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The Use of the Bible in Interpreting Salvation Today: An Evangelical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

LET IT be said right from the outset of our discussion, that we are under no illusions about the magnitude of the task of saying something significant, and yet reasonably concise, on this extensive subject. Applicable is the saying: Where angels fear to tread, fools go blindly in.

There is, however, considerable compensation in the fact of knowing that the subject is probably the most crucial one which has to be tackled in contemporary theology; all the more so in the present context of a first attempt at a serious dialogue between an *ad hoc* group of evangelicals and a team invited by the W.C.C. I think the geographical representation of both sides is a cause for satisfaction. I am genuinely hopeful that this fact will be reflected in the way we handle our discussion: avoiding narrow structures of thought and easy stereotypes, and provoking that openness and candour which are the prerequisites for a fruitful and creative debate on this complicated and fundamental issue.

The initiative for these conversations has come, in part, from the evangelical side because of its growing dismay and impatience at the way the Bible appears to be used in official conciliar documents, and in articles and papers prepared by scholars who evidently possess the confidence of the organizing departments of the W.C.C.[1] p. 2 The evangelical objection primarily concerns what might loosely be called a neo-Marcionite approach to Scripture by which only certain parts are selected as an acceptable, authentic testimony to God's revelation today, and a neo-Alexandrine hermeneutical practice which uses the text in a basically uncontrolled paradigmatic, figurative and even inspirational fashion.

These objections have led some evangelicals to accuse the W.C.C. of a certain basic dishonesty in its interpretation of the Bible: accepting that the Bible provides the only universally acknowledged norm for the doctrine and practice of the churches, it appears to circumvent its authority and ignore the controlling influence of its criteria when actually doing theology in the midst of the challenge and ferment of the modern world.

Having pronounced a severe accusation from the evangelical side, it would be unfair not to mention that the criticism of a dishonest hermeneutic is mutual, i.e. that evangelicals have also been under constant fire for their inconsistent, naïve, selective and culturally conditioned handling of the Scriptures. Indeed, the accusation of neo-Marcionism and neo-Alexandrianism could well be returned with emphasis.

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[1] E.g. the plenary paper presented at the 5th General Assembly of the World Council by McAfee Brown, 'Who is this Jesus Christ who frees and unites?' For further details of the use of the Bible in specific instances of belief and action, cf. R. Beckwith, 'The Use of the Bible in the World Council of Churches' (*The Churchman*, Vol. 89, No. 3, July–Sept. 1975), pp. 213–24.

Let me say at once that I am prepared to accept that such criticism as far as much evangelical interpretation goes is well deserved. It is absolutely true, and was so recognized in the Lausanne Covenant,[2] that evangelicals are just about as guilty as anyone in not recognizing the hidden, unexamined presuppositions which, when converted into the 'traditions of the elders', hinder their understanding of the meaning of the Scriptures and close their ears to what the Spirit is saying to the churches today. There are, unfortunately, forms of sectarian and triumphalistic evangelicalism, often linked to powerful organizational interests, which consider criticism of their exegetical practice as tantamount to an abandonment of evangelical belief.

However, I am firmly convinced that such an attitude is a negation of true evangelicalism, which historically has always defined its stance in terms of a constant examination, in the light of fresh truth springing from Scripture (whoever may be God's instrument in causing it to be discovered), of all doctrine, all practice and even p. 3 more significantly, its own hermeneutical methodology.[3] This is the only way of truly identifying and defending the characteristic evangelical view of the status and purpose of the Bible: 'we affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written Word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice….' (Lausanne Covenant, Clause 2). Because of the reality of these mutual accusations, a discussion of Biblical hermeneutics between evangelicals and non-evangelicals is bound to be polemical. This, I believe, is both good and constructive as long as there is a genuine Christian and human respect for those with whom one disagrees, which issues in a practice of listening and understanding. I believe there are profound disagreements about the way we should use the Bible today. Nothing is to be gained, therefore, by minimizing these differences; indeed, all present and future encounters will only be meaningful to the extent that we face honestly those issues and criticisms considered to be fundamental by the other side.

The fact that discrepancies over the use of the Bible appear to constitute the most crucial point of division between the two groups has induced me to devote a good deal of space to discussing the current issues in Biblical hermeneutics, as I see them. The basic framework of the discussion is supplied by those hermeneutical presuppositions which, I believe, most evangelicals would accept as authentically their own. This means that my approach is not the classic one which believes that a preliminary debate about Biblical authority is the only place to begin a discussion of Biblical hermeneutics, but rather one in which the meaning of Biblical authority is in fact demonstrated by the way in which we engage upon our hermeneutical task. Within the context of this approach, interpreting salvation today will be viewed as one instance (probably the most important) of the way in which the Bible is used, and ought to be used, so that the Church of Jesus Christ may more obediently and effectively fulfil the purpose of its Lord.

EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Interpretation of the Bible undertaken by evangelicals is done P. 4 from a perspective of commitment which involves a particular way of regarding the Scriptures.

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[2] Cf. Sections 1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 12, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis, World Wide Publications, 1975).

[3] Cf. J.R.W. Stott, 'The Authority and Power of the Bible' in C.R. Padilla (ed.), *The New Face of Evangelicalism* (London, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1976), pp. 38–40.

Contrary to a prolonged misunderstanding about the evangelical's view of Biblical authority, the principle of *Sola Scriptura* is not held as an end in itself. As an article of faith it possesses no independent existence from the more fundamental reality of the authority of the Trinity, an authority exercised equally in the realms of creation and salvation. The Scripture is the *norma Dei* only because it is the vehicle through which God has chosen to mediate his authority to his chosen people. The principle of *Sola Scriptura*, then, is basically a hermeneutical principle, a particular way of viewing the interpretative task.

This belief is based on a variety of arguments, of which the following are the most important. First, commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is meaningful only on the basis of accepting what he said about himself. This means accepting the historical Christ-event (of which the completion of Scripture was a part) as not only the end of the law but as the end of God's special revelation as well. Another way of stating the same argument is to say that Christ is the final reference-point for the true content of God's revelation of himself. This conviction is based on three distinct lines of evidence: the exegetical, by an appeal to the content of Jesus Christ's life and teaching; the theological, by deduction from the fact that he is the only effective inaugurator of the new age; the ideological—if God's revelation in Jesus Christ is not unique and final then he may be passed over for subsequent 'Christ-symbols', like Camilo Torres or Che Guevara, receptacles (*per argumentum*) of a wholly contemporary revelation in a new 'messianic' event. Secondly, a consistent interpretation of Scripture depends upon whether the interpreter, or interpreting group, accepts Scripture's own claim about itself. Though 'Jews call for miracles (and) Greeks look for wisdom, we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks'. We should not make the Bible deny what it claims to affirm about itself, even if difficult from the standpoint of our wisdom, namely that it is uniformly the inspired Word of God written. This is not the place to enter upon a lengthy defence of this traditional Christian view of Scripture. Our intention, rather, is to state that what the evangelical considers to be the Scripture's internal testimony to its own nature is part of the reason why he believes it is the unique, mediating vehicle of God's authority. p. 5 Moreover, this view profoundly affects a total hermeneutical approach, for an evangelical is freed from the arbitrary and reductionist task, as he sees it, of peeling away layers of purely human words in order to find within the Bible the true Word of God. At the same time, he is able, from the outset of his exegetical task, to take seriously the whole message of the text. In other words, the evangelical starts from the assumption that the Biblical consciousness of itself is non-negotiable. Thirdly, the closing of the canon of the Old and New Testaments testifies to a qualitative distinction between the written apostolic tradition (the *tupos didaches*) and all subsequent Church tradition. The evangelical believes that the only wholly reliable access to apostolic teaching is available in the pages of the New Testament. His view of apostolic succession is consistent with this belief, namely, that apostolicity is transmitted only through adherence to apostolic belief and practice. An evangelical believes that the full implications of the closing of the canon will affect the way in which Scripture is approached and interpreted in practice. By way of summary, we can say that the evangelical principle of *Sola Scriptura* means in essence that the written word of the Bible is, for all time, God's chosen means for the mediation of his own sovereign authority as the only Creator and Redeemer.

