

## THE ORIGINS AND LIMITATIONS OF PANNENBERG'S ESCHATOLOGY

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With the close of the twentieth century and opening of the twenty-first, time is opportune for theologians to shore up the last century's results and determine their value for today's theology. Because of his importance to late twentieth-century theology, this essay discusses Wolfhart Pannenberg and his rather novel contribution to eschatology in which he conceived the entire truth of God. Despite pressures to relegate theological insight to subjective values, Pannenberg uniquely substantiated Christianity's historical truth in an ambitious defense of universal, public theology.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Protestant theology in Germany's modernity had largely taken flight and hid its truth from critical dissenters within academic science. The scrutiny of reason and science against religion precipitated a series of hiding techniques with which theologians have shielded religion. Kant placed it within the limits of ethics; Friedrich Schleiermacher placed the truth of religion in the feeling of absolute dependence (*das Gefühl schlechthiniger Abhängigkeit*) or "God-consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Later, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, in their peculiar ways, hid God in his transcendent otherness, denying natural theology, while Paul Tillich hid God in the mystery of Being (*Sein*) itself and nearly forfeited claims to Christian particularism. With this legacy behind him, Pannenberg's attempt to uphold traditional Christian claims against competing gods and worldviews is, for all of its subtlety of presentation, audacious. But he sees universality as constitutive of theology itself and cannot imagine talk of God—the creator and source of all life—without these absolute claims.

His system requires a specific understanding of world history as the history of God's reign. Because time still marches on and God's reign is not yet consummated, knowledge of him is incomplete. But God is still accessible from the context of history's end. Indeed, the future is the theme in Pannenberg I wish to scrutinize because it is a unique, last-century idea whose usefulness is still unclear for the current century. Pannenberg maintains that all true knowledge of God flows from the context of universal history as completed

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1997) 1:1–62.

<sup>2</sup> Beginning in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der Christliche Glaube: Nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange Dargestellt* (Bd. 1; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960) 28.

in the future. To explain this concept, I found it necessary to trace its development within the formative years of his thinking, only there comprehending his thesis that the future is an indispensable category for systematic theology. This essay takes an historical form, tracing the future's hermeneutical function in early essays and how its function later broadened toward ontologically basic significance. This ontological use of the future, we will see, was an unfortunate development because it compromised the coherence of Pannenberg's system, but the hermeneutical significance of the future remains a strong insight for theology today.

### I. REVELATION AND THE FUTURE'S APPEARANCE

From his earliest days as a professional theologian, Pannenberg showed interest in the doctrine of God, its implications for theological language, and revelation. In 1959, he published an article on the "Philosophical Concept of God," where he traced Greek influence in the history of theology and expressed the need to reinterpret the doctrine of God "even in the face of the modern crisis of metaphysics."<sup>3</sup> The final outcome of this concern (in Pannenberg's full *Systematic Theology*) shows that he never abandoned this early task to find an adequate God. But to get to the harmony of his later system, Pannenberg first had to tangle with the problems that plague all modern theology: to find a sturdy concept of revelation, which he determined could only be grounded in the history of God's worldly presence.

In January of 1959, Pannenberg argued that revelation is based in actual, biblical history (*Geschichte*) rather than other foundations, be they reason, experience, or supernatural incursion from above.<sup>4</sup> To defend his claim, he had to reckon with world history as the ultimate context for interpreting events and ultimately the truth of God. Thus, before Pannenberg set about writing systematic theology, he considered the entire span of world history (from Genesis to Revelation) first and only from there interpreted Jesus, God's kingdom, and the future's significance. While this approach might be congenial to American theology, it offered a decisive break with Europe's tradition. Nineteenth-century theology had no apocalyptic eschatology, and twentieth-century theology was blind to God's future.

Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) had spun the Enlightenment notion of progress into a version of God's kingdom on earth.<sup>5</sup> He propounded ethical progress without apocalypics, which many modern thinkers either ignored or, as in David Strauss's case, discarded as primitive mythology.<sup>6</sup> Kant's idea of progress was not central to his whole philosophy and probably demonstrates simply his latching on to the current *Zeitgeist* on the knife's blade between

<sup>3</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Philosophical Concept of God," in *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays* (trans. George Kehm; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970–1971), 2:183 (hereafter *BQT*).

<sup>4</sup> Pannenberg, "Redemptive Events and History," in *BQT* 1:15–80.

<sup>5</sup> Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge, 2001) 318ff.

<sup>6</sup> See David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* (trans. George Eliot; 4th ed.; London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902) 39ff.

