

# FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT—THE ONE GOD: AN EXPLORATION OF THE TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE OF WOLFHART PANNENBERG

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A pastor once told his congregation, in what might have been for him a moment of profound honesty, that he mistrusted anyone who claimed to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. Unfortunately, in spite of a twentieth-century resurgence of interest, many still view the Trinity as one of the greatest Christian mysteries and perhaps some, like our erstwhile pastor, tend to suspect anyone who thinks it intelligible. Wolfhart Pannenberg, the German systematic theologian, notes that as soon as “it appears that the one God can be better understood” without the doctrine, it “seems to be a superfluous addition to the concept of the one God even though it is reverently treated as a mystery of revelation.”<sup>1</sup> These things suggest that two possibilities are open to theology. Either it can show that the one God can only be properly understood from a trinitarian construal, or it can allow the doctrine to wither as “superfluous” and unimportant. Pannenberg is convinced that the former choice is the correct one. Robert Jenson summarizes the sentiment:

Christians do not have “a God,” about whose ideas Jesus then perhaps contributes some information. They have the particular God of whom the man Jesus is one identity, and who therefore is **triume in the first rather than the second place.**<sup>2</sup> [emphasis added]

Further, Jenson suggests a point that Pannenberg makes explicit in his Systematics—without the doctrine of the Trinity, Christianity as such cannot survive. Pannenberg expresses the point as follows:

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In fact the doctrine of the deity of Christ could not itself endure apart from the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus would simply be viewed as a divinely inspired man and the church as a human fellowship of faith which arose under the impress of his personality, as in Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*.<sup>3</sup>

But, if the deity of Jesus falls, Christianity as such falls too, for what we have in Christianity is not primarily the admiration of a great moral teacher, but rather the claim that in Jesus Christ God himself appears on the side of humans in order to overcome sin on their behalf. Already we can sense the importance Pannenberg attaches to the doctrine of the Trinity, and it is our task to examine his trinitarian formulation and the claim that it is essential to a coherent doctrine of God.

Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity lies at the very center of his doctrine of God (which he promised in 1981 would be more trinitarian than any other he knew<sup>4</sup>). In a series of lectures delivered during a 1991 visit to America, he identified a number of specific revisions he felt appropriate to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> During the course of this essay, we shall have opportunity to touch upon each of them. Our discussion begins by reviewing the problems Pannenberg finds in traditional attempts to derive the Trinity. Next, we shall consider Pannenberg's basis for affirming the trinitarian nature of God, which will lead to discussion of the inner-trinitarian relations as well as the common divine essence. We shall discuss the unity of the immanent and economic Trinities and the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity and the metaphysical notion of infinity. We shall conclude with examination of Pannenberg's response to certain criticisms.

Given the monotheism of Judaism, a reasonable first question might be: why did a trinitarian conception of God arise in the first place? To answer this question, we must begin with the preaching of Jesus that was permeated with the "announcing of the nearness of the divine reign" of God—a God that Jesus referred to again and again as Father.<sup>6</sup> Reference to God as Father is not unknown in the Old Testament, and if things had stayed that simple, it might have been possible to connect the God to whom Jesus referred as Father with the one God of Jewish monotheism and be done with it. However, Jesus claimed an authority for his message such that God was only to be understood as the Father whom he proclaimed.<sup>7</sup> If Jesus had proclaimed his message and simply died at the hands of the religious officials, we might have seen him as another of the prophets—albeit one with a unique sense of closeness to God. However, this was impossible after the resurrection which "was seen as a divine confirmation of the claim implied in his earthly ministry, Jesus in the light of Easter had to appear as the Son of the Father whom he proclaimed."<sup>8</sup> Pannenberg cites Romans 1:3-4 as central in connecting the resurrection with the Sonship of Jesus, and consequently, his deity.<sup>9</sup>

Once the resurrection led to affirmation of the full deity of Jesus, it was necessary to explain how the one God could be understood as fully present in him. In addition to the Father and Son, the Scriptures also speak of the Spirit of God who is distinguished from both by his role in mediating the fellowship of the Father and Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Pannenberg summarizes:

The involvement of the Spirit in God's presence in the work of Jesus and in the fellowship of the Son with the Father is the basis of the fact that the Christian understanding of God found its developed and definitive form in the doctrine of the Trinity and not in a biunity of the Father and the Son.<sup>11</sup>

Now the difficulty was not simply reconciling the biblical witness of two distinct "persons" with the monotheistic idea of one God; instead it had to show how three distinct "persons" could be one God. There is a further difficulty; while the Scriptures clearly affirm the deity of the Father, Son and Spirit, they do not expressly clarify their relations or how they are unified.

In the early church's first affirmations of the triune nature of the one God it worshiped, the fundamental question it had to answer was how the unity of this "three-personed" God was to be understood. Consequently, Pannenberg notes that early Christian theology's attention to preserving the "biblical confession of the unity of God accompanied the development of Christian statements about the deity of the Son and the Spirit."<sup>12</sup> As theology unfolded the meaning of its claim that both the Son and the Spirit shared the divine essence, it attempted to articulate that they share in a way that preserved the oneness of God without dissolving the distinctiveness of the persons. Pannenberg claims these attempts generally found expression in one of two ways. Either the deity of the Son and Spirit was viewed as derived from the Father as the source or "fount" of deity, or the Son and Spirit were viewed as different expressions of the Father's self-consciousness.<sup>13</sup> But, will either do justice to the notion of a Triune God?

