position, yet at the same time all evangelicals may not be happy with the path he finally takes. Students should turn elsewhere for a conservative evangelical doctrine of revelation, yet here they will find a generous and thoughtful reflection on all aspects of revelation.

By far the most enjoyable volume in this series so far must be Colin Gunton's *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study*. Well known already for his Trinitarian theology, in this study he examines how that theology relates to the doctrine of creation. Using biblical and historical case studies, Gunton elucidates a thoroughly Trinitarian doctrine of creation, and then applies this to various systematic questions, including providence, anthropology, eschatology and ethics. The historical chapters make informative reading in their own right, and hence this study would be useful in this way alone. However, Gunton is keen throughout to avoid mistakes in his doctrine of creation, moving between the heresies and traps which various groups and individuals have fallen prey to during the centuries, even today. For example, he is well-acquainted with the popularisation of modern science, and the distorted views of God and creation these can eventually lead to. As with other volumes in this series on constructive theology, there is a distinct Barthian flavour to the theology. However, to a critical and acute eye that is not to be feared. An affirmation of a providential Trinitarian God, revealed primarily in Jesus Christ, is to be welcomed. The third volume in this series to have appeared thus far is Philip Clayton's *God and Contemporary Science*, and as with the other volumes, this offers a clear and informed guide to contemporary and historical issues. Others projected in the series include Paul Fiddes on *Salvation*, Alister McGrath on *Constructive Christology*, Bruce Marshall on *The Holy Spirit*, Kevin Vanhoozer on *Divine Action and Providence*, John Webster on *The Shape of the Self*, and Rowan Williams on *The Trinity*. These volumes are not at an introductory level for first year students, but, as study aids and detailed reflections, they are worthwhile. The fact that they are indeed 'constructive' means that at the very least they are worth a look, and the others are eagerly awaited.

The second new series offered by Edinburgh University Press is the 'Reason and Religion' series. These are more strictly studies in the philosophy of religion, but have close affinity with issues in systematics, and in fact would be of great use to students in either discipline. Paul Helm is the series editor, and he offers the first volume in the series examining *Faith and Understanding*. After a discussion of the various meanings of the phrase 'faith seeking understanding' (including discussion of Wittgenstein, Kant, D.Z. Philips, Kretzmann and Plantinga), Helm delivers part 2 as a series of 5 case studies into theological situations whereby the concept of faith and understanding is elucidated. These include Augustine's *Confessions* on time and creation, Anselm's *Proslogion* on ontology, Anselm on the incarnation, Jonathan Edwards on sin, and Calvin on the *Sensus Divinitatis*. These case studies are excellent, and could well be used as texts for philosophy of religion courses. They introduce the historical question, the theology of the authors, and then relate the issues to the faith seeking understanding project. Along the way Helm also teaches small important lessons from the case studies, such as the limits of disagreement Augustine viewed acceptable, and the role that divine illumination plays for Anselm. An excellent introduction to the series.

C. Stephen Evans contributes a volume on *Faith Beyond Reason*, examining and critiquing primarily the heritage of Wittgenstein. Often misjudged as fideism (a label which Evans clearly explores and critiques), Evans handles well the historical and contemporary issues in the philosophy of religion which relate to this question. His conclusion is that faith does not reject reason, but rather critiques or goes beyond reason. Evans writes clearly and at an accessible level, and this will be of use to both the student wanting to learn, and to the Christian wishing to reflect on the relationship between faith and academic theology. *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* is another solid contribution to the series by Stephen T. Davis, which goes through the traditional proofs for God's existence (and some more!), and analyses what it might mean for a proof to work. Although there are many books that run through these issues, this will serve as a useful textbook, particularly for the believer who wishes to explore the implications of such discussion. The final volume in the series to date is *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* by Peter Byrne. It concentrates on the philosophical attempts to interpret religion in moral terms, and so includes extensive discussion of Kant. Although hard work at times, the exploration of the work of Iris Murdoch is most illuminating, and thus explores and critiques a modern re-working of this approach. This series has much to offer – clear introductions, based on solid thinking, which wished to explore in depth the relationship between faith and theology.