Rationalism and Romanticism, but it testifies to a lasting trend in German thought. Similarly, Schleiermacher, the father of modern theology, could not open the church to God's future, and the kingdom-on-earth motif only gained speed to reach Albrecht Ritschl's great system.<sup>7</sup> God's kingdom there mirrored an ethical community thriving in civilization by mutual love, and Ritschl fully expected the future to bring about a unified body of peoples through human ethical striving.<sup>8</sup> There was little room, then, for a deity to direct the course of history toward his own creative ends.

By the next century, theology began to awaken to God's eschatological action through the work of Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss.<sup>9</sup> Schweitzer was unable to accept Jesus' preaching precisely because he felt that it failed to predict the world's imminent end. Jesus was a radical sectarian prophet, he felt, who is far too obscure to have direct relevance for religion today. Weiss would have agreed. Although approaching eschatology from the kingdom's standpoint and not Jesus' person, Weiss prefigured Schweitzer's work by demonstrating, contra Adolf von Harnack, that the NT idea of the kingdom is an apocalyptic manifestation that God alone is responsible for manifesting. At least, such was primitive Christianity's understanding. His view repudiated the kingdom-on-earth notion that was much more a product of the Enlightenment than of the Bible, but he and Schweitzer stranded eschatological thinking in the NT era.

These reactions to early modern theology laid the groundwork for Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Friedrich Gogarten to emphasize the Bible's pervasively eschatological meaning, but they still were unable to break free of their context. They all emphasized eschatology at the expense of the future.<sup>10</sup> Barth saw the biblical statements of future eschatology as fulfilled already in Jesus Christ, making his *parousia* ("coming") an event of revelation in which God appears to his church but not an historically future event. Similarly, Bultmann viewed eschatology as a kind of ethical stamp on life. He proposed that Christian existence offers already the kind of liberation that the NT typically portrays as future. Eschatology furnishes an indicative (of one's identity), which comprises an imperative (how one lives courageously into the future's uncertainties), but any future-pointing verses suffered demythologizing and reinterpretation within the consciousness of the person's subject.

Pannenberg, in contrast, found both of the above approaches unsatisfactory. The kingdom-on-earth view was shattered both by NT research and two world wars, and Barth and Bultmann's de-historicized account not only failed

<sup>7</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay; Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* chap. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (ed. Richard Neuhaus; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 52.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Edwyn Hoskyns; 6th ed.; New York: Oxford Press, 1968) 499–500. Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper, 1957) 151. Friedrich Gogarten, *Demythologizing and History* (trans. Neville Smith; London: Camelot, 1955).

to honor the Bible's claim to future eschatology but also led to the subjective retreat of theological claims, relegating them primarily into ethics and not universal knowledge of the world and its destiny. Contemporary theology, Pannenberg contended, must be debatable in a public forum and therefore must concern history as an objectively accessible arena of inquiry. Therefore, in his 1959 lecture, he directly countered Bultmann, Gogarten, and then Martin Kähler, who hid the truth of Christianity in a supra-historical plane of meaning visible to faith but not historical research.<sup>11</sup> He stepped back from the NT discussion of revelation and turned to the OT, with its promise-fulfillment motif. This motif was made famous for contemporary theology by Jürgen Moltmann, who probably receives more credit than Pannenberg.<sup>12</sup> But it was actually Pannenberg who established this new application for the doctrine of revelation five years before Moltmann's *Theologie der Hoffnung* (*Theology of Hope*) appeared. Part of the creativity for Pannenberg's notion of revelation as historical promise is explainable by his own intensive study of the scriptures and his search for the ground of universal truth claims. But he found great assistance in the OT theology of Gerhard von Rad. Contrasting the kerygmatic notion of revelation, so prominent in early twentieth-century theology, Pannenberg followed von Rad's OT portrayal of Jaweh who guides his people and the world by his historical acts.<sup>13</sup>

The Israelite community existed as a people between God's promises and their fulfillment. Their linear sense of history was always eschatological, looking back to Jaweh's past faithfulness (e.g. "I have delivered you out of Egypt") and forward to his promises ("I will deliver you into a land flowing with milk and honey"). When Jesus appeared, he did not change this schema but directed it toward himself as the ultimate redeeming power. The issue at stake is nothing less than history's meaning itself. If Jesus is upheld in his rightful place, Pannenberg reasoned, he focuses all of reality. He foretells the fulfillment of history and establishes world history's whole from which all temporal events derive meaning. Such is the hermeneutical power of the future, if we can see it, that enlivens the course of all events with significance. Though stated quite abstractly, Pannenberg was thinking of the reconciliation of the world to God as the whole meaning of history. The knowledge of this future is Jesus' resurrection from the dead: "the coming of the end of time has broken through all conceptions of the promise of God; indeed, in the event of the resurrection it has broken through everything we can conceive of."<sup>14</sup> Because Jesus manifests the end of history proleptically, provisional judgments about God's work in time and human knowledge of him are possible.