The former approach was taken by the Cappadocian fathers when they claimed that the relations were definitive of the distinctions between the Father and the Son and Spirit. They conceived of the Father as "the source and principle of deity" from which the Son and Spirit derivatively receive their deity.<sup>14</sup> Pannenberg notes, however, that this view had been linked to subordinationism in pre-Nicene formulations. While the Son and Spirit are only God derivatively, the Father, as the source or "cause" of deity, is inevitably God in the fullest sense needing nothing outside himself for his deity.<sup>15</sup> Do not causes always enjoy a superior ontological standing to their effects—even if only a small one? Perhaps the distinctiveness of the persons can be maintained in this fashion, but the equal deity of the persons is sacrificed.

As we shall see, the primary objection to this approach is not the use of relations to define the distinctions, but in the one-way nature of the relations. Only by understanding the relations as reciprocal can we do justice to the need for ontological equality among the persons. Consequently, Pannenberg favorably judges Athanasius' attempt to use "the logic of the relation that is posited when we call God 'Father'"<sup>16</sup> in order to get at the mutuality of the relations. In a very real sense, the Father could not be the Father without the Son; consequently, the Father is dependent, at least after a fashion, upon the Son for his deity. The idea of reciprocity is significant, and we shall return to it momentarily.

In addition to using the notions of "source" and "fount" to get at the relation of the deity of the Son and Spirit to that of the Father, the Cappadocians attempted to explicate their unity in terms of unity of activity. They sought to avoid the charge of trithe-

ism by showing that the three persons were only one God. But does a commonality of activity really preclude ontological independence? Pannenberg correctly points out that “the idea of a collective cooperation of ontologically independent beings is not, then, ruled out” so the unity of the persons is not adequately defended and the possibility of tritheism is not precluded.<sup>17</sup> In spite of best intentions, neither the unity nor the distinctiveness of the persons was adequately established by the Cappadocians.

The second approach (deriving the three “persons” from the self-consciousness of the Father) has appeared repeatedly. Pannenberg notes the origin of this approach dates back to the “psychological analogies” of Augustine, and that they became so influential that “they also figure in the development of what later became the normative structure of the doctrine of God to the extent that the doctrine of the unity precedes the treatment of the Trinity.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, Augustine did not intend the “psychological analogies” as attempts to derive the trinitarian distinctions; instead, he intended them as a general means of connecting the seemingly disparate notions of threeness and unity as an aid to understanding<sup>19</sup>—that is, they show the reasonableness of the Trinity once one is inclined to accept the doctrine as a tenet of faith.

Augustine intended to treat the triune nature of God as a pure impenetrable mystery of faith. Oddly, Augustine found support in the previously noted Cappadocian idea that the unity of the Trinity was to be found in the unity of the divine actions.<sup>20</sup> If the actions are such that they appear to be those of a single subject, then all attempts to get at the distinctions on the basis of the actions are ruled out from the beginning. We have already noted that tritheism cannot be ruled out on these grounds; now an additional problem becomes apparent. If no distinctions are evident, could the actions not be those of a single divine subject who simply appears in different modes? In this way, Pannenberg says, a tendency toward modalism was introduced into all efforts aimed at deriving the trinity from the unity. This problem was not a late discovery for Pannenberg notes that as early as the 12th century, Gilbert de la Porree “rejected as Sabellianism the attempt to derive the Trinity from the unity with the help of Augustine’s psychological analogies.”<sup>21</sup>

Pannenberg is sympathetic to efforts to derive the Trinity from the unity with the concept of love. He points to Richard of St. Victor who argued along the lines that “love defined as caritas has to be love of another...Hence it demands a plurality of persons.”<sup>22</sup> One of the advantages of such a conception, says Pannenberg, is that the notion of love “truly leads to the idea of personal encounter.”<sup>23</sup> A second advantage is that the Spirit, as the third necessary for expression of unselfish love, reaches clearer distinction as a separate person. However, there are problems. Are the persons constituted by love, or must they be presupposed? Are the second and third persons generated by the love of the first? If so, we return to a single divine subject who gives rise to the others. The important thing for Pannenberg is that if the divine essence is to be conceived as love, it must be conceived as an aspect of the divine reality which is shared by all three persons—not just the possession of the first person.<sup>24</sup>

Similar problems plagued Hegel’s attempt to renew the doctrine of the Trinity. Pannenberg refers to Hegel’s adoption and expansion of Lessing’s attempt to ground the Trinity “in the concept of Spirit as an expression of the self-understanding of God

in self-awareness” as the “classical form” of the “doctrine of the Trinity in terms of self-conscious Spirit.”<sup>25</sup> Again we have a single divine subject whose self-expression takes on three forms. Finally, Pannenberg claims that even Barth’s attempt to reground the doctrine of the Trinity in the revelation of Christ fell short when he used the “formal concept of revelation as self-revelation” wherein Barth posited an object, a subject and a revelation itself.<sup>26</sup> Here Pannenberg finds once again a single divine subject which precludes any real space for a plurality of persons.