The principle involves a series of derivative premises which closely affect actual hermeneutical practice. We can only enumerate them briefly, hoping that they may be amplified in discussion.

(1) The *unity* of Scripture is more important than its diversity. In the choice of hermeneutical keys to aid the understanding of meaning and application, the evangelical does not find any contradicting principles. He does not hesitate to affirm that the Bible

contains a theological pluralism, for the wisdom of God is multifarious. But, for him, pluralism means complementarity, not contradiction. He does not believe, therefore, that it is either possible or necessary to have to choose between antagonistic traditions, as if the orchestra of Biblical authors were sounding discordant notes. 'If the trumpet-call is not clear, who will prepare for battle?'

(2) The reference to the clarity of the instrument brings us to the supposition that the Bible contains a central *perspicuity* which ensures that its central message is understandable on its own terms. The Bible is its own most faithful interpreter; it possesses a unique perspective from which alone it may be rightly understood. p. 6 Biblical interpretation demands as a prerequisite that 'we try to think Biblical thoughts in a Biblical mode, rather than reclassifying the Bible statements along some other lines'.[4]

(3) The use of pre-understandings for the hermeneutical task of interpreting Scripture today, when they are imported from contemporary, non-Biblical, thought-systems, more often obscure rather than release the meaning of Scripture. This negative approach to man's contemporary self-consciousness, derived from a basically monolithic modern philosophical, psychological and sociological *Weltanschaaung*, as a necessary aid to the completion of the hermeneutical circle, is often a gut reaction amongst evangelicals. There also exists, however, a more careful presuppositional analysis of the usually temporary alliances forged between interpreters of Scripture and philosophical and historical movements.

This analysis is also conducted as part of a continuous hermeneutical circulation. It may begin either from the Bible's realistic assessment of man's proneness to intellectual and practical idolatry, an integral result of the Fall upon man's mind, or it may start from a historical survey of the theoretical and practical effects of post-Enlightenment Man's grasping after the straw of autonomy in a closed-system universe ('man is the highest being for man'). Either way, the result is the same: there is a fundamental incompatibility between the fragmented and dualistic approach to reality by man without God and the unitary approach adopted by the Biblical witnesses. As Trestmontant rightly remarks, 'conversion to Christianity requires a metaphysical conversion which abandons the pantheistic metaphysics of paganism in exchange for Biblical metaphysics'.[5] Belonging to the *new* age demands that our minds are re-made to think, and our entire natures to act, according to the norms, values and structures of that age. For our intellectual and moral formation has been largely dominated and formed by a cultural consensus (whether in the East or in the West) which is in sharp contrast to the Biblical worldview.

(4) Hermeneutical practice is faithful to *Sola Scriptura* only when it disassociates itself from the contemporary custom of doing theology according to the pattern of theological fashions and p. 7 schools. There are at least two fundamental and interrelated reasons why the familiar method of practising theology in the academic establishments of the West is inimical to the *Sola Scriptura* principle: first, it does not coincide with the Biblical way; secondly, it tacitly assumes that doing theology is a self-justifying intellectual pursuit rather than a means subordinate to furthering a more significant end. To argue the first case, I cannot do better than quote a short passage from an article by José Miguez, in which he first suggests that the Western tradition of theology is conducted in a manner in which 'theology begets theology'—'it is a process aimed at determining, explicating and possibly vindicating the correct doctrine, on the basis of the study of Scripture and Tradition, and sometimes with the use of philosophical categories'—and then puts to it the following

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[4] J. H. Yoder, 'The Message of the Bible on its own terms' (unpublished ms., Elkhart, Indiana, 1969).

[5] Cited by E. Cherbonnier, 'Is there a Biblical Metaphysic?' (Theology Today XV, 1959), p. 454. Cf. also C.R. Padilla, 'Evangelism and the World' in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice, op. cit.*

question: 'If we see theology in this way, and if we follow this procedure, a fact that should make us pause is that in the Scriptures we find very few instances, if any, of such a process of theologizing … What we usually find there is the story of a particular situation of the people of God, and how the Word of God comes to comfort, to admonish, to command, to advise, to correct or to condemn God's people in different situations. Such a collection is the theological norm that we have, and we should pay attention to the character of this norm.'

Secondly, the study of Scripture presupposes, for an evangelical, that the purpose in view is to make us wise concerning salvation in Jesus Christ, to teach the truth and refute error, and to equip us for good works of every kind. This means, in effect, that Biblical hermeneutics should never become a speculative discipline, but a liberating force; concerning itself not so much with a discussion *about* faith as with the obedience *of* faith. In other words, the way we set about our exegetical task is already evidence of the ways in which we interpret the relationship between the text and salvation in Christ. The purpose of all hermeneutics, as an evangelical sees it, is to facilitate the Church's understanding of the Biblical message in the context of obedience to its missionary task in the world. Later we shall consider the question of the *locus*, or context, of the hermeneutical task.

(5) The principles of unity and perspicuity of the Biblical message demand that we work from the assumption of a radical distinction between the Church and the world, or between the two ages. This means that, whereas we must be fully aware of the dangerous and p. 8 indefensible tendency towards a theological dualism in evangelical (and non-evangelical) circles, the current drift towards historical and philosophical monism underlying the propensity to syncretism and universalism in modern theology is a particularly destructive denial of the Gospel. An evangelical will work from the *heilsgeschichtliche* framework of Biblical revelation and reject the current notion, popularized by the Theology of Liberation, of the salvation of history.

THE STATUS OF TECHNICAL EXEGESIS

The initial aim of all exegesis must be to arrive at as objective an assessment of the original meaning of a Biblical passage as possible. This original meaning is generally referred to as the *sensus literalis*, the proper (or natural) meaning which may be discovered basically through the use of linguistic tools.[6] The chief value of the method usedy to discover the *sensus literalis* is that it is essentially open to discussion. Exegetes can appeal to more or less objective criteria in order to accept or reject a particular interpretation. Individual and dogmatic interpretations may be submitted to the scrutiny of language, grammar and syntax.

Nevertheless, purely technical exegesis is of limited value in a total hermeneutical process. Its claim to be scientific rests on a misunderstanding of the scientific method which demands that all tentative hypotheses be submitted to rigorous tests based on criteria which are universally recognized to be valid. Biblical exegesis, by its nature, cannot utilize this method. Rather, its verification criteria are historical, logical and personal.

No technical investigation therefore is absolutely objective. Indeed, in the history of Biblical exegesis some of the most farreaching techniques for interpreting Scripture (source, literary and form-criticism) have been founded on hypotheses not ultimately verifiable on the basis of objective data. Thus, for example, most evangelicals would

[6] For a slightly different definition of the *sensus literalis*, cf. below, p. 9, the one offered by *Divino Afflante*.

consider that the criteria used for the separation of strands of tradition in the Pentateuch are intrinsically subjective and that the main presupposition underlying the form-critical method of analysis of the Synoptic Gospels is speculative and based on a near-circular argument. p. 9

There are other reasons, which relate to a more total hermeneutical process, for insisting on the inadequacy of a purely technical investigation of the text's meaning:

(i) there already exists a hermeneutical circle within the Bible (e.g. in the case of the Exodus);

(ii) the modern emphasis on the *redaktionsgeschichtliche* method shows that wider theological concerns are a legitimate part of a comprehensive understanding of the text;

(iii) even so-called technical interpretation is an art which involves such hermeneutical undertakings as translation, commentary and application into the horizon of the exegete's world;

(iv) there are probably already different levels of meaning, even in the case of the *sensus literalis*. The Encyclical, *Divino Afflante*, for example, has defined it as what the author 'intended', giving the impression that the intention is that which the historico-critical method is able to establish. However, is it intrinsically possible to discover what the author intended? Would it not require a degree of insight and knowledge which the modern exegete, so far removed in time, cannot be expected to possess? Or, conversely, would it not require a syntony between the respective situations of exegete and Biblical writer, the necessity of which is already assumed in the search for an adequate hermeneutical method? Perhaps, therefore, we should define *sensus literalis* as what the writer 'said'. However, even this is not wholly satisfactory, for what the writer said is really a euphemism for what the writer 'communicates', and this again presupposes a hermeneutical circle. The task of establishing the *sensus literalis* seems to involve both technical methods of exegesis and a consciously assumed vantage-point on the part of the exegete. If this conclusion seems to undermine the discipline of Biblical exegesis, then one only needs to point to the history of interpretation to show that this is exactly how exegesis has been carried out in practice. The problem is not with technical exegesis as such, but with certain assumptions underlying its use as a discipline. In order that too much not be expected from its performance, due to the limits imposed by the method, the wider meaning, purpose and context of p. 10 all hermeneutical endeavour should be emphasized from the beginning.

THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

The recognition of Biblical hermeneutics as a circular process rests on the fact that no exegesis is neutral. The methodology which assumes that it is possible to establish first an unequivocal meaning for the text which is then applied through the use of other theological disciplines to our historical existence is built on a delusion. However, the recognition of how we work in practice (i.e. by taking our conscious or unconscious presuppositions to the text) should not lead to a methodological scepticism. Quite the contrary, by taking into account the process involved in building bridges between the text and our context we are enabled to avoid undue subjectivisms and relativisms in the process. Of crucial importance will be the examination of our presuppositions and the choice of a hermeneutical key.

We have already spelt out some of the presuppositions which we consciously adopt in our approach to Scripture. We will complement this by a general discussion of the *sitz im leben* of the interpreter.

1. Probable Influences Bearing on Interpretation

We can do no more than list these as they occur to us, but a fuller discussion of each one would be an interesting exercise to clarify unexamined assumptions:

(i) cultural and political assumptions in the interpretation of such Biblical concepts as freedom, law, justice, the family, etc.;
(ii) ecclesiastical traditions in the interpretation of Church order, the sacraments, the relationship between Church and State (majority, minority Church), etc.;
(iii) functional responsibility within the Church: is the interpreter financially dependent upon his denomination? What is his position in the hierarchical structure? If he is a theological professor, is he maintained by the denomination or by the State? etc.; p. 11
(iv) level of education achievement. To what extent does the interpreter think and reason in conceptual form? Is his background non-conceptual, i.e. more visual, intuitive (tending, perhaps, to the immediatism of pietism)? or is it more intellectualist, discursive (tending perhaps to alternations leading to agnosticism)?

2. Interpretation as a Cross-Cultural Discipline

A consideration of the historical dimensions of the interpreter's background, those which particularly influence his interpretation, has been widened recently. The social sciences have learnt (mainly from Marx and Freud) the art of suspicion, by which subtle ideological and psychological conditionings which affect the adoption of particular temporary value-systems are unmasked. The influence of these value-systems on the hermeneutical task can be illustrated in multiple ways, for example:

(i) the supposed contradiction between the Biblical prescientific worldview and the modern scientific worldview;
(ii) the confusion between passing cultural values and genuinely Christian values in the modern missionary movement, illustrated, for example, by the persistent idea that the Gospel is wholly apolitical;
(iii) the difficulty encountered, in translating the original languages of the texts, of finding equivalent terms across different language systems;
(iv) the approach to symbolic and 'mythical' language: under the influence of a Hellenistic mentality, much exegesis has only looked for ideas behind the symbols, ignoring or rejecting the possibility that they may point to both historical events and real personal relationships.

As soon as we speak about the meaning of the text to another human being, interpretation immediately involves cross-cultural communication. It may also involve a trans-linguistic process on a triangular basis: the original languages, my native language, the language of the receptor. p. 12

3. The Adoption of Conscious Pre-Understandings for the Hermeneutical Task

The adoption of unconscious pre-understandings is a fact. That is why hermeneutics is partly a polemical, purifying exercise: I must rebuke my brother when he allows cultural and ideological factors to obscure his understanding of an obedience to the message of

the text; likewise, I must be open to similar correction (so Paul and Peter, the Corinthian Church, etc.).

But hermeneutics is also a creative exercise when it comes to a choice between pre-understandings. In this context I would like to deal with three critical issues which have been regarded as privileged hermeneutical *loci* in recent debate: the concept of the 'signs of the times', the 'social question', and evangelism.

(a) The 'signs of the times'

These are defined as special signs of God's active presence in contemporary world events, or evidences of the end-times breaking into present world history. In recent theological thinking, for example, certain revolutionary pressures for radical change have been understood as signs of God's action to bring about more humanizing structures in society.

I think we are right to be very attentive to the signs of the times, seeking to discover how God continues to act in the concourse of the nations. Nevertheless, both the concept and its theological grounding are highly ambiguous hermeneutical guides. First, today's events, in so far as they concern man, can rarely be interpreted unequivocally. The human sciences are not precise interpretative and formative instruments. Secondly, the status of particular events as revealers of God's saving activity in history, even assuming universal agreement as to their interpretation, is hard to establish. Real life, at both the macro- and micro-level, requires its own hermeneutical circle of interpretation, of which revelation will constitute a fundamental part. Thirdly, God cannot be meaningfully discovered in today's events without a prior commitment to a certain interpretation of his action in the archetypal events. Without this prior commitment, it would be less ambiguous to interpret today's reality in wholly secular terms. Fourthly, the possibility of syntonization between the signs of the present and the *semeia* which irrefutably point to Jesus as *the* Messiah, *the* Son of God, p. 13 depend upon a core Biblical interpretation of the events which is comprehensible within its own terms of reference.

(b) The 'social question'

The fundamental questions of injustice and oppression operating against vast numbers of underprivileged people has become a polemical issue since the time of the French Revolution when the real causes of poverty began to be analysed. I would venture to suggest that, like the poor, the scandal of poverty in relation to the ability of technology to produce abundance will always be around to haunt us. As in the case of our hermeneutical stance, no neutral position is possible with regard to this question. Indeed, when faced with the obligation to create ways of solving at least some of the social problems, the social question poses itself to the Biblical exegete, not so much as a pre-*understanding* (a largely noetic concept), but as a pre-*commitment* (a definite praxiological stance).

Now that the rules of theological discourse can no longer be settled and imposed upon the rest of the Church by white, Anglo-Saxon males, the social question, acutely felt at the periphery of the world—the majority of the Southern Hemisphere and the ghettos of the Northern—will figure more largely on the agenda of a Biblical hermeneutic. If, as Gutierrez maintains, the context of post-Enlightenment theology in the industrialized countries of the West has largely been the 'non-believer', in the rest of the world it is the 'non-man', the 'wretched of the earth': the suffering, the poor and the exploited.

The social question is being (re)discovered by evangelicals—timidly, still full of prejudices, scared to take risks. Yet they have little to be afraid of, if the only consideration were faithfulness to their own hermeneutical presuppositions, for the social question looms large in the Bible and the God of revelation, ruling out all exploitation as an

abomination in his sight, has shown a particular concern for the defenceless and those disqualified by society.

Now, the social question is not free from ambiguity. There are clearly aspects of the present question which are not contemplated in the Scriptures (though such modern-sounding notions as 'accumulated wealth', 'wage-labourer' and 'surplus-value' can be found in the Biblical texts), just as there are modern instruments of socio-economic analysis which had not been forged before the 19th century. The question of syntony between, for example, the prophetic p. 14 view of history as the arena where God denounces and announces, dismantles and constructs, and modern political and economic analysis, is not easily resolved. If we were to take Marxism as an example, we might want to say that, on the one hand, its structural analysis of economic relations can act as a species of 'hermeneutical plus' which syntonizes with a whole cluster of Scriptural passages which see in the private accumulation of riches the basic cause of poverty. On the other hand, Marxism as a pretended total view of reality, inevitably acts in a reductionist fashion when allowed a privileged position within the hermeneutical circle. As a philosophical 'totality' (Levinas), it is open to the same judgement, for its absolutist pretensions, as any humanism.

