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Pannenberg on Ministry

In doing theology, each theologian...must do it within his or her own context, while seeking not to be caught in the particularity of that context but to express what can claim universal truth.[1]

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[1] W.Pannenberg 'An Autobiographical Sketch' in C.Braaten & P.Clayton (eds) *Wolfhart Pannenberg: 12 American Critiques* (Minneapolis 1988) p.18.

1. Introducing Pannenberg

1.1 The Place of Ecclesiology within Systematic Theology

Wolfhart Pannenberg is a contemporary German systematic theologian. He held the chair of Systematic Theology in the Protestant Faculty at the University of Munich from 1968 until his retirement in 1998, in which year was also published the English translation of the final of three volumes of *Systematic Theology*.[2]

His activities as teacher and writer have occupied most of his time, but he has also devoted an important part of his energies to the Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogue group in Germany, and since 1975 to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, where he was an important influence on the 1982 Lima Document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.[3]

This is the background to the large amount of space devoted in *Systematic Theology* III to ecclesiology. Volume III is almost twice the length of its predecessors, and chapter 13, 'The Messianic Community and Individuals' (338 pages in the English edition), is

[2] Vol I [1988] (Edinburgh 1991), Vol II [1991] (Edinburgh 1994), Vol III [1993] (Edinburgh 1998) (hereafter ST).

virtually a monograph on its own. This is significant coverage for a topic which often seems an afterthought in systematic presentations[4], and which Pannenberg concedes did not become a separate theme in dogmatics until the fifteenth century.[5] Nor has it seemed a major theme of Pannenberg's previous published work. Why he devotes this amount of time and space to the theme of ecclesiology is important, however, for one of his major contributions in *Systematic Theology* is to ground the doctrine of the church firmly within a systematic context by linking it with the doctrine of the kingdom of God, thus appropriating the revolution in understanding eschatology which began with Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer at the end of the nineteenth century. At a time when a church which has traditionally understood its nature to rest on hierarchical assumptions of order and authority is struggling to see its way forward,[6] Pannenberg's approach to ecclesiology has much to offer.

1.2 The Place of Ecclesiology within Pannenberg's Life

Pannenberg was born in 1928, and two formative experiences stand out in his early years and have defined his theology. On 6 January 1945, walking home from school at sunset, he was caught up in an intense experience of the love of God and of unity with the whole created order. Pannenberg did not come from a churchgoing or otherwise religious family, and as a child his first love was music. Yet in this encounter he felt, to his surprise, that God had reached out to him, though it took many years for him to understand the meaning of the event.[7] Nor did he know at the time that this was the feast of the Epiphany. Soon afterwards he was briefly caught up in the final months of the Second World War as a seventeen year old conscript. Spared a likely death on the Russian Front by an attack of scabies, Pannenberg became a prisoner of war for a short time before being released to find his family somewhere in the Russian zone where many Germans were close to starvation, living among their ruined cities. 1945 was thus a decisive year for the seventeen year-old, containing two dramatically opposing experiences of the glory of God and the misery of the world. Pannenberg's theology, I believe, takes its theme from the contrast.

Pannenberg began his theological pilgrimage in the dislocation and collapse of the immediate post-war years, and he has made it his task to show how the eschatological vision of God can exist in

[3] See G.Wainwright 'Pannenberg's Ecumenism' in Braaten & Clayton *12 American Critiques* pp.212-14.

[4] See, e.g. J.Macquarrie *Principles of Christian Theology* (London 1966).

[5] ST III p.21.

[6] See, e.g. R.Warren *Being Human, Being Church* (London 1995) Chapter 2, J.Drane *Faith in a Changing Culture* (London 1997) Chapter 6.

[7] Pannenberg has been shy about presenting his autobiography story in public, largely because he wishes his ideas to speak for themselves. He told this story publicly for the first time in 1981. See Wolfhart Pannenberg 'An Autobiographical Sketch', Braaten & Clayton *12 American Critiques* p.12, and R.J.Cooke *Modern*

the chaos of a fallen world. In his early university career he found himself in a three-cornered intellectual debate between Marx, Nietzsche and Christ, each offering a way of understanding the prevailing disintegration of Germany. This was not a merely intellectual exercise, however, because at stake was the question of whether these alternatives offered a practical approach to life. Germany in Pannenberg's formative years was being rebuilt physically, and there was also a crucial intellectual and spiritual renaissance occurring at the same time. Pannenberg and his contemporaries, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jungel, have been the theological equivalents of the *Trümmerfrauen* ('ruin-women') who salvaged bricks and girders from their bomb-damaged cities and built homes for their families to live in.[8]

The major intellectual challenges of the post-war era were Marxism and nihilism: Marx's contention that religion was not a force for liberation, but merely an opiate to keep the proletariat docile and accepting of capitalist oppression; Nietzsche's criticism that 'Christianity makes a thousand promises but *keeps none*.'[9] It is in response to these two criticisms that Pannenberg's mature theology has developed. Perhaps we should note at this stage that these two criticisms are also the most devastating accusations levelled by postmodern philosophers at Christian faith: that it is a way of upholding a patriarchal and hegemonic social system which oppresses and keeps people defined by their social stations; and that it makes promises about a future which leads people away from the present, where life is to be lived. For postmoderns Christianity is thus deeply implicated in the 'modern' era, indeed is constitutive of it.[10] Pannenberg's theology is a sophisticated attempt to show that the Christian tradition has many more resources for the renewal of culture than Marx, Nietzsche or the postmoderns allow. Central to his critique of modern (or postmodern) culture is the fact that he believes that Christianity was never intellectually defeated by the Enlightenment. The *maelstrom* of the Reformation and the subsequent European Wars of Religion in the late seventeenth century caused a humanist reaction to the intolerance manifested which placed the human self as the foundation of society, law and culture. In effect the medieval synthesis of Christian philosophy was by-passed, but not disproved. Rather, the Enlightenment was the result of the practical inability of the medieval and early modern church to live as a community of the gospel.[11]

Theology and Post-Critical History: An Examination of Wolfhart Pannenberg's Proposals for Re-formulating Historical Method (University of Bristol Ph.D. Thesis 1996) p..57.

