

Theta Phi Panel Discussion with Wolfhart Pannenberg

Moderator:

Dr. Laurence W. Wood

Frank Paul Morris Professor of Systematic Theology
Asbury Theological Seminary

Panel Members:

Dr. Lawson Stone

Associate Professor of Old Testament
Asbury Theological Seminary

Dr. Michael Peterson

Professor of Philosophy
Asbury College

Mr. Neil Anderson

senior student, president of Theta Phi
Asbury Theological Seminary

Wood: We welcome Professor Pannenberg to our noon luncheon and panel discussion. We also welcome our panelists, and this overflow crowd of students and faculty. I believe you will find this discussion to be intellectually and spiritually rewarding.

Our procedure will be to allow each panelist to address a question to Professor Pannenberg, and he will respond to each question in the order in which it is given.

During his presentation of the annual Theta Phi lectures at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wolfhart Pannenberg responded to these questions posed by a distinguished panel. Dr. Pannenberg is professor of systematic theology at the University of Munich.

Stone: I have two questions regarding Professor Pannenberg's development of the doctrine of the Trinity. These questions derive specifically from the suggestion that we should not regard the unity of God as a person or a subject but rather in terms of Spirit, understood under the metaphor of a field of power. First of all, in the Old Testament Yahweh is clearly presented as one, a unity, and yet clearly as a personal subject, an agent. How do you understand the Old Testament presentation of Yahweh's personal agency in the light of your suggestions about the unity of God? And, second, the Old Testament presents Yahweh as a sovereign person over against the widespread belief in ancient religions in an impersonal field of power beyond the gods from which the world and the gods emerge. How would you respond to the fear that your metaphor of a field of power, of spirit, is possibly a revival of an ancient pagan concept which the Bible is opposed to?

Pannenberg: Well thank you for your provocative question. I'm sorry that I didn't present my lecture on the Trinity before you had a chance to ask that question.

The answer to your first question is that the Yahweh of the Old Testament is, of course, the Father of whom Jesus Christ spoke in His message. Thus, the first person of the Trinity is identical with the God of the New Testament although the way of addressing the God of the New Testament in the language of *Abba* is a little different from the Old Testament usage of addressing God. Although God is sometimes referred to as Father—be it of the king, be it of the people of Israel—still the nuances of Jesus talking about the God of the Old Testament, the God of Jewish faith, in terms of Father are different from what is the general basis of the Jewish tradition in talking about God. It is the same God. And it's really important that the Father whom Jesus Christ talked about and addressed as God is the God of the Old Testament. But we also think that only in the way Jesus talked about God is the God of the Old Testament revealed in His true reality. So, in some way, we do not yet find the ultimate character of the God of Jewish faith in the Old Testament. I think this must be the test of faith. Otherwise Jesus would be just one in the number of prophets of Israel among others. It is this eschatological claim to ultimacy which also means that the way that the one God was experienced and addressed *before* was not yet coming to us in ultimate form of understanding of whom the people of the old covenant were talking about. Thus, the Father of Jesus Christ is identical with Yahweh.

But now the difference, and I will come back to this in my lecture: the way the God of the Old Testament is revealed as Father by Jesus Christ is inseparable from this form of manifestation so that this form of manifestation belongs to the Eternal Being of the God of the Old Testament as He is addressed as Father by Jesus. And thus what I think has not been achieved in the tradition of Jewish interpretation based on the Old Testament preceding Jesus Christ, and maybe after the history of Jesus Christ, is to express the identity of the transcendent reality of God, the God of Israel, with His mani-

festation—with the ultimate form of this manifestation. That is what the doctrine of the Trinity does.