(c) Evangelism

The Gospel of the Kingdom is addressed not only to the sociologically poor, but also to the morally and spiritually lost. If we accept, with reservations, Marx's philosophical, historical and economic analysis of man's alienation as loss of humanness in his relations with other men, would it not be possible to do a socio-political study, emulating Marx, of man's alienation as loss of humanness in relation to his Creator? It is this loss, or lostness, which determines the priority of evangelism in the hermeneutical task. All men, oppressors and oppressed alike, 'in our natural condition lie under the dreadful judgement of God … dead in our sins'.

The Church's attitude to evangelism is the acid test, in practice, of its view of man and its understanding of the nature and extension of salvation, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Once again we are not at liberty to eliminate from the text clear teaching about the nature of man's total existence in the universe. At the same time, we are at liberty to forge new analytical tools to help us see more clearly today why the evangel is good news for modern man, enmeshed as he is in a complex predicament from which he is powerless to save himself.

SALVATION TODAY

The immediately preceding section on the choice of hermeneutical pre-understandings sets the scene for a contemporary discussion of salvation. The meaning of salvation can be determined only by an adequate analysis of man's situation; *from what* does he need to be saved? Remission of sin must fit the crime. P. 15

Both the Bible and modern sociological analysis understand man foremost in terms of relationships. Only the Bible sees these relationships in a three-dimensional pattern of existence: God, neighbour and nature. Modern sociological analysis is well aware that man is alienated from his neighbour, from nature and from himself, and proposes a welter of hypotheses to explain the causes and consequences of this alienation (thereby presupposing the image of nonalienated man). At the same time, it proposes a variety of ways of salvation which would rescue him from the consequences of his alienation (thereby presupposing the possibility of a new order, the permanent eschatological pull

of Utopia). Only the Bible explains interhuman alienations by positing a prior cause in man's alienation from God. This datum is crucial in the use of the Bible in interpreting salvation today.

Precisely at this point we encounter two great divides today. The first divide is between the humanist and the Christian account of human alienation. The humanist experiences alienation as an existential problem which may have either psychological, economic or even evolutionist explanations. On the basis of his humanist presuppositions, however, he finds it hard to interpret alienation in fundamentally ethical terms. There is a logic which drives him beyond considerations of good and evil.

The second divide occurs within the churches and centres on the explanations given for the root nature of alienation. The divide may be a matter of emphasis, though we suspect that there are fundamental discrepancies regarding the historical nature of original sin. On the one hand, there is the interpretation of root sin in terms of man's oppression of man (according to this view the primal sin was homicide—Genesis 4); on the other hand, there is the interpretation in terms of man's suppression of God (Genesis 3). We might call the first view the moral and the second the ontological.

An evangelical would argue that only the ontological account of the *cause* of alienation does full justice to the total Biblical understanding of the radicality of sin, and therefore only that salvation which reaches this level merits the epithet salvation, within a proper Biblical hermeneutical circle.

The ontological explanation is irreducible to other categories. In the Bible it is described with the use of such concepts as wilful disobedience, idolatry, unfaithfulness, abuse of freedom, etc. It is perhaps most fully expressed in Paul's use of the word *asebeia* p. 16 in Romans 1:18ff. *Asebeia* is the acceptance of a lie about the fundamental nature of the universe: it means stifling the truth about both the Creator and the creature; it is the action whereby man unilaterally and universally changes the reality of his relationship to the Creator as creature into one in which he demands the status of God. Injustice, *adikia* (the complementary part of the hendiadys), is the result of *asebeia*. Because man lays claim to the throne of heaven, he claims the right to decide the destiny of his fellow man. So he justifies oppression by an appeal to the 'givenness' of a particular order, i.e. its possession of a 'divine' sanction.

The Biblical concept of man's ontological self-alienation stands, methodologically, as a hypothesis which (like the Marxist, or any other overall view of alienation), though unverifiable 'scientifically', most adequately accounts for the evidence of man's incapacity to liberate himself. The Biblical account of the fall of man discerns a permanent structural fault in present being which man is unable to transcend. All attempts to do so have their roots in the humanist view of humanness and contribute further testimony to the Biblical evidence for ontological alienation.

Paul states that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes. Salvation today depends upon our estimation of the possibility that the root cause of alienation today is adequately explained by reference to the Biblical elucidation of alienation yesterday.

I think this question is answered in an evangelical perspective by the drive for consistency and universality in the fusing together of the Biblical and contemporary horizons.

In order for there to be a hermeneutical circle, there must exist a permanent syntony between the Biblical revelation of man and reality of man today. In other words, the horizons are fused when they enter into a simultaneous syntonic relationship based on universally observed characteristics of man (such as his drive for power, for meaning and his hunger for love).

This relationship has been demonstrated with regard to the persistence of *adikia* in the world (although in this context, the Exodus narrative has sometimes been subjected to a quite arbitrary exegesis to sustain a particular ideological perspective). We believe it is necessary to demonstrate it with regard to the more fundamental *asebeia*. Here the Biblical contribution to an analysis of reality on the human level and the feed-back of this analysis, including the p. 17 Biblical contribution, into the hermeneutical circle will be absolutely crucial, simply because the Biblical diagnosis is unique. We could recapitulate our arguments concerning the bridge between salvation today and salvation yesterday by stating that we believe that the following prerequisites for making the hermeneutical task possible are fulfilled:

(i) the Biblical explanation of man's alienation from his Creator correctly describes the basic cause of every other alienation. Only a scriptural anthropology is capable of avoiding the persistent human error of confusing effect with cause (particularly in the Marxist account of alienation, however correct it may be at a certain level of analysis);

(ii) in the course of 2,000 years of history the unique salvation which God has effected and now offers in Jesus Christ (liberation from condemnation, sin, the Law and death) has not been exceeded by any other message, action or movement on behalf of man;

(iii) man has not evolved progressively in the area of his moral life (his history shows a recurring cycle of great achievements and devastating failures), in such a way that he has been able to develop an effective technique for his own salvation;

(iv) the present social, cultural and religious features of man's existence presuppose a definite continuity with those to be found in the Biblical era.

The bridge which irrevocably lines the two horizons is man himself and his need of a total liberation. The task of applying the Biblical message would, naturally, be quite impossible, if it could be proved that the external and internal situation of man had changed to such a degree that all continuity had been lost. In such a case the Bible would be a book of only historical and comparative interest.

The truth of the evangelical position does not depend ultimately upon a prior acceptance of the authority of the Bible. The proof which may be offered is that the Biblical Gospel of the Kingdom, as its basic meaning suggests, is heard today, as yesterday, as 'good news' of hope and promise. The Gospel which announces a totally unique salvation is still heard today as a novel message, capable of p. 18 solving man's problems on both a macro- and micro-level.

The application of the interpretation of Biblical salvation today must be done in conscious relationship to man's total reality, however and wherever his alienations are manifested today. Man's present existence, naturally, shows a certain marked discontinuity with regard to his past existence, for to a great extent man is the result of his own historical development (witness the ethical problems thrown up by the 'success' of modern science and economic growth). This development needs to be investigated with the use of technical instruments which man has himself created in the course of his history (anthropology, sociology, economics, psychology and political science), always remembering that these social sciences are not wholly objective, rational enterprises, but show in their analyses of human reality many of the features of man's fallen state.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, I think, the previous discussion has done little more than wander round the subject (if that). No one is more conscious than me of the inadequacies of the presentation. When faced with this particular subject a feeling of impotence descends which leaves its mark in the form of a series of banal observations which skate along the surface of real problems (and not even mixed metaphors are able to rescue them from triteness).