Two more series are worth mentioning. The Scottish Journal of Theology has started an occasional series on Current Issues in Theology, the two most outstanding contributions being *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, by Anthony Thiselton, and *Sanctify Them in the Truth*, by Stanley Hauerwas. As books they are chalk and

cheese. Thiselton, writing more accessibly than he often does, provides a clear systematic walk through issues of hermeneutics and anthropology, dealing devastating blows to people like Cupitt. Hauerwas' volume brings together addresses and sermons on a wide range of ethical and political issues – disability, violence, homosexuality, and community – to name but four, and never fails to surprise, challenge, and make the reader sit down and shut up. These are not introductory works for students, but they do offer much meat to chew and ponder. Questions must surely remain about his method, but no-one can now ignore his impact. The final series to mention is similar – by no means are these student introductions, but rather examples of academic theologians at their most academic. The Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, edited by Colin Gunton and Daniel Hardy, so far includes two titles. David Ford's *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* is one of those books that made me as a reader wonder if I had lost it! Deep, complicated, and forever swirling in circles, Ford uses the image of the face to explore the meaning of Christian salvation. This is not your traditional textbook on soteriology, and indeed there is little discussion of the intricate and historical issues surrounding substitution. Nevertheless, there are nuggets in there, especially when digging around his discussion of the arts and the two historical examples he explores – Therese of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This reviewer must admit to a slight temptation of calling the emperor's bluff, but then academic theology always presents that danger. The second book in the series is more digestible, with Sue Patterson offering a helpful analysis of post-liberalism in her *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*. Exploring the problems presented by modernism and postmodernism, she aims for a theological realism which takes both current issues and the incarnation seriously. In fact, this is basically an essay in incarnational theology, and is to be commended as such. She covers well the territory explored by Lindbeck and Frei, and continues their work in a positive and helpful direction. Again, not a book for the student starting out, yet there are others in the pipeline which may offer similar depth and discussion (Begbie on the arts, Jenson on the Church, Marshall on the Trinity, McFayden on Sin, and Vanhoozer on Remythologizing Theology).

Of course, there have been many other books in this time-span, some much more worthy and helpful than these volumes. Nevertheless, two positives can at least be concluded. That publishers want to take systematics and doctrine seriously. And that most of these fall on the orthodox side of the fence, rather than the liberal. What would I buy out of these? Given two choices, probably the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* by Colin Gunton, and Paul Helm on *Faith and Understanding*. Although they may never become 'classics', I will refer to them for years to come.

Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology*Francis Watson, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997***Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective***Francis Watson, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994***The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine***Edited by Colin Gunton, Cambridge: CUP, 1997***The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation***Edited by John Barton, Cambridge: CUP, 1998***The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer***Edited by John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge: CUP, 1999***The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology***Edited by Christopher Rowland, Cambridge: CUP, 1999***The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation***Gabriel Fackre, Edinburgh: EUP, 1997***The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study***Colin Gunton, Edinburgh: EUP, 1998***God and Contemporary Science***Philip Clayton, Edinburgh: EUP, 1997***Faith and Understanding***Paul Helm, Edinburgh: EUP, 1997***Faith Beyond Reason***C. Stephen Evans, Edinburgh: EUP, 1998***God, Reason and Theistic Proofs***Stephen T. Davis, Edinburgh: EUP, 1997***The Moral Interpretation of Religion***Peter Byrne, Edinburgh: EUP, 1998***Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise***Anthony C. Thiselton, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995***Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified***Stanley Hauerwas, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998***Self and Salvation: Being Transformed***David F. Ford, Cambridge: CUP, 1999***Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age***Sue Patterson, Cambridge: CUP, 1999*



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Admiring the Sistine Chapel: Reflections on Carl F.H. Henry's God, Revelation and Authority.[1]

Carl R. Trueman



(http://feeds.feedburner.com/Theologicalstudies)

Themelios 25.2 (2000): 48-58.

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Carl Trueman is Senior Lecturer in Church History at the University of Aberdeen. He is editor of Themelios and a student of Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The following is a review article of Carl Henry's recently republished God, Revelation and Authority, an evangelical exposition of the relationship between the doctrines of God and Scripture.