Then the question arises as to what is the unifying issue that binds together the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the concreteness of the divine reality in its manifestation which is not different from the eternal being of God. And then one can say, "Well, God is love. God is Spirit." Both answers come from the Johannine writings. Perhaps one can also say God is His Kingdom. The Kingdom of God and God Himself are not to be separated and I will say tomorrow something about how Father, Son and Spirit are united in relation to the issue of the Kingdom of God. When we speak of God as spirit, of course, then the question comes up as to what is meant by the term spirit. And I would call upon your competence as an Old Testament scholar when I say that *spirit* is not *mind* in the Old Testament. *Ruach* is not mind. *Ruach* is wind. *Ruach* is breath, but it is not mind. Now the same connotations are present in the origins of the Greek word, *pneuma*. I will not address this tomorrow so I may say it right away. The word *pneuma* and the history of *pneuma* is the basis of the field concept of modern physics. This has been asserted by Max Jammer, who is the leading authority in the study of the key concepts of the natural sciences in the history. He has studied the concept of space and Albert Einstein wrote a famous preface to that book on the history of the concept of space by Max Jammer. He has also studied the concept of mass in physics and also the concept of field, and produced some evidence, that the *pneuma* theory of especially Stoic philosophy was the immediate predecessor of the field theories of modern physics. Therefore, I happen to think that the field concept stands closer to the biblical term *pneuma* than the concept "mind" does. It was only the Platonist Origen who succeeded to identify definitively mind and spirit. And we should be open to revise our understanding a little bit.

Of course, to say that God is spirit is not all that can be said about God. In the first place God is Yahweh, or God is the Father—and the divine Spirit is concrete only in the person of the Father or in the way the Spirit is going out from the Father. Then of course a Christian peculiarity, again, is that in relation to the Son, the Spirit is manifest as a distinct person of its own, which we don't find in the Old Testament, but it is part of our Christian faith.

So, my answer to the main point that you made is that the divine reality which has the character of a field rather than of an anthropomorphic kind of mind, is concrete only in the persons—first of all the Father, the God of the Old Testament, but inseparably connected with the Son and the Spirit.

Peterson: Professor Pannenberg, as one who is interested in the philosophical problem of evil, I'd like to know your thoughts along those lines for theology. As you undoubtedly know, there are many who believe the problem of evil is *the* central problem for Christian theology. I'm thinking of my question particularly in terms of your emphasis that theology should not be

detached from history, and I wonder if that emphasis doesn't make it particularly important for Christian theology to engage actual historical evils, such as the horrors of the holocaust. Would you care to comment?

Pannenberg: Well, that's not the easiest question. You could have held back a little bit in the polite American way before challenging me to the bottom of my Christian faith in this way!

I would like to say first that the reality of evil is certainly the most serious argument against the existence of God in this world. It is not the most serious *intellectual* argument, but it is the most serious argument in terms of the evidence of feeling and experience. Intellectually, it is not very conclusive. But on the more basic emotional level, it is the major evidence against the existence of God. And so it will continue until the last day. We learn from the Bible that this is so. Thus, this issue will be definitively solved, not by our theoretical arguments, but only by the action of God Himself in the future of His Kingdom. We must, of course, say more than this, because we live in this world and, as Christians, we also have to struggle with this issue in our present lives.

Now, if you believe in God, the problem of evil—the reality of evil—does not put you to shambles. It is not the believer who is afraid of the problem but it is the unbeliever who thinks he cannot believe because of it. The moment you believe, the situation is quite different. If you read the book of Job, which is, of course, a book on this theodicy question in the Bible, Job never comes to the point of doubting the existence of God, does he? He complains about the situation. He charges Yahweh with treating him unjustly. But he never doubts the existence of God. And in the end of the book of Job it is the glory of God's work as the creator in nature which eventually makes Job aware that, after all, he is but a finite being left to death and who is he to ask questions like that of God? That's the attitude of the believer, even in view of his or her own suffering. Thus the situation of the believer is quite different when considering the question of theodicy than the situation of the non-believer.

To the non-believer, it may be the main obstacle to embracing faith in God. But on the other hand, to believe in God is the way to deal with this situation. There is no other way to deal with it.