In the first years of the 1960s Pannenberg was still concentrating on revelation and interpretation of history as a means to it. He then showed

<sup>11</sup> See Pannenberg, "Redemptive Events and History," in *BQT* 1:59.

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchung zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer Christlichen Eschatologie* (München: Kaiser, 1964).

<sup>13</sup> See Pannenberg, "Kerygma and History," in *BQT* 1:88.

<sup>14</sup> Pannenberg, "Redemptive Events and History," in *BQT* 1:37.

himself to be a disciple of Hegel's right-wing school and in one place followed Hegel in seeing Jesus as a synthesis of the Greek and Hebrew, static and dynamic understandings of truth, because Jesus staked absolute truth in an open and contingent future.<sup>15</sup> Pannenberg always evinced a Hegelian restlessness toward finding absolute truth because he thought that Christianity would too easily become obsolete without this character.<sup>16</sup> While Hegel founded this truth-as-history motif that would later influence Karl Marx, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans Georg Gadamer, his approach's own faults set up his followers' failures (Marx especially) because Hegel never understood his own philosophy in terms of history's true whole. In Pannenberg: "revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history."<sup>17</sup> Hegel, of course, understood this claim, but he mistook himself to be standing at the end of history where the absolute Spirit in his philosophy was supposedly manifest in complete self-consciousness. Hegel thus misjudged the end of history because the end is still somewhere beyond the currently open future and ultimately in God, who is "the ground of the unity which comprises the contingencies of history."<sup>18</sup> Hegel's followers were unable to find history's true meaning because they lacked this sense of the whole that is only possible from history's consummation, which is known only through Jesus' bodily resurrection, the confirmation of his preaching about the future kingdom and its completion. Pannenberg interacted with modern philosophy on this point to demonstrate the adequacy of its method but the futility of its presuppositions about history. Thus, Dilthey is correct to emphasize the need for the whole in hermeneutics to understand an individual part,<sup>19</sup> but he was wrong to assume that the end (or whole) of history is unknowable because he was unwilling to make proleptic interpretations based on the creator's promise to reconcile creation to eternal life.<sup>20</sup> Nor did Martin Heidegger succeed. He, too, understood Dilthey's hermeneutical axiom but was unable to break free of any finite and historically relative interpretations of existence because he assumed that the only wholes that human could ever access were their own lives, which are complete in death; he surrendered any attempt to follow Hegel's search for absolute meaning in history.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Pannenberg, "What is Truth?" in *BQT* 2:27.

<sup>16</sup> His worst fear is that theology become isolated and sectarian (Pannenberg, "Redemptive Events as History," in *BQT* 1:41).

<sup>17</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," in *Revelation as History* (trans. David Granskou; New York: Macmillan, 1968) 133.

<sup>18</sup> Pannenberg, "Redemptive Events as History," in *BQT* 1:75.

<sup>19</sup> Dilthey writes: "Historical objectivity is only possible if, among the many points of view from which history can be seen as a coherent whole of distinguishable parts, there is one from which a series of events can be recaptured as it happened," (*Pattern & Meaning in History* [ed. H. P. Rickman; New York: Harper, 1962] 73).

<sup>20</sup> Carl Braaten, *The Futurist Option* (New York: Newman, 1970) 21.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer's work on hermeneutics proved no more successful than Heidegger because he too failed to apply his own theory to universal history (Pannenberg, "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutics," in *BQT* 1:171-75).

These observations from the early 1960s show how Pannenberg was beginning to cast his whole system in order to debate the truth of God in history's arena. To avoid determinism and apocalyptic radicalism he emphasized the still-contingent nature of history's course, which he called the "openness of the future" and from which he demanded "openness to the future" on the church's behalf, spurring it to find new and creative ways of manifesting God's love throughout history's tortuous path.<sup>22</sup> In nearly all of his early essays on hermeneutics, Pannenberg used the future as a limit-concept by which he defined the ultimate horizon of meaning. Being inspired by biblical history, the future was not just "the future as such" but God's promise of resurrection toward humankind confirmed in Jesus.