If the twentieth century 'evangelical renaissance' in North America has produced a Michelangelo, that exemplar is surely Carl Henry.[2]

Such was the verdict of narrative theologian, Gabriel Fackre, on the work and stature of his fellow American evangelical theologian, Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry. Not as well-known on this side of the Atlantic as many of us would like - or think that he needs to be - Henry is perhaps *the* central intellectual figure of American evangelicalism this century, a position symbolised by the fact that he was the only evangelical selected for extended treatment in the series *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, where he took his place alongside such luminaries as Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and Pannenberg as those who have exerted profound influence on the shape of various theological traditions.[3] Whether Henry is one of the all-time great evangelical theologians might perhaps be open to debate, and it is doubtful if he himself would wish to claim such a position. Henry is above all a man of the big vision, with a keen sense of what is and is not important theological news - a leading North American evangelical once described him to me as 'a very profound theological journalist', a comment intended as a compliment to Henry's instincts and gifts as a passionate communicator and not as a criticism of his writings. Indeed, Henry's

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unerring ability to see the big picture, to focus on issues of real substance, and to communicate the significance of these issues to the theological public is not open to debate. From his first major public work, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947) through to his lectures in

the eighties and nineties on New Age movements and neo-paganism, Henry has attempted to bring to bear an informed biblical theology on issues which concern evangelicalism from both within and without the camp.

It is not entirely clear what Fackre's comparison of Henry with Michelangelo is intended to convey - both are, one could argue with some irony, 'big picture men' who place God at the centre - but *if* it is in any sense apt then there can be no doubt about the identity of Henry's equivalent to the roof of the Sistine chapel: the massive six volume work, *God, Revelation and Authority*, first published by Word Books between 1976 and 1983 and now reissued in the USA by Crossway and in the UK and Europe by Paternoster Publishing. The work, some 3,500 pages in length, while not a full systematic theology in the manner of, say, a Louis Berkhof or a Wolfhart Pannenberg, is yet a sustained analysis and exposition of the doctrines of God and revelation, issues which lie at the very heart of debates in modern theology. Without doubt it is the most exhaustive evangelical statement on these issues to have been produced in the twentieth century and, upon its publication, marked the pinnacle of Henry's career as intellectual evangelical leader and spokesperson. Like all theological documents, however, it emerged at a particular point in time, and it is that broader historical context which must first be understood in order to see the full significance of what Henry was doing in his *magnum opus*.

Henry's entire work - of which *GRA* is the greatest single example - must be understood as an attempt to restate conservative Protestant theology in a manner which takes seriously the epistemological concerns of the Enlightenment without surrendering the content and truth-claims of orthodox Christianity. In doing so, Henry defined himself over against theological traditions on both the left and right of the spectrum: on the left, the reduction of theology to reflection upon the religious self-consciousness found in Schleiermacher and his progeny, and the anti-metaphysical trajectory of Kantian theology evident in Ritschl, Herrmann, and, latterly, Barth and the neo-orthodox; on the right, the 'fundamentalist' obscurantism of those who denied the relevance of education, learning, or cultural/social/political engagement to the life of the Christian church - a position which had characterised much, though by no means all, of American conservative Protestantism in the twenties and thirties in the wake of the disastrous Scopes' monkey trial and the equally unfortunate era of Prohibition.

Indeed, it is specifically against this background of fundamentalism that the contribution of Henry must be assessed in terms of its historical significance. As liberalism made inroads into mainstream denominations and seminaries in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conservative response took one of two broad forms: that of the fundamentalists, whose

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cultural roots lay in the revivalism of the nineteenth century and whose theology was drawn primarily from the dispensationalism of the Scofield Reference Bible;^[4] and that of what one might call the confessional conservatives, epitomised by the theologians of Princeton Theological Seminary, before the 1929 reorganisation, whose theology was at once self-consciously framed in continuity with the confessional tradition of the church and yet who took care to articulate this tradition in a manner at once both biblical and learned.^[5] The two streams were briefly united in the early decades of the twentieth century in the production of a series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915, *The Fundamentals* (from

which fundamentalism as a movement took its name), but the alliance was relatively short-lived. Of the leading theologians of confessional Protestantism, first B.B. Warfield and then J. Gresham Machen, neither adhered to the theology of dispensationalism nor belonged to the cultural milieu of American revivalism.[6] Significantly, Machen did not testify at the famous Scopes trial, where a young Tennessee teacher, John T. Scopes fell foul of the state's anti-evolution laws and was prosecuted by leading fundamentalist, William Jennings Bryan.[7] The defence was led by brilliant lawyer, Clarence Darrow; and, while the outcome was indecisive, Darrow succeeded in making Bryan, and thus the fundamentalist culture to which he belonged,