All these attempts fell short in a very fundamental way—they failed to adequately connect, in a clear and essential fashion, the trinitarian statements about the three persons with the unity of God.<sup>27</sup> In the 16th century, this led to a number of attacks from; some challenging the supporting biblical exegesis while others questioned the reasonableness of the doctrine. In the 17th and 18th century, theology focused its attention upon discovering the doctrine in revelation. Roger Olson claims that this gave the impression that the unity was rationally demonstrable while the Trinity was a matter of special revelation, and that “from there it was a small step to the atrophy of the doctrine in Enlightenment religion and liberal Protestant theology.”<sup>28</sup> At the end of detailed discussion of various attempts to derive the doctrine of the Trinity, Pannenberg comes to the following conclusion:

Any derivation of the plurality of trinitarian persons from the essence of the one God, whether it be viewed as spirit or love, leads into the problems of either modalism on the one hand or subordinationism on the other. Neither, then, can be true to the intentions of the trinitarian dogma.<sup>29</sup>

If the Trinity cannot be derived from the presupposed unity of God, what options are left? Pannenberg says we must begin with the revelation of Father, Son and Spirit in salvation history,<sup>30</sup> the starting point is “the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

Pannenberg favors reformation thinkers who argued that the doctrine of the Trinity had to be taken from the Scriptures rather than from speculative derivations. He writes that they “saw more clearly than many later theologians that as God reveals himself, so he is in his eternal deity.”<sup>32</sup> Why so? Pannenberg notes Jesus’ claim that “no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27).<sup>33</sup> During the last supper, Jesus says to Philip that whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father.<sup>34</sup> In light of Easter, we have already noted that the claims of Jesus’ earthly ministry stand confirmed by God. Consequently, it follows that the revelation of the Father, as contained in the message of Jesus, cannot be superseded and that God is, in his eternal deity, as he was revealed by the Son. For these reasons, construction of the doctrine of the Trinity must begin with examination of the revelation of Christ.

As this point will be important for subsequent discussions, a bit by way of further expansion is appropriate. It was Karl Barth who argued that if the revelation of Jesus is to have ultimacy and reveal God as he is, then God, in his eternity, must coincide with the revelation in Christ.<sup>35</sup> Karl Rahner, concerned with showing that the incarnation was not accidentally connected to the eternity of God, further developed the position into the thesis that the immanent Trinity (God as he is in his eternal life) is

identical with the economic Trinity (God as revealed in salvation history).<sup>36</sup> The point is significant for only if the economic “sendings” of the Son and Spirit into salvation history are intimately connected with their inner-trinitarian relations to the Father can the biblical witness of salvation history give means to affirm the inner-Triune nature of God. Consequently, “the concrete relation of Jesus to the Father must be the starting place for trinitarian reflection.”<sup>37</sup> We shall return to this point (known as Rahner’s Rule) in our discussion of the immanent and economic Trinities.

Examination of the revelation in Christ, however, reveals that things are not as simple as one might like—there is no express formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity anywhere to be found either “in the message of Jesus [or] in the NT witness-es.”<sup>38</sup> While the deity of the Son and the Spirit are clearly affirmed, “it is not clear how the deity of the Son and Spirit relates to that of the Father.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, we must proceed with systematic reconstruction from the biblical witness regarding the relations of the Son and Spirit to the Father. This is the same path the Greek fathers took in speaking of the Father as “origin” and “fount” of deity. Pannenberg affirms the approach, though we must not repeat the errors of subordinationism or modalism.

It is appropriate to pause and summarize briefly. Pannenberg’s first revision to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is a negative one—the Trinity cannot be derived from an abstract concept of the one God.<sup>40</sup> Second, Pannenberg is unwilling to take the path followed by some—simply denying the doctrine of the Trinity as a later Hellenization of Christianity.<sup>41</sup> In fact, he recognizes that the Trinity can only stand if it is essential to the explication of the one God, and he proposes to show this is the case. Third, Pannenberg affirms that the beginning place for explication of the Trinity is with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Finally, since the Scriptures contain no explicit trinitarian formula, the development of the doctrine must be by systematic reconstruction from the biblical evidences regarding the relations between the Father, Son and Spirit.

So, if the revelation in Christ is the starting point, the next question is obvious: what does that revelation demonstrate about the relations between the Father and the Son? Traditionally, theology has adduced passages such as John 1:14 and John 3:16 and claimed that the relations flow one way from the Father to the Son and can be expressed by the term “begotten”—the Father begets the Son. Yet, if this is all we can say, we have not yet escaped the ontological subordination implied by one way relations of origin. There are two very closely related questions that must be asked next. First, does the revelation in Christ give us grounds for affirming other relations between Father and Son? Second, are there grounds for supporting a mutuality of relations so that the Son is not only dependent upon the Father for his deity, but so that the Father is also dependent upon the Son?

If we examine the message of Jesus, Pannenberg claims we find that Jesus “distinguishes himself from God and sets himself as a creature below God as he asks his hearers to do.”<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg points to the Johannine gospel wherein “Christ says that the Father is greater than he (14:28)” and wherein Jesus claims that the words he speaks are the Father’s and not his own (14:24). In Mark, Jesus refuses to accept the title “good Teacher” since only God is good.<sup>43</sup> Pannenberg gives other evidences, but



the point is the same—Jesus, as opposed to the first Adam who sought equality with God, self-differentiates himself from the Father and submits himself to the Father. Here we must note a thesis from one of Pannenberg's earlier works: "communion and unity with God increase in the same proportion as the modesty of the creature in distinguishing itself from God."<sup>44</sup> Consequently, as Jesus self-differentiates himself from the Father and subordinates himself to the Father, he fulfills the mission for which he was sent and thereby is "so at one with the Father that God in eternity is Father only in relation to him."<sup>45</sup> Since God is Father only in relation to Jesus, "the Son shares [the Father's] deity as the eternal counterpart of the Father."<sup>46</sup> And, according to Rahner's Rule, this is indicative of an eternal, inner-Triune relation.