Pannenberg thought he had secured a ground for theology that could never be sublated, the logic being that the end he proclaimed can never be exceeded by a different, better end if it is truly ultimate. Through time, conflicting theologies will always arise due to the provisional nature of truth claims, but they still take place in the context of universal history and rely on the same God-revealing data. After all, "The future of God will bring the answer to the questionableness of every phenomenon in the world of nature and of mankind."<sup>23</sup> By G. E. Lessing, whose famous "ditch" divided biblical and modern times, Pannenberg was untroubled because ancient and modern times both share the same future and thus the same history. Although ancient thought has elements we can never synthesize with modern minds, Jesus' unsurpassable instantiation of God's kingdom can never be transcended either by the awakening modern consciousness or by another religion because it is itself the transcendent future.<sup>24</sup> To his own satisfaction, at least, the future had brought ultimacy to Pannenberg's investigation for historical truth.

So far we can see the future as a powerful hermeneutical tool and a rugged theological contribution. This work on hermeneutics and a consequent doctrine of revelation dominated Pannenberg's work in the late 1950s and early 60s, after which he continued to expand his system. From the mid-1960s, his work took a more ontological turn, perhaps explainable by the success of Moltmann's *Theologie der Hoffnung* and also because of his research for *Jesus—God and Man*.<sup>25</sup> From there, Pannenberg began to shift his attention to the future as an independent power of God's kingdom, a development that complicated the sound hermeneutical insights.

<sup>22</sup> Pannenberg, "Hermeneutics and Universal History," in *BQT* 1:134–35.

<sup>23</sup> Pannenberg, "The Question of God," in *BQT* 2:233.

<sup>24</sup> "As the power of the future, the God of the coming reign of God proclaimed by Jesus already anticipates all later epochs of the history of the church and of the non-Christian religions. From this standpoint, the history of religions even beyond the time of the public ministry of Jesus presents itself as a history of the appearance of the God who revealed himself through Jesus" (Pannenberg, "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutics," and "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions," in *BQT* 1:178 and 2:115, respectively).

<sup>25</sup> *Jesus—God and Man* (trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

## II. THE POWER OF THE FUTURE

Pannenberg did not drastically change directions in the mid-1960s, but the future's function and emphasis noticeably shifted once he began to construct his whole system. An essay "The God of Hope," originally published in a *Festschrift* for Ernst Bloch (1965), demonstrates an early place where the future appeared as the fundamental category. Bloch was a Marxist philosopher who made his utopian projections the object of hope, projections he believed could impact the present even though the utopia was still unrealized. In effect, though, he influenced Christian theologians to rethink the category of the future.<sup>26</sup> Pannenberg did not need Bloch to establish this category, but the rare essay about Bloch shows a Marxist boost of his fundamental insights.

The essay discusses God's kingdom, which works like a Christian equivalent of the alienation-less utopia in Marx, and Pannenberg emphasized, contra Bloch, that this kingdom can never arise out of human effort but only by God's intervention into history.<sup>27</sup> Because alienation still exists the kingdom is obviously not complete and God has not yet intervened fully into history, but he will. Because God's lordship over the kingdom grounds his very deity, God's divinity is staked on the future. God is not fully Lord because the kingdom is not yet consummated; but while time still endures, he has a presence to the world through the future. God's transcendence from the world is not that he is locked away in heaven so much as that he lies at time's end, and from this perspective, he cannot exist until the end. We should not be surprised, then, at his ostensible absence today. Still, Pannenberg claimed that this future itself is God's power over the present, making his absence only relative and not absolute, as atheists claim. Thus: "everything that has come to pass, even in times long gone, has come about and also been changed once again through this same power of the future which decides over the present just as it has brought it forth."<sup>28</sup>

In that essay, Pannenberg hoped to show, contra Nietzsche, that talk of God is real but provisional, because its referent is still-to-be. To Bloch, Pannenberg showed his agreement, that the future has some strange power over the present to transform the world through faith, hope, and love; but against Bloch he averred the need for a personal God to ground hope. These details are important because they mark a shift from the hermeneutical to the ontological. Whereas early on, Pannenberg worked centrally on epistemological questions within the doctrine of revelation, he later proposed a doctrine of God that would ground his whole theology. He strongly formulated his sentiment that the future does not only convey the meaning of history but actually has ontological priority over all time.

<sup>26</sup> See Pannenberg, "The God of Hope" in *BQT* 2:234–49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 239–40. This insight comes from Weiss's influence.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 243.