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look very silly indeed. With this and the backlash against Prohibition, fundamentalism fell into further disrepute and, in reaction, developed an increasingly obscurantist and siege-like mentality, undergirded by its dispensationalist theology.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s however, a new kind of attitude developed amongst a group of young fundamentalists in reaction to the current obscurantist culture. This 'new evangelical' movement sought to assert, against the left, the reasonableness of an intellectual commitment to orthodox Christianity, and, against the right, the need to engage with the wider world, culturally and intellectually, and the futility of simply ignoring the problems raised by Enlightenment thinking as if this in itself would make them simply disappear. Instead, the new evangelicals clearly saw the need to understand the Enlightenment and the world which it had helped to shape, and to respond to it at all levels in an informed and articulate manner. In its quest for a broad-based evangelical consensus based on parachurch activity rather than a specifically ecclesial theology, it was also distinguished from the conservative confessionalism of the Machen tradition, as continued by Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Among the leaders of this movement were E.J. Camell, Bernard Ramm, George Eldon Ladd, Harold Lindsell, Harold Ockenga, and of course, Carl F.H. Henry himself. In terms of institutions, the movement came to be associated above all with Fuller Theological Seminary in California, founded by revivalist preacher Charles Fuller, supported by Billy Graham, and staffed by those such as Carnell and Henry, who wished to set out the new evangelical agenda: a conservative theology which was at once both biblically faithful and academically rigorous.[8]

Given this background, Henry's *GRA* stands as perhaps the major statement of evangelical epistemology which emerged from the new evangelical movement, designed to demonstrate the coherence of evangelical theology despite the criticisms of its enemies - and indeed, the misguided support of some of its friends. It was intended to serve as a rallying call for evangelicals to *think* about their faith

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commitments in the same way that Henry's ethical works served as a call for evangelicals to *act* upon those same commitments.

An Outline of the Arguments

Of course a work of this size is not an easy thing to assess in an article of only a few pages, but such a *magnum opus* demands - and deserves - to be judged as a whole. Before proceeding to some overall observations on

the strengths and weaknesses of Henry's case, it will be useful to provide a broad-brush summary of the overall flow of argument.

The first volume of the series, *God Who Speaks and Shows I: Preliminary Considerations* is in many ways the most uneven of the series. In terms of its style it is, in parts, like high quality journalism, especially in the earlier sections dealing with the contemporary (i.e. 1970s) cultural scene. Elsewhere, particularly in the latter sections, it reads like a rather heavy philosophical textbook which, I suspect, will tax the patience and the powers of concentration of all but the most dedicated. In addition, this volume is, perhaps the most dated, a fact that derives in large part from Henry's choice of opponents, a choice inevitably determined by those challenges faced by evangelicals in the sixties and seventies. Thus, the reader is exposed to lengthy discussion of the sixties counter-culture, of the Jesus Movement, and, on a more sophisticated level, the logical positivism of A.J. Ayem. It is indisputable that none of these three are a significant force today - although it must be added that the world we now inhabit is without doubt a legacy of the counter-cultural revolution, albeit domesticated and in some instances, transformed from a revolution to a lucrative marketing opportunity.[9] Thus, Henry's discussion is to an extent, illuminating though perhaps of more historical value than otherwise.