You mentioned the Holocaust. Now I don't know whether you know Theodore W. Adorno, who was an atheist. (A Jew can never be an atheist, really. And if a Jew is an atheist, this is a way of keeping the second commandment!) I've never met a Jew who, deep down in his heart, is an atheist. And certainly Adorno was not. But he said after Auschwitz one can no longer talk about God. I always felt that you can say that only if you are in a position of watching a tragedy in theater. You cannot say that, if you think of yourself in the place of those who had to go into the gas ovens, because those who had to walk that way had their only hope in singing psalms. You perhaps know about that. The only power to deal with experiences like that

is not in simply observing them in others, but if one has to go through them oneself. Therefore, I don't think it is a very convincing argument really. The moment you believe in God you get hold of the *only* power that enables you to face experiences of terror like that. You get deprived of the best ally we have in fighting the power of evil when you let go of the faith of God.

Well, the question remains, how is it reconcilable with the power and goodness of God that He created the world such as we experience it? And then, in addressing this rather limited question within the broad range of the question you posed to me, considerations gain the force that have been raised in this history of dealing with the problem of theodicy, and especially in its classical Leibnizian form. Because Leibnitz not only argued that evil was admitted because of freedom—of having freedom—but he argues that evil is bound up with the very existence of independent, finite reality. If one wants to have independent, finite reality, one cannot at the same time avoid evil in all its forms. One has to have the patience—and a Creator, if you allow me to say so, may have the patience—to deal with His creation, seeing, watching it being tempted by evil, without, however, being finally overwhelmed by it. Augustine once said a very beautiful word about this issue, different from Clement of Alexandria whom he otherwise often followed. Clement said evil comes from the free will of the creature, so God is not responsible for the evil in this world. Augustine was too intelligent a man to be content with this kind of answer because, after all, God had created that creature that is going to bring about evil, moral evil, by the abuse of its free will. And so Augustine said that even in creating Adam, God knew very well that this Adam would abuse the freedom he had been given. But God knew even more than that: He also knew that Jesus Christ would come and save Adam from the consequence of death that would result from his sin. And I think this is a very beautiful word because it entails, on the one hand, God the creator bought the independent existence of creatures at the price of admitting evil in His creation. But on the other hand, He also had in view what His aim for His creation is: the rescue of the creation by the death and resurrection of His Son and by the final eschatological overcoming of evil.

Anderson: Professor Pannenberg, your criticism of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is well known. For those who may not be familiar with it, I'll briefly summarize. You consider the Virgin Birth to be an atheological legend (based on historical critical concerns, I believe) and you think that the doctrine was only later conceived by the early church to support the idea of incarnation, unaware of the contradiction inherent in that—that the Virgin Birth says that Jesus is God's Son from His beginning and the Incarnation refers to His preexistence. You believe that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth has been mistakenly accorded the same status as the Resurrection in support of the idea of incarnation. Also, interestingly, you level a criticism against those who use the doctrine to promote piety, particularly with regard to Mary. I think that may have something to do with your criticism of Karl

Barth, perhaps—Mariolatry in Protestantism. In spite of these criticisms, you wrote in the *Apostle's Creed* and *Jesus—God and Man*, that Christians should retain the credal affirmation in the *Apostle's Creed*—not affirming the historicity of the Virgin Birth but affirming the motivation that went into the formulation of the *Creed*.

Based on this, I have three related questions. Why would it not be possible to affirm the historicity of the virginal conception of Jesus based upon the historicity of the Resurrection as that event casts light backward upon the events of Jesus' life? Second, could we say, without resorting to pietistic solutions, that in terms of salvation history, the virginal conception was not comprehensible as an historical occurrence until after Pentecost? And third, how do you respond to Oscar Cullmann's criticism that you have not taken sufficient notice of the events and their Spirit-directed interpretations by later believers?