From the preceding, we see a degree of mutuality in the relations between Father and Son—the Father is only Father in relation to Jesus as Son. However, Pannenberg goes on to ask whether there might be similar self-distinction from the Son on the Father's side. The Scriptures speak of the Father's handing over the kingdom to the Son. The Father hands all authority over to the Son who must execute that authority until he brings everything under his reign, then the Son hands back the kingdom to the Father and finally subjects himself to the Father's rule so "that God may be all in all."<sup>47</sup> Now we have a true mutuality of relations for the Father, by virtue of the handing over of the kingdom, makes himself dependent upon the Son for his own deity: he is dependent upon the Son fulfilling his mission and handing back the kingdom. Again, by Rahner's Rule, this relation defines an inner-Trinitarian relation so that the Father, in the eternal divine life, is in fact dependent upon the Son for his deity.

With the notion of self-distinction as a principle for getting at inner-Trinitarian relations, one now asks if it also applies to the Spirit. Pannenberg points us to the Johannine gospel where it is said of the Spirit: "Precisely by not speaking of himself (John 16:23) but bearing witness to Jesus (15:26) and reminding us of his teaching (14:26), he shows himself to be the Spirit of truth."<sup>48</sup> The Spirit distinguishes himself from the Father and the Son and shows himself to be separate from both; and by glorifying the Son, and in him the Father, the Spirit shows himself to be one with the Father and the Son.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, even though self-distinction and self-subjection are somewhat different for the Spirit, they are still the principles whereby the Spirit shows himself to be distinct from the other two and whereby he receives his deity.

In order to have a truly reciprocal relationship, the Father and the Son must also be dependent upon the Spirit for their deity. As the Spirit is the "condition and the medium of [the] fellowship [of the Father and Son]," the imparting of the Spirit brings believers into their fellowship.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the Spirit participates in the realization of the kingdom among humans, and thus we see one way in which the rule/deity of the Father (and thus the Son) is dependent upon the Spirit.

Perhaps, the best example of the mutual dependency of the Trinitarian persons is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. At the crucifixion, the deity of all three members is brought into question. If Jesus is not raised, it is shown that he was not the Son. Further if the Son is not raised, he will not be able to submit all things and hand the rule back over to the Father. If the Spirit does not raise the Son, his status as Creator of life is seriously damaged. While the deity of all members is threatened,

“decisive significance attaches, however, to the work of the Spirit as the creative origin of all life.”<sup>51</sup> By recognizing the special significance of the work of the Spirit, we further amplify the dependence of the others upon the Spirit since their deity is secured by the Spirit’s raising of Jesus.

Pannenberg states that one may affirm the relations between the Father on the one hand, and the Son and Spirit on the other as relations of origin (the Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds), but to see them exclusively as such leads to subordinationism. However, if the persons are dependent upon each other for their deity, so that the relations are fully reciprocal, Pannenberg claims that ontological subordination is overcome. Similarly, the notion of self-distinction leads us beyond modalism for clearly we have three persons and not one subject simply appearing in different modes. Pannenberg summarizes as follows:

If the trinitarian relations among Father, Son and Spirit have the form of mutual self-distinction, they must be understood not merely as different modes of being of the one divine subject, but as living realizations of separate centers of action.<sup>52</sup>

With the threats of modalism and subordinationism behind, that of tritheism arises; consequently, we must turn to Pannenberg’s demonstration that the three persons are only one God and that the “doctrine of the Trinity is in fact concrete monotheism.”<sup>53</sup>

In discussing the unity of the trinitarian persons, three points need to be considered. First, implicit in our discussion has been the modern subordination of the concept of substance to that of relation. In Aristotelian categories, relations were conceived as accidents that belonged to a substance that was ontologically prior. However, modern thought has reversed this connection so that relation is now seen as primary and substance subordinated.<sup>54</sup> With Hegel, Pannenberg holds that a fundamental element of the logical structure of substance is its relatedness to another. Consequently, the divine essence must be understood as defined relationally, and not simply as an abstract “thing” lying behind the relations. We have seen that Pannenberg finds the relations constitutive for the persons of the Trinity as well as for their deity—they are each only God as they are related to each other in the divine life mirrored in the economic Trinity.<sup>55</sup>

The second point is the importance of the monarchy of the Father. First, we have already seen that Pannenberg rejects any notion of the Father’s monarchy that results in ontological subordination, but this does not mean rejection of the monarchy of the Father *per se*. As a matter of fact, it is precisely the self-subordination of the Son and the Spirit in their acts of self-distinction that supports the monarchy of the Father without ontological subordination. Now, we must combine this insight with the constitutive nature of the relations. Is the monarchy of the Father threatened by the mutual dependence implied by the relations? Not at all; in fact, it means that his monarchy is mediated to him through the Son and the Spirit. As Pannenberg writes:

By their work the Son and Spirit serve the monarchy of the Father. Yet the Father does not have his kingdom or monarchy without the Son and Spirit, but only through them.<sup>56</sup>