Perhaps the great superficiality of this attempt to synthesize the way in which evangelicals do, or may, link their particular view of Scripture to the whole question of salvation will rouse us all to a more adequate statement and practice of Biblical interpretation. I will close with a slight development of the main strands of the previous argument which may suggest a suitable jumping-off ground for subsequent discussion.

Earlier we mentioned that evangelicals accepted as a hermeneutical presupposition the distinction between the Church and the world. Such a distinction does not, of course, foreclose discussion about the meaning of either Church or world. Its purpose is to avoid an unbiblical monistic approach to the relationship between human action in history and the Kingdom. Exegetically, it is built on the New Testament concept of the two ages, one of the principle keys for interpreting the meaning and extension of salvation. But the doctrine of the two ages does not allow the Christian the pharisaic p. 19 satisfaction of thanking God that he is alright and despising the rest of men, for it also calls into question any triumphalistic or easy identification of the Church with any particular structures. So the boundary of the Church may also have to be redrawn, so as to avoid easy presumptions about salvation. By this I do not mean that the boundaries should be extended to include a so-called 'anonymous Church', for I believe that the Gospel always demands a personal call to radical discipleship of the Biblical and historical Christ, implying an unavoidable conversion from all idolatry and self-righteousness through repentance and faith in Christ's finished work of salvation. There simply is no other way of entering the messianic community. Rather, the boundaries may have to be redrawn appealing to criteria which are less tied to institutional considerations and more in consonance with the implications of the reality of the two ages.

So how do we recognize the people of God today? I believe that this is not a question so much about where the Church *is* formally (i.e. a question about certain structural characteristics of the empirical Church) but about how we may know which groups of people show the authentic signs of belonging to God's people. The reason for making this distinction is to safeguard the principle of obedience (orthopraxis)—'doing the truth'—in our definition of the true Church. To be identifiable today the Church, clearly, must stand in some definite continuity with the original People of God. This latter, in turn, if it is to be recognized as such, must stand in a unique relationship to God's original saving acts expressed in terms of the two ages or the Kingdom. This relationship may be summed up by saying that the Church is recognizable as such when it manifests clear characteristics of the new order which God is creating. This new order is clearly discernible in the New Testament in the twin poles of the operation of grace and works: i.e. wherever God's grace is a reality through faith in Jesus Christ's finished work of salvation, and wherever this grace has established a totally new set of relationships and new action in the face of the mind-set of this world (or this age). The criteria of grace and works interpreted in the light of the presence of the Kingdom remain valid today in the following way:

(i) God's grace in effecting man's liberation from *asebeia* by Jesus Christ alone remains a fixed reference-point; p. 20

(ii) God's grace in effecting liberation from, and new action within, the mind-set of this world will both be constant and vary: for example, the mind-set of the 1st century world included, in differing degrees, legalistic religion, idealistic philosophy,

gnostic syncretism and idolatrous politics. All remain today and require a particular response on the part of God's people. At the same time, the mind-set which has produced today's social problems are the world structures of economic injustice and exploitation based on greed and the desire for power and security;

(iii) today's empirical Church demonstrates itself as belonging to God's people when it takes relevant action against each one of these manifestations of the *kosmos*, by proclaiming a Gospel of free grace, which is not cheap grace, and by struggling systematically to lessen the injustices of the social order (could we say that these actions are dependent respectively on a 'priestly' and 'prophetic' hermeneutic?);

(iv) the criteria of recognition cannot be given by the empirical Church (for it is not the Kingdom), but only by the signs of the new age manifested as the contradiction of the *kosmos*, represented as both *asebeia* and *adikia*.

The effective and ultimate bridge between the horizons, to whom the hermeneutical task has been committed by the Lord of the Church, is the people of God, the messianic community. On the one hand, the existence of the text presupposes the people of God and the Bible as already part of God's liberating acts in history; and on the other hand, the contemporary Church recognizes her true identity as she continually consults the original text about the meaning of her mission in the world. In between the two horizons the Church acknowledges a long tradition of Biblical interpretation and hermeneutical practice which may act as either a guide, or a warning, to her task.

The bridge between the horizons can be established, therefore, when this particular people of God listen to the text's communication through the input of the hermeneutical key of the two ages, or the Kingdom, and through the challenge of particular empirical manifestations of the rebellious *kosmos* today.

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Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg: a Critical Evaluation

by CLARK H. PINNOCK

TO DISMISS Wolfhart Pannenberg as just another German theologian seeking fame through ingenuity and novelty would be a grave mistake. Pannenberg is a Lutheran theologian of rare brilliance, remarkably capable in philosophy, Biblical studies, and theology. He has come out in strong defence of several major themes of classical theology, including the deity, vicarious death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is projecting the most rigorous and ambitious programme of academically oriented theology since Barth, and

like Barth (of whom he is sharply critical) is likely to be remembered as a towering giant in 20th century Christian thought.

Whether we like it or not, German theologians have played a leading role in the creative theology of modern times and will go on doing so, at least until others of us challenge their leadership with work of equal quality and power. Meanwhile, the best thing evangelicals can do, if we hope to mature in thought and reflection, is to engage theologians of Pannenberg's stature in dialogue so as to sharpen our own tools and commitments. Pannenberg welcomes this interaction. He maintains an admirably open spirit toward criticism of his thought and an evident willingness to change in the interests of the truth.

Although he writes with clarity and force, Pannenberg is a formidable thinker for the average person to grasp. He often expresses his thought in long essays devoted to a single aspect of a question, subtle in argument and richly documented. Therefore we are deeply indebted to E. Frank Tupper, a professor at Southern p. 22 Baptist Seminary in Louisville, for giving us a serious, readable, systematic report on the full range of Pannenberg's ideas *Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Westminster, 1973). The book enjoys Pannenberg's own seal of approval. The simplest way for the initiate to get a direct introduction to the texture of Pannenberg's thought would be to read his book entitled *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (Westminster, 1972), the title of which points to his central concern: to submit historic Christian commitments to the test of critical thought. All that I can hope to accomplish in this short article is to highlight a few of the basic themes important both to Pannenberg and to us evangelicals.

A THEOLOGY OF REASON

Pannenberg's advocacy of a theology solidly based on reason is an identifying feature of his position. (His major study entitled *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* is, regrettably, not yet available as I write.) This emphasis is attributable in part to the fact that he underwent a rigorously intellectual conversion from atheism in his university days. Like C. S. Lewis and Malcolm Muggeridge, he travelled a path to Christ that entailed more rational reflection than Christian nurture or emotional crisis. Certainly, his concern from the first has been to oppose all forms of authoritarian theology and to espouse what we might call a 'university theology', open to criticism and intellectually aggressive. To use his own words, he wishes to demonstrate the powers of Christian truth 'to encompass all reality' and 'gather together everything experienced as real' (*Basic Questions in Theology,* II, 1f.). He is deeply hostile to the revolt against reason that has for decades characterized theology and made it a matter of interest only to a ghetto of initiated believers. His basic concern was expressed in another generation and context by L. Harold De Wolf in *The Religious Revolt Against Reason* (Harper, 1949).

Although he studied with Barth, Pannenberg reacted against him sharply on this question. Theology, Pannenberg insists, must subject its truth claims to the canons of rationality operative in the larger human community. It must be able to point to evidences supporting faith instead of only a bare, subjective decision. He is convinced that authoritarian claims are not acceptable in either political or intellectual life. Such claims in theology, he says, clothe p. 23 human ideas in the splendour of divine majesty and place them beyond the reach of critical examination. The result is that the content of theology becomes arbitrary and subjective. We must not, he insists, make the knowledge of God's truth dependent on a private revelation, available only to the members of an esoteric society with its own in-group linguistic symbols. To do this does not exalt the sovereignty of the self-revealing God, as is supposed; it simply directs attention away from God's

objective truth to man's own subjective understanding. Pannenberg's critique crashes down on all versions of dialectical theology; however, it is equally hard on evangelical theology, in so far as it too is often presented in the guise of an authoritarian claim.