What is significant in this first volume is the emphasis on God's rational revelation as the epistemological starting point for theology, a point he will expand in the later volumes. Contrary to Kant and the theological trajectory represented by Schleiermacher, Henry asserts that God does make himself known to humanity, and that in a way suited to human capacity and which means that theology is not simply talk about the religious psychology of the individual believer or of the believing community. For Henry, this is what makes revelation rational - not that it can, in some Cartesian sense, be predicted by the autonomous reflection of human beings, but that when God does reveal himself he does it in a way that is intelligible to individuals and communicable from one individual to another. For

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Henry, the deposit of revelation, the epistemic starting point, is the inspired Scriptures; the instrument for appropriating that revelation is reason - not reason that determines in advance what God can and cannot do but reason which understands what God has done and what he has revealed of himself. Henry's model in this approach is that of the 'faith seeking understanding' tradition of Augustine; and the basic tools are those of logic (non-contradiction and excluded middle), i.e., if God exists, then God does not not exist. This basic commitment provides the tool for understanding all that follows.

The second volume, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part One*, moves beyond prolegomenal considerations to the assertion and justification of seven basic theses concerning God's revelation: one, that revelation is a supernatural initiative, depending entirely upon the sovereign and unilateral action of God; two, that revelation is for the benefit of humankind; three, that God as revealer yet transcends his own revelation; four, that revelation's unity and coherence is guaranteed by the fact that it is the act of the one living God; five, that revelation is diverse in form, a diversity itself the result of God's sovereign choice; six, that God's revelation is uniquely personal in both content and form; and seven, that God reveals himself not just universally in the history of the cosmos and the nations but also redemptively in saving acts within this external history.

The third volume, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Two*, advances the argument with a further three theses: first, that the climactic centre of God's revelation is His personal incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth; second, that the mediating agent in all of God's revelation is the second person of the Trinity, the Logos; and third, that God's revelation 'is rational communication conveyed in intelligible ideas and meaningful words, that is, in conceptual-verbal form'. This last thesis is one of the most important pieces of Henry's overall argument, and something to which we will return in a later section.

The fourth volume, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Three*, completes the central section of the work on the nature of revelation by positing five more theses: one, that the Bible is the authoritative conduit and norm of divine truth; two, that the Holy Spirit superintends the communication of divine truth as original inspirer of the Scriptures, then as their illuminator and interpreter; three, that the Spirit, as bestower of spiritual life, enables individuals to appropriate God's truth saving manner; four, that the church approximates God's kingdom in miniature; and five, that God will unveil his glory in a crowning revelation of power and judgement, vindicating righteousness and subduing evil. This is by far the longest of the six volumes and contains much of Henry's extensive engagement with James Barr (in the earlier theses), especially his famous work *Fundamentalism*, and the eschatological materialism of Marxist and liberationist philosophies (in the latter theses).

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The fifth and sixth volumes, *God Who Stands and Stays: Parts One and Two*, contain Henry's doctrine of God, constituting in the first part a defence of orthodox trinitarianism and God's attributes. Of particular note here is Henry's defence of God's timelessness in light of contemporary philosophical assaults on this position. Then, in *Part Two*, Henry moves from a defence of supernaturalism to discussion of issues such as election, creation, and the saving work of Christ. Readers may be interested to know that on the issue of election, he holds to a broadly Anti-Pelagian position, against both Arminians and neo-orthodox reconstruction of the Reformed position (though, as one would expect with Henry, great emphasis is placed upon the need to understand election in the personal categories appropriate for God, not impersonal categories appropriate for a determinist force). On creation, Henry is clearly anti-evolution, primarily on the basis of its theological and philosophical implications, and noticeably sympathetic to literal six day creationism. The work ends with some reflections on the relationship between Christianity and culture.

The Central Issue

Though the work breaks into three basic sections (Volume I: prolegomena; Volumes II-IV: revelation; Volumes V-VI: the doctrine of God), the central theme, the central purpose of the work as a whole, is the explication of the Christian notion of revelation. This is no coincidence: at the start of *GRA II*, Henry comments that '[n]owhere does the crisis of modern theology find a more critical centre than in the controversy over the reality and nature of divine disclosure'.^[10] The 3,500 or so pages of *GRA* are intended as nothing less than a proposed solution to precisely this crisis.