Only two years later, Pannenberg visited Concordia Theological Seminary St. Louis, where he gave two lectures on this very topic,<sup>29</sup> one on God and eschatology, the other on ethics. He expanded on earlier concerns, still developing the future's function for God's being but now also for the unity of created realities, history, and a moral ontology. He discussed the groundwork not only for his *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (1969),<sup>30</sup> but also for his entire system. His central theme was the kingdom and the need to acknowledge its historical coming as God's action to complete history and his own lordship. He again proposed that the future has independent power over the past and present. While history has a temporal priority, the future of God has the ontological priority. Recognizing the difficulty of this thinking, his refrain was to point to the message and ministry of Jesus, who, he claimed, manifested the very future of God in this reverse kind of causality by proclaiming kingdom's imminence. That Jesus' message requires temporally backward causality is a questionable assumption, but it is nevertheless the closest argumentation Pannenberg furnished for his view.

He further noted the future's importance for the doctrine of creation, arguing even that A. N. Whitehead's concept of teleology would be better expressed had he understood the future's power, also showing the future as a category to bring order to the scientific theory of evolution because it is the transcendent point of all history. Being the future, God is still dominant over all things. His coming lordship correlates with human hope for all creation, the self-transcending inspiration enabling individuals to fulfill the ethical requirements of the kingdom, spread God's love, and open their lives to the future.

These concerns set up the second lecture, where Pannenberg continued to show the future kingdom's usefulness for grounding ethics. Responding to Nietzsche's impact once again, he demanded recourse to a transcendent moral order, even in the ancient spirit of Plato. He differed from Plato, however, by making the ontologically immanent kingdom the basis of ethics. Christians are ethically commissioned to anticipate the future kingdom and so should already cultivate the kind of relationships God will instantiate in the eschaton. This morality is possible not by natural reasoning as the Greeks supposed but through Jesus' work in inaugurating the kingdom even now to his church. Thus, the future's immanence over the present becomes a fountainhead of many ethical precepts, including love, social justice, and individual freedom.<sup>31</sup>

What served as lecture material in 1967 Pannenberg published two years later.<sup>32</sup> By that point, his employment of the future as a theological concept was mature and would not differ even in the complete *Systematic Theology*

<sup>29</sup> He presented them on January 27 and 28, 1967.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Neuhaus, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

<sup>31</sup> At this point, Pannenberg was interested especially in the social implications of eschatology and its symbolic representation as a driving force of communal ethics (see "Can Christianity Do Without an Eschatology?" in *The Christian Hope* [London: Talbot, 1970] 32-34).

<sup>32</sup> *Theology and the Kingdom of God*.

twenty years later. He founded his eschatology in response to liberal views such as Ritschl, who depicted the kingdom's basis in Christian morality, but also to Barth and Bultmann, who let eschatology float away from concrete history. By emphasizing Jesus' ministry and drawing out its implications, Pannenberg synthesized the best concerns of each side: "This resounding motif of Jesus' message—the imminent Kingdom of God—must be recovered as a key to the whole of Christian theology . . . Jesus underscored the *present impact* of the imminent future."<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg maintained the kingdom's supernatural status (contra liberalism), but its retroactive impact on the present provided the ethical energy that Ritschl demanded. Being historical, the kingdom also avoided the subjectivism and narrow scope of Barth and Bultmann's existentialism without forfeiting this divine source of moral inspiration.

The greatest innovation Pannenberg showed in *Theology and the Kingdom of God* was his unrelenting use of the future metaphysic: "we see the present as an effect of the future, in contrast to the conventional assumption that past and present are the cause of the future."<sup>34</sup> Early on, Pannenberg used Jesus' kingdom message as the basis for this claim and eventually expanded its implications for God's eternity, hoping to meet the conditions his position demanded.<sup>35</sup> The future kingdom, he later claimed, is temporally identical with God's eternity in which God would exist even if the world did not. He followed Boethius's view that eternity is not an endless sequence but rather to the totality of all time as depicted below.

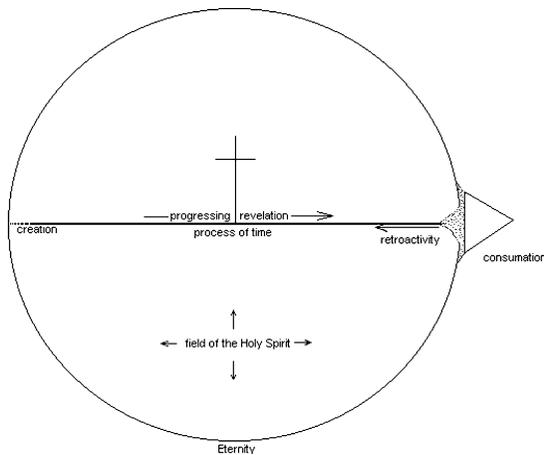


Figure: Eternity encompasses all of time, and enters into time in the eschaton. The kingdom is complete only in the eschaton, but it has retroactive pull backward in history. God is omnipresent through the Spirit field.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1: chap. 6.