Debate has been swirling around this matter of the relation between faith and reason for centuries. Pannenberg has simply emerged on one side of the discussion with a forceful and subtle proposal, attempting to reverse the irrationalist trend from Schleiermacher to Barth that derives revelation from the experience of faith rather than from reason's knowledge of history. If faith is placed in faith, and not in truth, how is faith to be distinguished from superstition or illusion? For Pannenberg, faith and reason are *co-essential dimensions* of the act of a total person. A split between them, or even a ranking of one over the other, is intolerable. He does not leave us under the tyranny of the expert, or with the arbitrary situation of faith projecting its own basis; he wants only to assert the legitimacy of reason's role in the decision of faith.

Pannenberg insists that the Hebrew concept of truth not be suppressed by the Greek view. He does not contrast Hebrew thought with Greek in a simplistic manner but rather calls our attention to the fact that truth for the Hebrews is something that *happens* and is not merely thought out. God's truth is proved to be true to the extent that his promises are realized. Truth thus shows itself in history, and is historic in a manner foreign to the Greek conception. Although the Israelite did not search for truth as a timeless reality behind appearances, he expected it to be proven reliable by the outcome of the future. In the light of this, it would be more accurate to say that Pannenberg has developed a theology of *historical* reason rather than reason *per se*, a point that becomes obvious in his view of revelation as history.

Before moving on to that point, we should note that, paradoxical though it may seem, even Pannenberg's stalwart defence of the p. 24 bodily resurrection of Jesus derives not from his orthodoxy but from his rationality! He is not motivated at all, as evangelicals often are, by a reverence for classical beliefs just because they are Biblical and traditional. He defends Christ's resurrection solely because it seems more reasonable to defend it than to deny it. The demands of the same reason that place him in opposition to a host of other critical scholars also lead him to reject the virgin birth of Christ, to consider many of the Christological titles in the Gospels as post-Easter intrusions, and to be sceptical about various and sundry details in the resurrection narratives.

Just because he insists so strongly that faith must rest on rationally tested foundations, Pannenberg must devote time to the doctrine of the Spirit, which many of his opponents in both dialectical and evangelical circles have used to support the notion of certainty that is inwardly experienced but not externally verified. He is convinced that the doctrine of the Spirit has been misused as 'a fig leaf to protect the nakedness of the Christian tradition from the questionings of modern critical thinking' (*Apostles' Creed*, p. 131). He thinks that scholars have appealed to the Spirit in order to immunize traditional positions against having to face up to critical objections, and to offer believers a cheap certainty indistinguishable from fanaticism.

It is clear that Pannenberg does not wish to deny that faith is the gift of God. What he is concerned to say is that faith cannot be indifferent about its basis, and should not be perverted into blind belief in some authority claim. By recognizing the objective truth content of faith, we rescue faith from the danger of perversion and acknowledge it to be a decision on the sound basis of reliable knowledge. The Spirit is not to be thought of as authenticating an otherwise unconvincing message, or adding to it the plus of personal inspiration. The Spirit of illumination does not create new truth but rather leads us to the truth that already exists in the proclamation of Jesus.

REVELATION AS HISTORY

A second major defining characteristic in Pannenberg's theology is the important shift from the self-authenticating *word* in dialectical theology to verifiable *history* as the key to the nature of revelation. Besides being directed against Barth's central emphasis on the Word P. 25 of God, this move is a rejection of both the liberal mysticism of religious experience and the orthodox idea that revelation consists chiefly of infallible doctrinal propositions.

In the seminal book that he edited entitled *Revelation as History*, originally published in 1961, Pannenberg expounded his concept of the indirect revelation of God through history, final and complete only at the end, but indicated in advance by Jesus and the vindication of his claim by the resurrection. He sets forth his highly original yet deeply convincing notion of revelation as history, open to all, located at the end, but realized in advance in what happened to Jesus. God does not unveil his essence to man directly but demonstrates his deity in historical events so that he may be recognized and trusted. In Pannenberg's words, 'In the destiny of Jesus the End of all history has happened in advance, as prolepsis.'

Lest we suppose that he fails to answer the inevitable criticisms raised against such a view, let us look deeper. What about the interpretations placed upon historical events? Do they not amount to a set of doctrines existentially derived?

Not according to Pannenberg, who rejects the sharp distinction between event and interpretation. For him the meaning of events inheres in them. Facts are always experienced in a context in which they have a made-to-order significance, which we discover by casting about in the context of the events themselves. For example, we discover the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus, not by producing an authoritarian interpretation, but by asking what resurrection signified in the Hebrew tradition and to Jesus. Of course, the same event may mean different things to different people, but the process is still not merely a subjective one, because there are objective methods by which to determine and settle the various interpretations offered.

Pannenberg's aim in this is not to deny the importance of word alongside event but to dispute the commonly held idea that the word has a non-historical and basically experiential origin. In this, he is lining up with the theology of Gerhard von Rad, who also advocates seeing the acts of God in the context of the history of Israelite traditions. Pannenberg wishes to refute the idea that the revelatory meaning of the activity of God in history is available only to faith and not inherent in the activity itself, which would make it autonomous and finally ahistorical. Rather than conceiving revelation as the union of event with a supplementary illumination p. 26 by the Spirit, he sees it as Spirit-directed events, already defined in their original context and continually explicated in the history of the transmission of traditions. Pannenberg does not reject the category 'Word of God' except in its isolated use, outside the unity of event and word. To split up the detection of facts and the evaluation of them is intolerable to him: it makes the Christian message ultimately a human subjective interpretation, and it is the result of a poor historical method.

The startling result of Pannenberg's argument is to make an ally rather than an enemy out of critical history, a *tour de force* by any standard. He intends to rest faith firmly upon historical knowledge rather than upon private revelations or authority claims that have no solid basis. He is well aware that the results achieved by the use of historical evidence are only probable at best, but he holds probable knowledge to be the basis of all human decisions and compatible with the trustful certainty of faith. In any case he cannot see how religious experience or authority can come up with anything more certain or more

probable than this. As for the standard sceptical argument that miracles do not occur and that no amount of evidence could convince the person who is sceptical of the resurrection of Jesus, Pannenberg simply unfolds a carefully wrought historical methodology of his own in which he shows the *a priori* and therefore unacceptable character of such a historical dogma. Again, he defends the possibility of miracle, not in the name of orthodoxy, but with the tools of a properly conceived rationality.

REVELATION AS SCRIPTURE

Although the evangelical reader appreciates Pannenberg's integrating of word and event into the unity of divine revelation, he is forced to ask further about the *locus* and authority of the word-component. He does this not just because it is the conservative's reflex to do so, but because he sees a weak concept of Scripture leading into the very subjectivity that Pannenberg abhors.

Pannenberg repudiates Biblical infallibility on two grounds. The first is that he interprets it in terms of an authoritarian commitment to the sacrosanct truth of the Bible, independent of rational checks. He opposes, not verbal revelation *per se*, but verbal revelation vouchsafed to a select community that alone recognizes it as p. 27 such on the basis of an inward experience. Were he to confront Warfield's position that, just as Jesus' claim to authority was confirmed by his resurrection, so also was his claim for the divine authority of the Old Testament Scriptures—an extension of Pannenberg's own historical apologetic—I cannot believe his position on infallibility would be so decisive.

Nevertheless, we cannot overlook his second reason for rejecting it: that critical difficulties in the text also preclude understanding the Bible as the infallible Word of God (*Basic Questions in Theology*, I, 1–14). The only way to dispel his fears on this point is to show by means of patient Biblical scholarship that the difficulties that arise in connection with the text do not refute Biblical infallibility, which is itself soundly based on the testimony of accredited Biblical spokesmen, including Jesus himself (cf. J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, Inter-Varsity, 1972).