Henry's basic argument is that our knowledge of God is dependent upon God's revelation of himself, and that this revelation is dependent upon who God actually is. There is nothing too radical in this: after all, what Christian theologian would not want to argue that there is an intimate connection

between who God is and his revelation of himself'? In making this point, however, Henry makes crystal clear the important relationship that exists between God, revelation and Scripture - a relationship which has in some quarters been obscured over recent decades - and thus the centrality of a proper doctrine of Scripture to any theological endeavour. After all, the doctrines of God, revelation, and Scripture cannot be dealt with in isolation because beliefs about one stand in close relation to beliefs about the others, a point which cannot be stressed too strongly or too often. Who God is, how he has revealed himself, and how we appropriate that revelation are not really three discrete issues, but three aspects of the one great problem of revelation - and all three aspects must be dealt with in any theology which aspires to the title of 'Christian'. In the British context in particular, the

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republication of the work is thus timely and significant: it has become the unofficial vogue in certain scholarly quarters, particularly, though not exclusively, in the area of biblical studies, to dismiss debates about the doctrine of Scripture as essentially an American phenomena which need not concern those of us on this side of the Atlantic. There is some truth in this: the question of the mainstream academic evangelicalism in Britain; but there are reasons for this that have nothing to do with the intrinsic importance of the question itself. Theological education at English universities has had its basic pedagogical trajectories set by the (until fairly recent) Anglican monopoly of university posts. Thus the curriculum has tended to reflect the concerns of the liberal Anglican broadchurch: a primary focus on biblical studies with comparatively little - if any - attention given to systematic theology and to reflection upon the interrelationship between various traditional doctrinal loci associated with such a discipline. Comparison with theological higher education on the continent, especially the Netherlands, the confessional seminaries in North American Protestantism, and the traditional curriculum in Scottish universities reveals that the dogmatic issues surrounding the relationship between God, revelation, and Scripture are far from being simply an 'American debate', even if some of the proposed solutions have come to be associated with particular American theologians, seminaries or organisations. While fear of the 'American debate' is understandable - it has often been conducted in an acrimonious and theologically unsophisticated manner, and been far more destructive than constructive - this does not mean it is not important. Abuse of a doctrine does not invalidate it: after all, just because our neighbour happens to commit adultery does not mean that we should abandon the institution of marriage. In this context, One can only hope that to understand the central importance of Such doctrines for the theological endeavour as a whole. One may not agree with all of his conclusions, but the importance of the issues he raises cannot be ignored; and the tone in which he conducts the debate is informed and articulate, as he seeks to understand his opponents before critiquing them. One could therefore do a lot worse than use Henry as a starting point for constructive debate: he has plenty of good arguments; and his level-headed, if not always irenic, tone is a model for proper polemical engagement.

Assessing Henry's Work

Clearly, the sheer size and scope of Henry's work makes any comparatively brief assessment of strengths and weaknesses both difficult and, to a certain extent, superficial. Nevertheless, a number of points of strength can be identified.

First, this is without doubt the most extensive attempt to explicate and defend the classic conservative evangelical position on Scripture to date. As such, it is a vital touchstone for all who wish to understand or to contribute to the evangelical debate on this vital

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topic. Many, of course, regard penetration of the secular academy as the acid-test of whether a theologian is successful or not; and, by this criterion, Henry is an abject failure. But he is an abject failure not because he is an idiot but because the very notion that he seeks to defend in the pages of *GRA*, that of a divinely inspired Bible, is excluded from the horizons of plausibility permitted by the said academy. Evangelicals however, should judge a theologian's successfulness by his or her fidelity to biblical teaching. By this criterion, I confess to regarding Henry as somewhat more of a success: the connection between God and his Word would seem to be fundamental: if God's revelation is of himself, then the means and form of that revelation would seem to be crucial to any understanding of who he is.