While God's eternity is forever constant, its intrinsic relationship to time (in encompassing all time) allows it to break into time even from the moment of creation and especially from Jesus' ministry. Such is Pannenberg's effort to explain the ontological priority of the future, because it links historical time to the omnipresent eternity, and to explain how God can relate to the world in adequate balance between immanence and transcendence.

This general framework is the basis for all of Pannenberg's theology. The story of the world is the story of God's reign, the appearance of his kingdom, and its complete fulfillment in the eternity of history's end. Beyond the 1970s, he worked on theology's problems from this basis and expanded his already rich contribution to eschatology. He concentrated on eschatology's basis for social ethics, addressing human suffering, and the struggle for meaning in response to secularization.<sup>36</sup> He also picked up problems of individual eschatology such as the afterlife, or what humans are to expect after death, thus facilitating his theology of hope's general motif.<sup>37</sup> In America, much eschatology concerns interpretation of the apocalyptic symbols of Revelation and predicting the end times,<sup>38</sup> which has distracted it from seeing the eschatological quality of all theology. It stands, then, to learn from Pannenberg the importance of God's kingdom for all theology and thereby its implications for the church today. The basis of this kingdom eschatology is Pannenberg's use of the future as a theological category, hence this essay's central concern to determine what lasting import it might furnish to theology.

### III. THE INTEGRITY OF FUTURIST THEOLOGY

1. *Negative aspects.* To assess the strength of Pannenberg's eschatology for theology, the primary criterion must be the doctrine's coherence and broad significance for the church, academy, and world.<sup>39</sup> This requirement is inherent in Pannenberg's program to construct a public theology. The relevant question is: Does he succeed in his self-stated goals? As my thesis states, the ideas of the future's ontological presence and reverse historical causality threaten the logical coherence that his system requires as a universal, public theology.<sup>40</sup>

The problem (although Pannenberg's account lacks these categories) is causality between the real and the actual.<sup>41</sup> For us in the present, he portrays

<sup>36</sup> For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology," *HTR* 77 (1984) 124–39.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Task of Christian Eschatology," in *The Last Things: Biblical & Theological Perspectives on Eschatology* (ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 2–6.

<sup>38</sup> See Robert Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977).

<sup>39</sup> Other important criteria for evaluating doctrines are: (1) the confines of tradition/orthodoxy; and (2) Scripture, both of which I will touch on later.

<sup>40</sup> "To think of the future as prior to the past and the present is, at first, an exercise that threatens hernia of the mind" (Braaten, 28). He does not explain how this threat might be alleviated.

<sup>41</sup> I owe the use of these categories to my former professor Dr. John Cooper at Calvin Seminary.

the future as real, in that it is part of reality, but it is not yet actual. He also claims, especially after 1964, that the future itself has ontological independence over the past and can actually determine the course of history. In other words, he demands that the non-actual has ontological priority over the actual. The question arises: Can the non-actual have power over the actual? The answer, I believe, is that this power is possible only from the consciousness of the actual. Non-actual things can indeed have power over actual things; Santa Claus can enchant a child's imagination, but non-actual things can only affect children as far as they believe in them. The non-actual works as ideas and as such can inspire, but it can never transcend the bounds of time as a history-driving (ontological) force. For the church, the non-actual future of God's kingdom has power only in the church's anticipation of it, but this anticipation (hope) is the church's power in the present and not something from outside the bounds of time. Furthermore, Pannenberg's insistence on an open future only complicates the matter because, if it is really open and contingent on human freedom, then the future is not determinately real, let alone actual. It is an impossible strain on our powers of credulity to imagine an open (undecided) future impacting (deciding) the past.

The principle of retroactivity, that the future is proleptically present at all times, fails to help even if the certainty of the future kingdom is granted amid this openness. An example of retroactivity is annulment of marriage; although a couple was truly married at one time, the annulment (retroactively) reinterprets the marriage as void. Retroactivity concerns reinterpreting the past from the standpoint of the present, or the present might be interpreted from anticipation of the future (e.g. I grab an umbrella if I expect rain), but in so doing it operates within the confines of real time. At best, the future takes its proper hermeneutical priority over time, but never can it take ontological priority.