Pannenberg: Well, you reported correctly on my position concerning the issue of the Virgin Birth and I think it is, indeed, a historical question—as, of course, the question of the Resurrection is. You cannot settle, however, the historicity of the Virgin Birth by referring to the historicity of the Resurrection. These are two different events, and you cannot solve questions of historicity in general by affirming the historicity of just one event. Of course, in terms of miracles, the Resurrection of Jesus is by far the more mysterious miracle than the Virgin Birth. So some people have asked me why I accept the greater miracle and not the lesser one. Well, in the case of the Virgin Birth, even current biological ideas need not be challenged, certainly not in the same way as in the case of the Resurrection. But my criticism of the historicity of the Virgin Birth is not based on a disbelief in miracles. I think that reality as such is miraculous. And I don't agree with David Hume that the mere fact that something is unusual—even if it is uniquely unusual—is sufficient reason to reject a claim to historicity. There have to be *other* reasons. If it could be shown that the traditions of the early Christians were late legends as a whole, I think it would be very difficult to go on with the Christian faith. But this is not the case so far—so far, we have to say. We should not make infallible judgments, even in this central part of our faith. This is precisely the point where faith involves a risk. We are not safe as Christians at this point. We are not safe. But we may leave it to God to take care of the truth of His gospel. We certainly cannot protect the gospel and the truth of the gospel.

That's my criticism of fundamentalism, of those who want to draw a fence around the Scriptures in order to defend them from the application of critical reflection. This is an indication of too little faith. Too little faith in God. If His revelation is true, He will take care of that Himself. Not we.

Then, of course, I may turn out to be wrong in my historical judgment on the story of the Virgin Birth. But given the situation and the arguments as they stand, given the nature of the text that we have, I cannot escape a criti-

cal judgment here. This may tell you that I don't postulate the inerrancy of every word in Scripture just on principle. We couldn't do that unless this is a kind of works righteousness, I think. We shouldn't do that. We should leave it to God. In this case, there are legendary elements in the Scriptures. And, of course, it is clear *why* this is so. Most professional exegetes would concur with the conclusion that the message of the angel in Luke is in fact an answer to the question of why this man is called Son of God. And the answer in the message of the angel is that He is called the Son of God because he is to be born by the virgin from the Holy Spirit. It is at this point where the original version of the legend and belief in the preexistent Son of God is not reconcilable. When we ask, "What's the basis of confessing Jesus to be the Son of God?" we have a number of different answers in the early Christian writings. We have the answer in the very old text, quoted by Paul in the opening sentences of the letter to Romans, that Jesus is the Son of God on the basis of his Resurrection. We have the answer in the baptism story of Jesus where the voice from heaven declared effectively this man to be the Son of God with the adoption formula (if it is an adoption formula) of Psalm 2:7. We have the Virgin Birth story in but two of the New Testament writings, while the idea of preexistence is much more widespread generally in the New Testament. (And preexistence is actually the basis of the trinitarian doctrine. I'm going to say something on that tomorrow.) If one realizes this situation, one also has to realize one cannot have everything at the same time. We can affirm all these different witnesses by understanding how they are related to each other in the process of giving reasons for the faith in Jesus Christ being the Son of God; but we cannot conceptually merge what Luke and Matthew say on the basis of that predication of Jesus as the Son of God, with what Romans 1 says on it, or with the idea of preexistence. The Church's later doctrine of the Incarnation has been a combination of the Virgin Birth with the idea of preexistence and precisely in this form of combination the doctrine of incarnation is not completely biblical.

You will find the new version of my Christological argument in the second volume of my systematic theology, where I argue that the notion of the incarnation relates not primarily to the birth of Jesus, but to His whole historical existence. In the main texts about incarnation—Romans 8 (God sent His son into the flesh) and Galatians 4 (God sent His son to be born by a woman and put under the law) and explicitly in John 1—we don't have this idea related primarily to the event of birth. So, I call upon you to be more biblical!