Second, Henry's defence of propositionalism is important, particularly in the current climate. This aspect of his work has received short shrift at the hands of his critics who seem, on the whole, either to have misread him or, in some cases, not to have read him at all. To argue that revelation is propositional is not, despite apparent popular opinion, to reduce the Bible to a series of statements of the kind represented by, say, Pythagoras' Theorem or some other mathematical formulae. This is the charge that is often levelled against Henry and the classic evangelical position by advocates of neo-orthodoxy and by those who press for the importance of the (often very useful) contributions of speech-act theory. In this context, Henry makes several useful observations. First, at a presuppositional level he indicates that, as God is the ultimate reality, so God should be regarded as determinative of his revelation, something which has significance for the adequacy of language to convey divine revelation. Criticising Barth in particular, he makes a point of more general significance:

If God and his revelation are really the basic axioms of Christian truth, then this axiomatic basis, and not some modern theory of linguistics, should finally be accorded sovereignty over revelation.[11]

What underlies Henry's point here is his view that the collapse in confidence in language to convey divine realities has less to do with biblical teaching and more to do with an *a priori* framework which rests on post-Kantian premises concerning the knowability of reality and through which the biblical text is to be understood. In other words, belief in the inadequacy of language in this regard is built upon secular philosophical premises and not upon biblical teaching. Certainly one might add at this point that classic Protestant thought, with its notions of accommodation and its positive appropriation of the medieval Scotist distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology had no problem with the idea of language being an adequate medium for God's revelation of himself - a position which it shared with the mainstream theological

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trajectories running from the early church.[12] In this context, it is a pity that Henry himself does not make more of the historic discussions on this issue which one finds in the literature of Reformed theology.[13]

Second, as for propositionalism itself, Henry is emphatic that he does not mean to reduce the content of the Bible to the theological equivalent of geometrical equations. In dialogue with the speech-act philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, he states the following:

Commandments like 'thou shalt not kill' are indeed imperatives, as Wolterstorff notes, but their grammatical form does not cancel the fact that revelation is primarily correlated with a communication of propositional truth. Imperatives are not as such true or false propositions; but they can be translated into propositions (e.g., 'to kill is wrong') from which cognitive inferences can be drawn.[14]

Indeed, one might add to Henry's argument at this point that the individual response to 'speech-acts' such as promises and commands depends upon the knowledge of who it is promising or commanding. If the person promising is a liar, or simply incapable of delivering on the promise, then trust in such a promise is profoundly misplaced. That is why the historical sections of the Bible, which reveal to us who God is and how he typically acts, are so crucial - and yet these sections are scarcely susceptible to reduction to the categories of promise, command, consolation, etc. They contain propositions which make historical claims - claims which, if they are not historically true, are utile more than pious human meditations on who God *should* be or who we would *like* him to be, not reliable accounts of who he actually *is*. [15]

On the issue of propositionalism, Henry is no doubt at his most vulnerable when arguing for the univocity of human language about

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God.[16] This is a clear sign of the influence of his mentor, the philosopher Gordon Clark, on his thinking and this very issue was, indeed, one of the factors which caused quite an unpleasant stir in a small American denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, between 1943 and 1948, when Clark applied for ordination in the Philadelphia presbytery. Put simply, the notion of univocity (that, for example, the word 'good' can be applied to God and humanity in the same qualitative manner) would seem to be vulnerable to the accusation of reducing God to human dimensions and falling foul of Ludwig Feuerbach's arguments about the anthropomorphic nature of religion. Again, the issues of accommodation and archetypal/ectypal theology should have come into play at this point, and one is left with a sneaking suspicion that Henry perhaps does not ultimately do justice to the mystery and unknowability of God.[17]

Finally, of course, it must be acknowledged that Henry's work is now almost a quarter of a century old. The developments in hermeneutical theory that have taken place over the last twenty years have been dramatic and have immense significance for how the Bible is to be understood. On this point, of course, Henry is inevitably inadequate; yet, for all the talk about speech-acts and reader-response, the importance of the reality of the personal God who speaks behind the phenomenon of Scripture remains crucial to any understanding of what Scripture is; and Henry's personalism as developed in the doctrines of God and Scripture in the pages of this work, remain of perennial significance. Whatever new ideas secular linguistic philosophy may come up with, these points will remain the fundamental issues which divide those who believe in the God 'out there' who has spoken to us and those who believe that the only God 'out there' is one we have first put there, and who thus reduce theology to

talking to ourselves - traditionally, the first sign of madness. Readers of *Themelios* are those, I hope, who prefer sanity as an option; and to them, therefore, I commend Henry, warts and all, for careful consideration.

References

[1] Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999).