Thus arguing, I prescribe that theologians avoid obscurities that threaten theology's ability to communicate.<sup>42</sup> To demand that the past and present do not determine the future but that the future determines them backwardly is to contradict the *Systematic Theology's* general goal to communicate Christian truth publicly. By demanding a counterintuitive notion of reality based on quite novel interpretations of Jesus' message and the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch risks alienating multitudes, thus sabotaging Pannenberg's program.<sup>43</sup> Kant and the tradition of cognitive philosophy have long demonstrated that knowledge cannot take place without our minds imposing their own *a priori* concepts onto objects that they perceive.<sup>44</sup> Not only does this *a priori* conception contain certain laws of reason such as causality and non-contradiction, but it also imposes space and time. Without these categories,

<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg of course finds this metaphysic necessary, but it is so by his sentiment and not by exegetical necessity.

<sup>43</sup> Pannenberg notes how theology "has yet to digest" the new innovations about the kingdom (*Theology and the Kingdom of God* 52).

<sup>44</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn; New York: Prometheus, 1999), Introduction, part 1.

the mind is blind to potential knowledge. Though Kant does not have the final word on knowledge, he is fundamentally right that the mind can only think intelligible thoughts if it follows the parameters of what thought is. The mind understands history as a causal process from beginning to end, not the reverse. It understands history as an unfolding of space and time in the present, not an independent future breaking through time's confines. Pannenberg might counter these assertions by relying on Boethius's view that eternity fills all time, but it would not help the fundamental problems of the non-actual affecting the actual and the reverse causality of time. Boethius's eternity balances divine transcendence and immanence but is there limited. While God certainly acts outside of the mind's ability to conceive, theology's doctrines are meant to approximate knowledge of God in a conceivable, meaningful way and should avoid multiplying extra-scriptural paradoxes.

The only biblical warrant Pannenberg employs for the future's priority relates to Jesus' message, but this interpretation is an unsubstantiated innovation built on Weiss and Schweitzer's work. And the leap from the hermeneutical to the ontological future is a philosophical innovation that has little or no precedence in theology's tradition. One difficulty is that this interpretation of God's kingdom seems to come at the expense of God's presence here and now to suffer with his people and hear their prayers in time. The Bible actually portrays God's relation to the future in terms of his knowledge. When it discusses the future, the NT uses the language of foreknowledge.<sup>45</sup> Rather than demanding a God whose being transcends human temporality, the NT is concerned with the divine Father, who establishes his kingdom presently through his Son and Spirit. While we can say that "God is the future" or that the kingdom is the "in-breaking of the future," these statements cannot excise God's temporal presence, biblically portrayed, that foresees and awaits the future consummation together with creation.

The retroactive ontology leads to problems in God's very being, leaving Pannenberg ambivalent about God's "true" nature. Sometimes he speaks as though God can change, that is, from history's perspective; other times he emphasizes that God's essence is eternal and immutable.<sup>46</sup> The eternal essence supposedly has ontological precedence over all of time and enters time from the end of history, but it is also affected somehow by time at very least in assuming the Logos's incarnation that the essence would not have without its relation to history. If the incarnate Logos is constitutive of the eternal essence (as it retroactively presides over all time), then it is not evident how the unchanging essence is still ontologically prior. In fact, it proves the opposite, I think, that even on Pannenberg's own understanding of essence, history must be temporally and ontologically prior to the future eternal

<sup>45</sup> The Bible uses these words: "foreknow' (*proginōskō*), 'foreknowledge' (*prognōsis*), 'foresee' (*prooraō*), 'foreordain' (*proorizō*), 'foretell' (*promarturomai, prokatangellō*)" (William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000] 31).

<sup>46</sup> See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1:438, contrasting 1:331.

essence. This essence, as formed through history, could have only a projected, ideal presence until history's impact on it is complete.