Anderson: Your criticisms are very strong. They are difficult to address. Still, in terms of salvation history, we can think of events which occur in history that are not comprehensible historically, but are still events in history. Then, as Cullmann points out in his book *Salvation in History*, the Holy Spirit later on may direct believers into greater understanding of those events.

Pannenberg: I didn't answer that part of your question, I admit. Well, what do we really comprehend of history? It is different from case to case, but usually not very much. And certainly even though we affirm the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus we don't comprehend very much of what actually happened. We comprehend best that which is reported to be historical and isn't. That's what we comprehend best. And so we comprehend comparatively better the legendary character of the Virgin Birth than those events that really happened in history because reality is not exhausted by our understanding. Our understanding is very provisional.

Now you say, with Cullmann, the real understanding may have come afterward—after Pentecost. Well, there are some obvious questions, including whether Mary had forgotten about what happened to her until after Pentecost. But I'll not be addressing this question now. It is true that in the course of our history we usually understand differently later what had occurred to us earlier. And the difference may be more or less incisive. Sometimes the difference can be very incisive so that we understand in a completely different way what happened to us earlier than we did then. Sometimes the difference is simply that we come to see our earlier experiences in a broader horizon. But, in any event, the actuality of the events is already presupposed in that process of hermeneutical change of meaning. Thus, one cannot argue from later experiences to the historicity of earlier events. That is not sound historical argument in any case of historical judgment, and thus we have to accept it in the case of biblical information also.

Wood: I'd like to ask one question. You have particularly criticized your teacher, Karl Barth, for trying to establish the truth of faith from the standpoint of *faith* and not critical historical reason. And yet you say that the Resurrection of Jesus as an event in history is discernible only to believers. Is there any difference between you and your teacher?

Pannenberg: I have to tell you I like that question because most of the time I am taken as somebody who has completely forgotten about his teacher or, worse, who is so dependent upon that teacher that he has to follow him blindly for most of life. That is not my relationship with Karl Barth. I owe him a great deal of gratitude in the formation of my own theological thought—and continuously so. But I'm not completely identical with Karl Barth.

I was especially impressed by Barth's emphasis on the sovereignty of God which was, of course, his Calvinist heritage to a large extent. But I drew different conclusions than Karl Barth did. I concluded that if God is sovereign as the Almighty Creator of everything, there should be no animal, no human being, and certainly not human nature, there should be no stone on this earth that could be adequately understood without this God. In other words, we don't need some prior decision of faith, we only need to remove our prejudices and look on reality as it presents itself. If God exists, that will

be enough. Therefore, I follow another theological method than Karl Barth followed. If we establish a prejudice of Christian faith and then go on to rationalize that prejudice, we act in a manner unworthy of the God we believe. If we really believe in God, we may ask for His truth in the reality of the history that we believe is the history of His manifesting Himself. We should remove every prejudgment in the judgment of faith.

This also applies to the Christian Easter tradition. I don't believe because of the faith of the apostles. I should say belief in God is not solely dependent on our judgment of the factuality of the Easter story. It is a more complex matter. But I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus because I am convinced that all of the criticism against the historicity of this tradition does not succeed. It is true that the Resurrection has been attested to only by those who became believers. Being a Jew, you cannot at the same time affirm the Resurrection of Jesus and continue to be an unbeliever. It is an immediate consequence: If Jesus had been raised by the God of Israel, belief is the immediate consequence. And that is the reason why we have only believers attesting to the Resurrection of Jesus. The story is true, and is reported; rather than the story being a product of the individual faith of those who reported that story. To get this backward is to pervert the Christian message. Because then we could invent other stories. We could invent a story that would be more appropriate for our time. We could invent another God with female rather than male features, and so on. Thus, faith should be considered as a consequence, a result, of God's action and not to be the precondition that we have to embrace first in order to be able to see the content.