[2] Gabriel Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

[3] See Bob E. Patterson, *Carl F.H. Henry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983). Henry is also placed alongside G.C. Berkouwer and Helmut Thielicke as representative evangelical theologians in Ray S. Anderson's article 'Evangelical Theology' in David F. Ford (ed.) *The Modern Theologians*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 480-98. Both Patterson and Anderson append useful bibliographies of relevant literature. Further discussion of Henry's theology from a narrative perspective can be found in Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 153-78.

[4] For good studies of the origins and development of American fundamentalism, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). The work of George M. Marsden is basic to any understanding of this period of American religious history: see, for example, the essays gathered in *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

[5] A good introduction to the rise and fall of Princeton as a centre of Christian orthodoxy is provided by the two volume history by David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994-96); a useful selection of readings in the theology of orthodox Princeton can be found in Mark A. Noll (ed.) *The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

[6] On Warfield, see the biographical sketch by Samuel G. Craig in B.B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), xi-xlvi; also W. Andrew Hoffecker, 'Benjamin B. Warfield' in David F. Wells (ed), *Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 65-91; on Machen see D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1994); also the essay by W. Stanford Reid in Wells, 95-111. Hart's work is particularly good in explaining the difference between fundamentalism and confessional Protestantism. A forthcoming issue of *Themelios* is to carry an article by Hart on Machen.

[7] Ironically, despite efforts in many conservative quarters today to make six-day creation a, if not *the*, test of Christian orthodoxy, the view was far from universal among conservative confessional Protestants. The Genesis chronology was not the point at issue in the Scopes' Trial, and many, such as Warfield and Machen, held highly nuanced views on the issues of creation and evolution; the modern fundamentalist fixation with six day creation has more to do with the impact of Seventh Day Adventist theologians on the wider Christian world than any unified Protestant exegetical tradition: see Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

[8] On the history of Fuller Seminary, see George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). This is a clear account of the seminary's founding and early years, although the focus on the doctrine of Scripture as the unifying narrative theme is somewhat reductionist and begs some key questions. Undoubtedly, the collapse of an orthodox doctrine of Scripture at Fuller was both sad and significant, but other elements of the story, such as the rise to prominence of the school for missions under Charles Kraft and issues surrounding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, also represented significant developments within the New Evangelicalism of Fuller as it sought to respond in an articulate manner to the world around. Another book of interest, this time on the psychology of New Evangelicalism as epitomised by one of its most significant (and tragic) leaders, E.J. Carnell, is Rudolph Nelson's *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind: The Case of Edward Carnell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[9] For the ultimate appropriation of revolution by free market capitalism one has only to think of the transformation of that Icon of sixties revolution, Che Guevara, into a trademark. On the broader cultural level, one can also cite the example of such events as the Glastonbury Rock Festival, once symbols of youth revolt, now outlets for the bizarre behaviour of frustrated middle-aged bank managers and chartered accountants.

[10] *GRA* II, 7.

[11] *GRA* 3, 289.

[12] *Accommodation* is the notion that, when God speaks to humanity, he does so in a form suited to their capacity, as a father might prattle to his child: this does not require that the communication is either inaccurate or inadequate, simply that it is couched in a form accessible to the recipient. *Archetypal* theology is the knowledge of God which he has of himself, which is, by definition, infinite, exhaustive and perfect; *ectypal* theology is that knowledge of God which he has made available via revelation to humanity, by definition, finite but fully adequate.

[13] The New Evangelical project was, by definition, transdenominational. While this allowed for greater flexibility of organisation, it also meant that rich heritage of confessional theology, allied to a strong ecclesiology, was marginalised. This left the movement without clearly defined boundaries and has led to the chaos of contemporary New Evangelicalism, where few, if any, doctrinal norms now apply to a movement which often is defined more by vague notions of a cultural evangelical self-consciousness than theological commitment.

[14] *GRA* 3, 417.

[15] For a critique of evangelical criticism of propositional revelation, see Douglas Groothuis, 'The Postmodern Challenge to Theology', *Themelios* 25:1 (1999), 4-22.

[16] See *GRA* 3, 363 ff.

[17] For accounts of the Clark controversy, see D.G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight* (Philadelphia: OPC, 1995), 106-115; also John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 97-113.