The mutual goal of the trinitarian persons is the establishment of the monarchy of the Father over all creation. However, there is a significant point to keep in mind: the Father's monarchy does not have logical precedence over the Son and the Spirit, for this would lead toward subordination. Instead, the monarchy of the Father is the result of the "common operation of the three persons" and is, thus, "the seal of their unity."<sup>57</sup>

The third and final point we must consider is the precise nature of the divine essence. We know that it is constituted relationally, and that it takes outward expression in the mutual cooperation of the three persons for whom the monarchy of the Father is a goal. Now, the question is whether we can say more about the divine essence so characterized. Jenson, working from Pannenberg's essay entitled "Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God," summarizes Pannenberg's answer in three steps. First, Jenson points out traditional theology's problematic understanding of the divine attributes and inner-trinitarian relations that stem from its "obedience to the metaphysical prejudice that 'being' is self-enclosure, transcendence of relation."<sup>58</sup> This resulted in separation of the inner-trinitarian relations from the divine attributes that God has in relation to creation (righteousness, mercy, wisdom, etc.) and from the divine attributes which describe God's essentiality, the so-called "omni-" attributes.<sup>59</sup> However, as we noted above, essence or "being" is now seen as primarily constituted by relations, and this opens the way to rethinking these attributes in terms of the constitutive relations.

Second, Jenson quotes Pannenberg's claim that the so-called "omni-" attributes all "relate back to the concept of infinity."<sup>60</sup> Pannenberg credits Hegel with showing that the truly Infinite is only that which overcomes the distinction between finite and Infinite and thereby appears with the finite as well as is transcendent to it.<sup>61</sup> Jenson notes that the "word for such a relation, where it is concretely realized [is] love."<sup>62</sup> Pannenberg notes that "the phrase 'God is love' represents the concretization of the abstract structure of the concept of infinity."<sup>63</sup> The relations between God and creation (righteousness, mercy, etc.), then, are concrete expressions of God's infinity.

The third step is the recognition that love is not simply one divine attribute among others, but "according to 1 John 4:8, 16, love as the power that manifests itself in the mutual relations of the trinitarian persons is **identical with the divine essence**."<sup>64</sup> [emphasis added] It is not simply that God has love; the very divine essence itself is love. The relations that have been discussed are all expressions of that mutual love. Consequently, the claim that "God is love" captures the fullness of the trinitarian fellowship. Further, if there is only one divine essence ("the relationally-structured love which unifies without obliterating distinctions"<sup>65</sup>), then there is only one God who, nonetheless, is concretely realized in three distinct persons. Thus Pannenberg writes (expanding upon the quote from above):

Thus the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact concrete monotheism in contrast to notions of an abstract transcendence of the one God and abstract notions of a divine unity that leave no place for plurality; so that the one God is in fact a mere correlate of the present world and the plurality of the finite.<sup>66</sup>

Pannenberg thus forges a doctrine of the Trinity which he believes overcomes the

concerns of tritheism on the one hand, and subordinationism and modalism on the other.

While this discussion has outlined, as Pannenberg sees it, the unity of the trinitarian persons, one other area related to the unity of God needs attention: the unity of the immanent and the economic Trinities. Rahner's Rule that the immanent and economic Trinities are identical seems simple enough, but it must be carefully applied. Pannenberg credits Kasper with correctly pointing out that the equation of the two must not result in absorption of the immanent Trinity into the economic—as if salvation history were necessary for God's eternal self-identity.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, the strength of Rahner's proposal is that it does away with the apparent independence of the economic and immanent Trinities that arose when early philosophical theology, guided by Hellenistic conceptions, viewed the divine essence as "untouched by the course of history on account of the eternity and immutability of God."<sup>68</sup> The questions are: how forcefully should one push the identity of the immanent and economic Trinities? and, how ought that identity be understood?

Two insights are important here. First, there is Pannenberg's claim that God's deity is his rule.<sup>69</sup> Second, and closely related, is Pannenberg's claim that, while the existence of a world is not necessary to God's deity, should God create a world, God would hardly be God apart from his ruling it.<sup>70</sup> Pannenberg connects these two notions with the previous discussion regarding the mutual interdependency of the persons when he writes:

Even in his deity, by the creation of the world and the sending of his Son and Spirit to work in it, he has made himself dependent upon the course of history. This results from the dependence of the trinitarian persons upon one another as the kingdom is handed over and handed back in connection with the economy of salvation and the intervention of the Son and Spirit in the world and its history.<sup>71</sup>

Recall that Rahner's thesis was first worked out with regard to the incarnation of the Son. Specifically, the incarnation was not simply a task appropriated by one of the Trinitarian persons who just happened to be the Son; instead, it was the salvation historical expression of an inner-trinitarian relation between the Son and the Father and Spirit. Further, we have already seen that the crucifixion called into question the deity of all three persons of the Trinity. But, if the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity, it was in fact the immanent Trinity that was called into question in the events surrounding the crucifixion. Taking the next step, if once God has created a world his deity is only consistent with his ruling it and if his kingdom is not yet fully present in the world, in light of Rahner's Rule, it becomes obvious that "the immanent Trinity itself, the deity of the trinitarian God, is at issue in the events of history."<sup>72</sup> For Rahner's thesis to be taken seriously, Pannenberg believes it must be taken at least this far.