A lingering doubt in the evangelical's mind over the theology of Pannenberg relates to a certain depreciation of the category 'Word of God'. It is not that he eliminates it from his thought; in fact, he includes it together with event in an integral way that may improve our own understanding. The problem is that, because of his unnecessary equation of verbal revelation with authoritarianism, he has difficulty giving full weight to the concept of revelation as word, which is nonetheless as prominent in Scripture as revelation in history is. It is simply impossible to subsume under his category 'revelation as history' substantial portions of the Bible such as the wisdom literature, or to incorporate in it so central an experience as God's speaking to Moses before, during, and after the historic deliverance called the Exodus.

My reservations about the 'revelation as history' formula are intended not to invalidate it but to call attention to event and word, which are both genuinely God's acts, the twin foci of his redemptive dealings with mankind. Event and word are to be kept inseparably together and each given full weight and value. The fully Biblical concept of revelation includes the mighty acts of God in history, transmitted through a uniquely inspired medium of interpretation by accredited prophets and apostles. Not to do justice to this full Biblical pattern will lead, almost inevitably, to an undercutting of dogmatic theology through a dissolution of the canon that gives it its norms.

Pannenberg is right to insist, as Warfield also allowed, that even p. 28 without inspired Scripture a true knowledge of the divine purpose would still exist as a result of the impact of the divine actions that have irrevocably taken place already in world history. But he is

wrong to imply that divine revelation in fact exists without such an inscripturation when the promise and reality of this divine gift, too, is abundantly plain. Because of his refusal thus far to acknowledge the normativity of the Scriptures over human thought, Pannenberg is forced to make his own reconstruction of the event and meaning of revelation canonical, with all the uncertainty and subjectivity that implies, at least for us.

We evangelicals do not ask that Pannenberg forsake his stance of critical honesty, which we ourselves strive for. We ask simply that due respect be granted to the gift God has so evidently given: inspired written Scriptures, the capstone of that anticipatory revelation which has come to light through Jesus.

JESUS AND THE KINGDOM

In his theology Pannenberg places tremendous stress on the future, seeing in the concept of the coming Kingdom of God the most important truth about reality, a truth that overshadows all others. According to Jesus' message, the future is not an enemy to be feared but the blessed goal toward which history is moving under the hand of God. For some time New Testament scholars have been aware of the apocalyptic element in the teaching of Jesus, but they have been uncertain what to do with it. The idea of an end event in which all the dead are raised and the glory of God is finally revealed for all to see seemed strange to modern thinking and a point of embarrassment to the exegetes.

True to his calling as the reverser of theological trends, Pannenberg has intervened in the discussion, arguing boldly that this very motif in the teaching of Jesus must be recovered as the key of the whole Christian message even for today. Jesus was open to the future God had promised, and calls all men to faith and hope. In a final event at the end of history, God will be vindicated as God of all peoples, and the hopeful longing of all the ages will finally be realized.

Pannenberg has managed to hoist apocalyptic out of oblivion and give it an honoured place in a systematic theology of universal history. One might hope that the centres of interest in prophecy and p. 29 apocalyptic in North American evangelicalism will take note of Pannenberg's contribution in defence of their concerns, and allow him to teach them how to relate their insights to a broader theological context and in a more obviously intelligible and relevant way.

As to the person of Jesus, Pannenberg insists that we develop a 'Christology from below'. This simply means that, instead of starting with preconceived notions derived from authoritative sources such as creeds or even epistles, we should begin with the man Jesus himself and strive to understand what he proclaimed about his own significance. Fortunately Pannenberg, unlike Bultmann, is quite optimistic about what we can discover about the life and ministry of Jesus. The knowledge gained in such an investigation is clear and definite enough, he thinks, to permit confident conclusions that can serve as an anchor for reasoning faith. As a result of his study, Pannenberg presents Jesus asserting a claim to divine authority in the context of preaching the Kingdom of God, a claim that had to be either blasphemy or else the true fulfilment of the promises of God. But this claim to an authority belonging only to God was linked to Jesus' expectation that God would vindicate him in the near future by the coming of the Kingdom and the resurrection of the dead; it was not a bare authoritarian claim devoid of all truth conditions.

Pannenberg's handling of the death of Jesus is much less satisfactory. Although I am grateful for his emphasis on vicarious substitution, I am troubled by his insistence that Jesus had no clear preconception of the significance of the death that lay before him, and was not an active agent in that death. The theology of atonement and sacrifice in the Gospels was read back into the life of Jesus by the post-Easter community, Pannenberg

claims. This view exposes not only Pannenberg's slight regard for apostolic Scripture but also the depth of his radical criticism, which can excise from the text of the Gospels as fundamental an element as the suffering-servant-of-God motif in the life of Jesus. Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem apparently was not to offer himself as a sacrifice for sins; it was only to precipitate a decision regarding his claim about the nearness of the Kingdom and about his own centrality in anticipation of it. The interpretation of his death in terms of atonement was arrived at later. Therefore, Pannenberg strives to expound the meaning of that death on the basis of severely edited Gospels and apart from the rich teaching about the cross in canonical p. 30 Gospel and epistle. Given that limitation, I suppose we should admire the results all the more!

But this view leaves Jesus' execution basically unforeseen, and therefore unclarified in its essential relation to what Jesus did proclaim and, strictly speaking, unnecessary to his mission. It cannot satisfy those who glory in Christ's cross and treasure the teaching of the apostles and, we trust, of Christ himself on it. It does not seem reasonable to me, if I may appeal to Pannenberg's norm, to divest Jesus of the awareness he so obviously possessed as the soon-to-be-offered sacrificial lamb of God.

ON THE THIRD DAY ...

On the subject of the bodily resurrection, Pannenberg's optimism about the results of 'life of Jesus' research extends to unheard-of lengths, at least in the circles of academic theology. He boldly contends, to evangelical applause, that the resurrection of Jesus can be validated by historical research. In this he contradicts a virtual dogma held by liberal critics, dialectical theologians, and every shade of fideist. Before Pannenberg, the most a prominent theologian could be expected to say was that the resurrection was an event of history; that alone would win him a chorus of abuse from the Bultmann school and other sceptics in the Church and outside it. But to go on and say that the resurrection can be proved to have occurred is breathtakingly bold: it refutes all positivists who see history as a closed system of natural causes and effects and at the same time rebukes a multitude of timid Christian thinkers who retreated decades ago into the safe haven of unverifiable 'salvation history'. For this single achievement, Pannenberg deserves our undying praise and gratitude. Of course, some evangelical scholars have said as much before, but critical scholarship was affected by our weak initiatives about as much as a lion is terrified by a BB gun. At last a major, respected theologian has said it.

And Pannenberg, being the scholar that he is, does not leave it at the level of a bare assertion. He pursues the point at great depth, offering an extensive historical argument in defence of the resurrection and detailing an entire alternative historical methodology that makes room for such a case *(Jesus—God and Man*, Westminster, 1968, Chap. 3). While not suggesting that the issue is beyond controversy, Pannenberg believes that the historical evidence sustains p. 31 the credibility of the Christian message beyond reasonable doubt. Furthermore, he rejects the cynical objection—by Schubert Ogden, for example—that the resurrection, even if it did happen, would mean nothing to modern man. Pannenberg argues strongly for its significance: it validates Jesus' claim, signifies the inbreaking of the Kingdom, and shows that the covenant with Israel is now open to all the nations. Above all, it signifies fulfilment to man, whose being is structured in such a way that he hopes for salvation beyond death.

Obviously, according to Pannenberg, Jesus is a unique person if he claimed divine authority, was raised bodily from the tomb, and is expected to reign in judgement in the coming Kingdom of God. What then is Pannenberg's understanding of the person of Jesus?

The title of his weighty book on Christology, *Jesus—God and Man*, shows quite clearly that he wishes to affirm the two natures of Christ in one person. However, his method of working from Jesus outward, rather than starting with creeds or even epistles, means that Pannenberg attempts to formulate his own statement in terms arising from the historical situation of Jesus' mission. We cannot blame him for that; we wish him well. Pannenberg therefore emphasizes Jesus' communion with God, expressed in his utter obedience to him; this relationship exhibits an identity with the eternal Son or Logos, who eternally stands in this position with the Father. In this way Pannenberg hopes to conceive of the deity of Christ without violating his true humanity.