Finally, the ontological future's lack of coherence compromises ethical sense. If the future kingdom really had ontological power to inspire love among God's people and direct their mission, it seems that the OT narrative would be more peaceful. Pannenberg believes that "the eschatological future of this reign does not remain a distant beyond, but rather becomes a power determining the present without thereby losing its futurity."<sup>47</sup> And his use of eternity implies that this power is present to all times. It is then inexplicable that the Israelites had to exist as a military community, battling their way to Canaan, for instance. The future's reconciling power should have helped Israel to seek less violent relationships with the other tribes and nations; but if it did not, then what was the kingdom's impact on ancient Israel? Admittedly, this argument is something of a "paralogism," but it demonstrates the unavoidable ambiguity to know what the future actually does to the past if it has this ontological priority. Pannenberg would have to respond by emphasizing that the newness of Jesus' covenant over the old has altered the need for violence, but that response only proves what we have suspected all along, that history has the true priority over the future, and future hope has only hermeneutical/ideal precedence over the present.<sup>48</sup>

2. *Positive contributions.* Strictly considered, the ontologically prior future is a meaningless idea, but Pannenberg's eschatology is still valuable. If the Bible truly proclaims "the end from the beginning," then theology has to operate within the framework of this entire salvation economy, not only to be scripturally sound, but to embrace the course of all history and the destiny of humankind. In acknowledging this scope, especially as he argued for it in the "history as revelation" period of his career, Pannenberg demonstrated the importance of God's kingdom for interpreting history and constructing doctrine. In acknowledging the historical nature of Christian hope, he has soundly aided theological studies.

The future's importance is its interpretive value for both doctrine and life. For doctrine, Pannenberg's eschatology accounts for the difficulty of forming theological assertions, enabling him to embrace the provisional nature of truth claims as qualified by the future when all will agree. In showing the incompleteness of all reality, the future also maintains epistemological humility, the only condition under which constructive debate between religions and worldviews can occur. It gives an overarching qualification on theology by showing individual doctrines' significance as they relate to the whole of God's kingdom, and it inspires the church to seek this kingdom in creative ways while time still ticks. All of these elements come from this inspiring idea and object of hope even if we dispense with the futurist ontology.

<sup>47</sup> Pannenberg, "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutics," in *BQT* 1:178.

<sup>48</sup> At least to 1991, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson noted that Pannenberg has not provided a satisfying answer to these kinds of questions (*20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992] 199).

In fact, some of Pannenberg's most creative and practical work concerns the ethical implications of the future kingdom, where he requires the future's hermeneutical device without its necessity as an independent power.<sup>49</sup>

Additionally, the future's qualification over all present moments is greatly important for human life. It inspires ethics in the church, which should always try to anticipate the glory of the eschaton in the way it cultivates fellowship. But before this glory, the present has many dark moments of anxiety and suffering even within the church. The idea of the future helps us to interpret life's sufferings as penultimate expressions of God's transcendence that is still necessary until the eschaton. In this respect, the church is inspired to hope for those glorious scenes in Revelation 21–22, knowing that God's seeming absence in the present is not the "death of God," but is only a condition of reality before he appears in his fullness. Pannenberg's theology is able to handle the problem of suffering because he understands its place in reality. It is true horror in present time but ephemeral in eternity's light. And the way to address suffering is not to solve the puzzle of why God allows specific evils, either diminishing his power or increasing his determinism of all things, but to look to the future: to hope in the promise he gave through his Son. The future has an indispensable ability, then, to suspend the seeming reality of every day and confirm to the faithful that evil will not get the last determinative word on reality.

For these reasons, I think that Pannenberg's eschatology will have a lasting impact, so far as it causes theologians to remember the entire historical context in which doctrine inevitably is formed. It will act as a qualifier of theological statements, showing their provisionality, and also as a focal point, lest the church forget its true purpose to live for God's kingdom.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Pannenberg's notion of the future came about in a complicated nexus of ideas and influences while he sought an adequate concept of revelation. Although he appreciated Barth and Bultmann's emphasis on eschatology, he was unsatisfied with their de-historicized version because it contradicted the OT accounts that von Rad propounded and led to subjectivism in revelation. These concerns led him to establish the future as a key to history, from where he could provisionally conceive of its whole and thus interpret God's presence in the history of religions, ultimately in the resurrection. The future makes revelation possible because it shows the context of all history (the means of revelation) as directed toward this one goal. Later on (about 1964), Pannenberg began to formulate his whole system from the kingdom's standpoint, marking the shift where the hermeneutical precedence of the future for revelation became maximized into the future's ontological priority over all

<sup>49</sup> I refer to the Concordia Lecture of January 28, 1967. See also William Schweiker, "From Cultural Synthesis to Communicative Action: The Kingdom of God and Ethical Theology," *Modern Theology* 5/4 (1989) 367–87.

time. So doing, he tried to preserve God's presence in the world even though his deity is comprised only at the end. As I have argued, the ontological emphasis lacks coherence because it demands that an open future determine the past. However, the hermeneutical implications of the future are many and solid so long as we honor the confines of time and the biblical portrayal of God who anticipates, with the church, the same future and basis of all hope.