The danger is that the immanent Trinity becomes so closely linked with the world's history that the economy of salvation becomes the means by which God develops into that which he is to be. To avoid this, priority has to be given to the immanent Trinity so that God is who he is "from eternity to eternity." How shall we

reconcile these seemingly disparate notions of eternal self-identity and dependence upon the course of history? Pannenberg utilizes a central tenet of his theological enterprise—the ontological priority of the future. If the kingdom should come, as Christians anticipate based upon the proleptic appearance of Christ, then it will become clear that God has been who he is all along. In Pannenberg's words, "the eschatological consummation is only the locus of the decision that the trinitarian God is always the true God from eternity to eternity."<sup>73</sup>

Some have asked whether this simply means that our knowledge is made accurate by the coming of the kingdom thereby implying the "dependence" of God upon the course of history is merely an epistemological matter. However, Pannenberg would reject such an understanding. When a future state of affairs is necessary for a given thing/event to have its essence/meaning, then the change resulting from the occurrence of that future state of affairs is not epistemological, but is truly constitutive of the essence of the thing/event. So, if God's kingdom comes, then it will finally be decided, for all eternity, that God is who he is. If the kingdom does not come, then God's deity is refuted, also for all eternity. In Pannenberg's view then, it is simply that the eschaton is "the locus of that decision." This being the intent of Pannenberg's claim is clear from his comparison of the retroactive power of the eschatological consummation for God's deity with the retroactive power of the resurrection for the identity of Jesus as the Son.<sup>74</sup>

In this way, Pannenberg conceives the relationship between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity which allows for the debatability of God's existence in the world today, while maintaining the eternal self-identity of God so that the history of the world is not necessary for his becoming. This also opens the way for articulating the notions of God's eternity and his immutability in a more biblical fashion. Pannenberg (and others such as Jüngel, Moltmann, and Jenson) believes that the correct starting point for reworking these doctrines is the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>75</sup> Let us now turn attention to the manner in which the Trinity makes possible conceiving of God as truly Infinite.

A fundamental requirement imposed upon the doctrine of God by the philosophical notion of the Infinite is that it be able to support the seemingly disparate notions of transcendence and immanence. A single, transcendental divine subjectivity does not accomplish this, and Pannenberg argues that only with a concept of God as a differentiated unity (something like a trinitarian conception) can such reconciliation occur. In discussion of God's omnipresence and omnipotence (recall we have observed that the "omni-" attributes are expressions of God's infinity), Pannenberg makes the solution explicit:

The doctrine of the Trinity made it possible so to link the transcendence of the Father in heaven with his presence in believers through the Son and Spirit that in virtue of the consubstantiality and perichoresis of the three persons the Father...could be viewed as present and close to believers through the Son and Spirit.<sup>76</sup>

And now the pieces fall into place. The Father is transcendent, but the Son and Spirit,

by their being sent into the world, are present with the creatures in their places. As a consequence of the unity of the divine essence, we can affirm that the Father is also present with his creatures and, thus, this one God is both transcendent to and immanent within the world. It only remains to make the connections explicit in the various "omni-" attributes.

Pannenberg connects God's omnipotence to the notion of infinity by showing that omnipotence simply viewed as opposition to all others who have power is one-sidedly transcendent. God's omnipotence is demonstrated by its appearance along side the creatures—specifically, in the act of self-distinction wherein the Son becomes a creature in order to provide a means of rescuing the creatures from the nothingness into which they had fallen by the assertion of their independence.<sup>77</sup> With regard to God's eternity, it is again the incarnation of the Son which "sets aside the antithesis of eternity and time" so that the kingdom of the Father may be present through the appearing of the Son.<sup>78</sup> Finally, Pannenberg notes that, in general, unity of the Infinite and the finite, as required by the philosophical concept of the Infinite, which appears insoluble in its logical form without loss of distinction between the two, is only soluble with a trinitarian concept of God. And now the reversal Pannenberg called for is complete—he has shown that it is only possible to construct a coherent doctrine of the one Christian God with the doctrine of the Trinity as foundation. Only with a trinitarian conception of God can justice be done to the revelation in Christ. And only with a trinitarian conception of God can the divine attributes relating to God's infinity, which have been so problematic throughout the history of theology, be satisfactorily treated.

In addition to solving the problem of applying the metaphysical notion of infinity to God, Pannenberg believes a trinitarian conception provides the resources necessary for responding to Fichte's criticisms that arise from conceiving God as personal: 1) the claim that the notion of personality is an anthropomorphic projection, and 2) the claim that God's personality stands in contradiction to his infinity. In responding to the first objection, Pannenberg argues that the inner-trinitarian conception of personality is the source of the human conception of personality. Specifically, he writes:

Historically, these features of human personality emerge only in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity as its concept of person, constituted by relations to others, is transferred to anthropology.<sup>79</sup>

Pannenberg goes on to recognize the differences one must admit between the trinitarian persons and human persons, but the important point for our discussion is that modern conceptions of personality did not develop independent of religion, but rather from reflection of the triune God and the relations between the three persons. If this is correct, application of the notion of personality was from God to humans, and Fichte's criticism falls.