His efforts in Christology, I think we should recognize, spring not from any impulse to deny the orthodox confession but, quite the opposite, from a strong desire to ground belief in the deity of Christ in original Biblical categories rather than veiling it in more dubious Greek terminology. But this effort, coupled with his reluctance to make use of the rich materials on Christology found in the apostolic writings (a reluctance that springs from his inadequate doctrine of Scripture noted above), inevitably results in some hesitancy and unanswered questions. Yet there is no doubt in my mind that Pannenberg views Jesus' relation to the Father as unique, and that he believes we gain a relationship with God only through communion with him and in hope of the resurrection.

What then is his view of other world religions? In a context of increasing pluralism, this is a question that anyone who, like p. 32 Pannenberg, holds to the finality of Jesus must answer. Can the unevangelized, for example, share in the benefits of Christ's reign, or are they automatically excluded from his Kingdom?

Pannenberg develops two ideas bearing on the issue. First, he argues, in a long essay entitled *Toward a Theology of the History of Religions*, that we should regard other religions not as mere fabrications of man's striving after God but as occasions of the appearance of the same God who revealed himself through Jesus, though they may present him in a fragmentary way, even at times resisting the infinity of the divine mystery *(Basic Questions in Theology*, II, 115f.). Secondly, looking to I Peter 3:19 and 4:6, he argues that salvation is made available in the realm of the dead to those who during their lifetimes never encountered Jesus or the Gospel message. The meaning of Jesus' descent into hell in the Apostles' Creed according to Pannenberg is that the salvation he achieved applies also to the vast multitudes who never came into contact with his story. This view point, I suspect, does not divide evangelicals from Pannenberg so much as it divides evangelicals among themselves. I myself find it basically acceptable.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

With Pannenberg there is no 'death of God' nonsense. Everything hinges on the reality of the sovereign God who has raised Jesus and promised to bring in his Kingdom. In another sharp contrast to Barth, Pannenberg also develops a kind of natural theology without calling it that, based not upon the classical 'proofs' of God's existence but on the nature of man as one open to the future and filled with hope for ultimate salvation. In this Pannenberg is endeavouring to establish a universal point of contact, a preliminary knowledge of God that the Gospel can presuppose. Anthropology is the sphere in which he thinks the question of God arises, and Pannenberg is optimistic that a point of contact can be established with all men in this way. We may expect greater development in this area of his thought.

In understanding God's being, Pannenberg is boldly innovative in conceiving God as the 'power of the future', and at the same time soundly traditional in defending an essential trinity in the eternal being of God. If Jesus was raised from the dead, and is a

revelation of the essence of the true God to be finally manifest at the end p. 33 of history, it follows that the distinction experienced between Father and Son in Jesus' earthly life belongs also to the inner life of God. His serious effort at constructing a viable trinitarian dogma for our time is welcome, and it reveals the essential orthodoxy of his theology. Here is no liberal theologian setting aside the Trinity, or treating it as a mere appendix to the system. Pannenberg can fairly be compared with Athanasius and Augustine, Calvin and Barth, for like them he strives to exalt the triune God and to preserve the divine origin of our divine salvation through Father, Son, and Spirit.

But in the same breath, and without withdrawing my respect, I must register a strong protest at some of the unwise modes of expression Pannenberg has used to draw attention to the importance of the future. I have reference to his striking notion of 'the futurity of God,' in which he is determined to connect God's deity with his rule. 'The being of God is his lordship'. Therefore, until the rule of God is universally established, in a certain sense 'God does not yet exist'. *(Theology and the Kingdom of God*, Westminster, 1969, p. 56.) Fortunately, Pannenberg later explains his meaning. The end of history will *reveal* God's deity, which until then will remain wrapped in considerable mystery. The future will make evident what has been true all along. If that is his meaning, he would be wise to avoid expressions that obscure it, especially when process theology delights in seeing God as still developing.

There are rich benefits in store for those prepared to enter into dialogue with Pannenberg. A theological genius of his calibre, particularly one who expresses so strong a commitment to the basic Biblical message and expects it to be vindicated in the face of all criticism, is a rare occurrence. Perhaps we ought to note, too, that his theology is not the labour of a solitary scholar working alone but has developed out of a team effort: he and other scholars from various disciplines met together, especially in the early years, to hammer out their positions. Likewise the evangelical theology we need, if it is to prove adequate for our day, will not be written by a 'prima donna' but will arise out of a communal effort.

In essence, Pannenberg's theology is a creative synthesis of the classical Biblical themes and a modern critical posture. That accounts for both the delight and discomfort we feel in our interaction with him. But evangelical theology, represented by *Christianity Today*, is not a monolithic and normative confessional position that can easily serve as a measuring rod for evaluating a theology p. 34 like Pannenberg's. Our roots are legion: Calvinist, Lutheran, Anabaptist, Wesleyan, dispensational, pentecostal, and others linked together by a shared respect for the givenness of divine revelation and the finality of canonical Biblical teaching and by our experience of the grace and command of the Scriptural God. Because our precious unity masks so much important disunity, we cannot with a single voice reply to Pannenberg's thought. His development of a theology of reason, for example, exposes a considerable rift among ourselves, delighting the wing of evangelical opinion that advocates a strengthening of our rational apologetic, and infuriating a fideistic wing that feels something vital is being lost.

The point most certain to gain widespread approval among evangelicals is one that charges Pannenberg with neglecting the inspiration and authority of the Bible, using it only as a historical source, and not submitting to its full cognitive authority. But in most of the other areas, we should think of Pannenberg not as a theologian to refute so much as a respected teacher in the Church who has a great deal to teach us, not least in the singlemindedness and love of the truth he displays in his pursuit of the theological task.

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Black Theology and African Theology

by BYANG H. KATO

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INTRODUCTION

I AM addressing you as a Christian African. As a Christian, I have had the experience of new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and his Word, the Bible, come first and foremost in my life. This experience is a categorical imperative for me and other Christians. It is an experience that I would recommend to everyone, and it is possible for anyone to share in this experience.

As an African Christian, I empathize sincerely with all my fellow Africans under any type of bondage, be it spiritual or physical. It is my sincere prayer that the exploited Africans under any regime on our continent will soon find justice and liberation. But my greatest concern is for the three hundred million Africans who have not had the experience of Jesus Christ. It is therefore the responsibility of the 60 million African Christians to share Christ with this vast majority so that they might find true eternal liberation. The main purpose of this paper is to re-emphasize the Christian message and its relevance to contemporary Africa, as opposed to the confusing voices we hear today.

Let me first point out that Black Theology is different from African Theology, though the two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

Black Theology which became evident among the blacks of the United States of America in the 1960s seeks to emphasize black consciousness and thereby discover the dignity of the black man. Black consciousness does not necessarily mean the pigmentation of the skin. Rather, it means an awareness that the particular class of people called black, have been oppressed. 'It is the liberating p. 36 effect of this self-knowledge and awareness that we refer to as Black Consciousness,' writes Nyameko Pityana of Fort Hare University, South Africa.[1] Dr. McVeigh of Nairobi University accurately sums up the concept of Black Theology when he says, 'The primary concern of Black Theology is liberation, and one sees considerable attention devoted to defining the implications of Jesus' Gospel for the downtrodden in the face of entrenched political, social and economic injustice.'[2]

African Theology lays emphasis on the dignity of the African by playing up African culture and African traditional religions. It does not stress blackness or liberation as such. Some of its proponents definitely point out that African Theology is different from Christian Theology. Dr. J. K. Agbeti of Ghana writes, 'The idea of "African Theology" seems

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[1] *Black Theology*, p. 60.

[2] *Presence*, Vol. V, No. 3, 1972, p. 2.