With regard to the second objection Pannenberg accepts the claim that relationality is essential for personality so that if we are to understand God as personal, we must be able to affirm that personality in terms of relation to something else. If the Christian doctrine of the one God were an abstract, transcendental conception of a

single, divine subjectivity, then something outside of God (like a world) would be necessary for God's personhood. Without a trinitarian conception of God, this line of reasoning would be disastrous for it would lead to either finitization of God (limiting him to the person that stands opposed to the finite world) or pantheism (maintaining God's infinity by absorbing the world into it, and deserting his personhood).<sup>80</sup> It is precisely the doctrine of the Trinity that shows how the relationality necessary for conceiving the one God as personal can occur within his differentiated unity. This secures God's creative freedom (he need not create a world), and it makes possible the coherent application of the notions of infinity and personality to God.

It is now time to consider some of the questions Pannenberg's doctrine will undoubtedly face. First, does it avoid the charge of subordinationism—particularly with his emphasis upon the monarchy of the Father?<sup>81</sup> Can we maintain the equal deity of the persons if the Father is God in a special sense? Pannenberg clearly argues that we can. It is precisely the point of the mutuality of relations between the Father, Son and Spirit which is intended to overcome any hint of ontological subordination. Since the persons are all mutually dependent upon each other for their deity, Pannenberg argues that their ontological status is equivalent. Self-subjection, he says, does not lead to ontological subordination. But, is the charge of subordination overcome—even if it is a unique sort of subordination?

It seems the matter hinges upon a pair of questions: 1) does the tradition's affirmation of the equal deity of the persons imply more than ontological equality? and 2) do distinctions of "rank" imply ontological inequality? As to the first question, it seems clear that the credal affirmations focus upon ontologically equivalent deity. Important phrases include: "very God of very God," "Light of Light," "of one substance," and "who with the Father and the Son is worshiped together and glorified together." Is there more than ontological equivalence at stake? It does not seem so. Also, the tradition has recognized that the persons, as they appear in salvation history, have different roles, which implies that ontological equality is not intended to mean indistinguishability of works. By Rahner's Rule, the salvation historical roles correspond to real inner-trinitarian distinctions. One is hard pressed to see more than ontological equivalence at stake here, or how different roles implies ontological inequality.

This leads us to the second question: do distinctions of "rank" imply ontological inequality? In virtually every sort of relationship known where ontologically equivalent beings interact, distinctions of rank are common. The fact that one individual is the president of a company and others employees does not imply ontological inequality (especially should the others make the president). The same is true of military organizations, and much more appropriately, of family relationships. Granted these comparisons have a weakness. The organizational subordination indicated in the first two examples may include a conflict of some sort—perhaps the person lower in rank does not want to subject himself. In the latter, the father is temporally prior. However, we can remedy these problems by noting the co-eternality of the persons of the Trinity and by remembering that the Son and Spirit willingly subject themselves. In light of these considerations, it is hard to see how Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity is subordinationistic even though it may contain something of the notion of "rank"—that is a "rank" constituted by the self-subjection of the others. For these reasons, I cannot

concur with those who would accuse Pannenberg of subordinationism.

Any doctrine of the Trinity which gives strong affirmation of the distinction of the persons will likely be accused of tritheism. Does Pannenberg's doctrine successfully avoid tritheism? Perhaps this matter can also be addressed by considering a pair of questions: 1) can any understanding of God which reduces the content of the Trinity to a single divine subject ever be adequate? and 2) does the reciprocity of relations proposed by Pannenberg show that the three persons are one God? The first question has already been answered. To summarize: first, it is doubtful whether any meaningful notion of God remains if he cannot be conceived as personal. Second, personality is a relational concept so that if we are to conceive a being as personal, it must have something to stand over against. Third, this means that either we need a concept of God where the relationality exists within God, or some world becomes necessary for God. We have argued that the latter is not an acceptable possibility for it surrenders divine freedom and finitizes God; thus, the short answer to the first question is no. Thus, the second question becomes critical.

Let us ask one further question: under what conditions could we affirm that distinct persons share a single essence and are, then, one? Jenson summarizes Pannenberg's discussion of personality from *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*:

If one person's will were to be so directed to the will of another person as to be in "absolute practiced unity of will" with the other, achieved in "complete abandonment of self" to that other, and if that unity of will were confirmed by the other, this would amount to the reality of a personal being which is one for both persons.<sup>82</sup>

This particular discussion relates to the unity of the Father and Son, but doesn't the reciprocity of the inner-trinitarian relations, the mutual commitment to the monarchy of the Father, and the self-subjection of the Son and the Spirit bear a striking resemblance? In the Trinity, we have three persons who have a "unity of will" oriented toward the monarchy of the Father and a mutual love which could only be described as "complete abandonment of self" to the others. Can we say that three persons so intimately bound together are really one? It certainly seems so.

It is worth noting that some have compared Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity to the so-called social analogies.<sup>83</sup> Oddly enough, Pannenberg himself is not sympathetic to social trinitarianism.<sup>84</sup> Why not? Because, he argues, we know of no societies which would really be analogous to the trinitarian relations. All societies, we know, are made up of autonomous, independent beings—none with beings who are what they are only in relation to each other. We know of societies which imperfectly realize the bond of love—none within which that bond is so perfectly realized that there is mutual, unreserved self-giving of each to the others. We know of societies wherein individuals struggle to be at the top—none wherein members willingly and totally subject themselves to the monarchy of another. If the members of the Trinity constitute a society, it is so radically different from anything else we call a society that the analogy is hopelessly flawed from the beginning.

So, has Pannenberg solved the problem of tritheism? There will undoubtedly be those who claim that he has not, but is the objection reasonable? Pannenberg has shown that a single, transcendent divine reality does not work, and he has given us the salvation historical evidence for the plurality of persons. He has shown how the



reciprocity of relations ought be understood so that the persons are fully dependent upon each other not just for their personhood, but also for their deity. Finally, he has demonstrated the singularity of the divine essence, which is a relationally-structured love that is constitutive of a degree of intimate fellowship beyond anything else known. This writer concludes that this adequately demonstrates both the necessity of the plurality and the reality of the unity, and therefore, avoids tritheism.

The last question that needs response is whether or not Pannenberg's Christology is adoptionistic. Olson notes that this question has important consequences for if it is, it would be possible to "dismiss the doctrine of the Trinity based on it as merely 'economic.'" <sup>85</sup> Pannenberg readily admits that no necessity attaches to the Son's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth—i.e. it is hypothetically possible that the Son could have been incarnate in someone else. <sup>86</sup> Does this imply adoptionism? Pannenberg claims that it does not because the man Jesus was not adopted by God at some particular point during his life. As a matter of fact, while it is possible that the Son could have been incarnate in someone else, this does not mean that the decision to become incarnate in Jesus was not made in God's eternity "before the foundation of the world." Pannenberg holds that this "eternal decision" to become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth preserves both the creatureliness of Jesus while avoiding adoptionism. Further, the human Jesus was not already existing prior to incarnation by the logos (which would imply adoptionism), but is in fact constituted by the incarnation. Of course, once the incarnation in Jesus had become reality, all of the consequences of the handing over and the handing back which make the Father's deity dependent upon the Son become a reality with regard to Jesus as Son. In light of the "eternal decision"—and the constitutive nature of the incarnation for the human person Jesus, it seems Pannenberg is justified in denying his doctrine is adoptionistic.

In the course of this essay, we have investigated Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity in some detail. During the 1991 American tour, Pannenberg commented to one professor that volume one of his forthcoming Systematics would be about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—and so would volume two and so would volume three. Even a casual perusal of these volumes reveals how Pannenberg again and again appeals to the trinitarian conception of God to breathe life into the other aspects of his systematic reconstruction of the Christian faith. Over the next several decades, the tradition will judge Pannenberg's contribution, but it does not seem rash to suggest that he will be judged a major contributor to recentering the Christian doctrine of God on a trinitarian conception. <sup>87</sup>

#### Notes

1. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing), p. 291.
2. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton, eds., *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), p. 202.
3. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 292.
4. Quoted by R. Olson in "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity" in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 43 (1990): 176.
5. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion on the Trinitarian Doctrine," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 46 (Fall 1991): 31-35.
6. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 259.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 264, for example.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
13. See Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 180ff. for more details.
14. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 279.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 282 and 287.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 183.
25. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 292.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
27. Pannenberg points this out once each on three consecutive pages in *Systematic Theology*, p. 290, 291, 292.
28. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 183.
29. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 298.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
31. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, taken from the first subsection title of section 3 of Pannenberg's chapter entitled "The Trinitarian God," which reads, in its entirety, "The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the starting point, and the traditional terminology of the doctrine of the Trinity."
32. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
34. John 13:9.
35. Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God," p. 29.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
37. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 307.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
40. For specific discussion, see Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God," p. 31.
41. *Ibid.*, compare discussion on p. 28ff.
42. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 309.
43. *Ibid.*, all Scriptural references from p. 309.
44. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 187, paraphrasing Pannenberg.
45. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 310.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 316, see also p. 281.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

52. Ibid., p. 319.
53. Ibid., p. 335.
54. Ted Peters, "Trinity Talk: Part II, *Dialog* (1987), pp. 133-135 for a good summary of this point.
55. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 319-325.
56. Ibid., p. 324.
57. Ibid., p. 325.
58. Braaten and Clayton, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, p. 204.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., Jenson quoting Pannenberg.
61. This is a central point for Pannenberg's doctrine of God, and those wishing more detail see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), chap. 2, where a detailed defense is given.
62. Braaten and Clayton, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, p. 205.
63. Ibid., Jenson quoting Pannenberg from "Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine," trans. Philip Clayton *Dialog*, 26(1987): 250-257.
64. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 427.
65. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 195.
66. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 335-336.
67. Ibid., pp. 330-331. See also, Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," pp. 198-199.
68. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 332.
69. See for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), pp. 55-56.
70. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 313.
71. Ibid., p. 329.
72. Ibid., p. 330.
73. Ibid., p. 331.
74. For the latter discussion, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Williams and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 133-138.
75. Braaten and Clayton, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, p. 197.
76. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 415.
77. Ibid., pp. 415-422.
78. Ibid., pp. 445-446.
79. Ibid., p. 430. Pannenberg refers us for further detail to his own *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985], p. 236) and other works cited therein.
80. See Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 177.
81. Ibid., see, for example, p. 203ff.
82. Braaten and Clayton, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, p. 193.
83. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine." He quotes Wagner on p. 192 and implies he agrees on p. 202.
84. From personal conversation in January 1994.
85. Olson, "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine," p. 188.
86. Pannenberg affirmed this in personal conversation and went on to say that if this were not true, it seems it would destroy the creatureliness of Jesus.
87. I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Pannenberg for allowing my several discussions in late 1993 and early 1994, and for his review and comment on an earlier version of this paper.