[8] See Cooke *Modern Theology* pp.64-5.

[9] F.Nietzsche *The Anti-Christ* [1895] (Harmondsworth 1969) #42.

[10] See Drane *Faith in a Changing Culture* pp.38-9.

[11] cf. the argument of *Christianity in a Secularized World* (London 1988), stated more simply in 'How to Think about Secularism' *First Things* 64 pp.27-32.

The church and its order, in other words, has a major part to play as a practical apologetic. As Eduard Schweizer said,

> The New Testament's pronouncements on church order are to be read as *gospel* - that is, church order is to be regarded as a part of the proclamation in which the church's witness is expressed, as it is in its preaching. There may be times when this kind of proclamation is better heard and regarded by the world than are any words; and for that reason this part of the church's witness too must be given plainly and clearly.[12]

This is why Pannenberg has committed so much of his time to the ecumenical movement, in parallel with his academic work. Although he is known as a theologian of reason, this does not imply abstraction: practice is just as important to him as theory.

2. Pannenberg's Views on Ministry

2.1 The Need for a Mediating Position

'The modern disruption of Christianity into a plurality of churches that are not in full communion with one another is not least based on differences respecting the church's ministry.'[13] This comment of Pannenberg's is particularly pertinent to the Church of England, which has institutionalised such differences in its recently accepted doctrine of 'two integrities'.[14] The constant theme of his work on ministry is to develop a mediating position which does justice to both the Roman and Protestant emphases. For Anglicans it may be that this divergence of doctrine is an internal problem as much as an external one. We rightly emphasise our church's nature as catholic and reformed; but sometimes the attempt to live with the tension this creates leads to confusion. Can Pannenberg help?

2.2. The Church as a Sign of the Kingdom

Pannenberg sees the church as a sign of the kingdom of God, an entity which has broken in as the power of the future in the life,

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[12] E.Schweizer *Church Order in the New Testament* (London 1961) p.14.

[13] ST III p.392.

[14] Pannenberg is a supporter of the ordination of women: see ST III pp.389-90.

work, death and resurrection of Jesus: 'The church is not yet the kingdom of God; it is a preceding sign of the future fellowship of humanity under God's reign.'[15] The church celebrates and realises the eschatological future of the kingdom in worship, that is, in the celebration of the Lord's supper. [16] When not at worship, the church (and therefore the kingdom) is 'latent' in the world,[17] in the sense that it is then hidden and not manifest. Thus the church's actualisation of the presence of the kingdom 'will always be fragmentary in the sphere of the demonstration of faith in this world.'[18] Pannenberg recognises that the church, though it may be a sign, has not done very well in discharging its function. 'Nevertheless, its destiny means that even the sign that has become obscure is still a sign. The sign can be purified.'[19] The function of the ordained ministry is to give the church, in its visible (liturgical) form, organisation and order. Substantial agreement and common action in terms of organisation and order contribute to the tolerance, fellowship and unity which should make the church a sign of the kingdom.

2.3 The Common Calling of Christians and the Function of Leadership

According to Luther, all baptised Christian have the authority to pray for others and to teach. It was on this basis that, in the Reformed churches, all Christians had the right to judge the teaching of the ordained.[20] The function of the ordained is a mediating one, 'to help believers on the way to independence in their relation to the substance of scripture',[21] and Pannenberg notes that in the documents of Vatican II this view and the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (developed from 1 Peter 2:9[22]) are accepted.[23] Therefore, Pannenberg contends, both Roman and reformed doctrine agree on the fact that the ministry of leadership is, rightly understood, a presbyteral and not a priestly one.[24] Clergy are priests by virtue of baptism, as are all Christians. There is no special spiritual grace or benefit of salvation bestowed by the act of ordination. Rather ordination is understood as a gift of *function*, not grace, indelible in the sense only that it (like baptism) is unrepeatable. This is a further

[15] ST III p.31.
[16] ST III pp.283-336.
[17] ST III p.371.
[18] ibid.
[19] ST III p.433.

[20] ST III p.127. cf. C.Buchanan *Is the Church of England Biblical?* (London 1998) p. 34, who notes that in the Church of England lay people 'may therefore in principle challenge the exegesis of any teacher (though they were usually liable to be in trouble if they tried this in some Tudor or Stuart reigns)'!
[21] ST III p.127.
[22] ST III p.126.
[23] ST III p.127. cf. pp. 373-5.
[24] cf. the *ASB (1980)* Ordinal: 'The Ordination of Priests (also called Presbyters)' p. 351.

example of common ground, after four centuries, between Luther and Vatican II.[25]

All Christians are commonly called to a task of mission, 'to confess their faith and to pass on the gospel message, bearing witness to it with their lives', and the common nature of this task requires a collaborative and corporate approach.[26] This task is, however, publicly focused by ordained ministers in worship; and though all baptised Christians have the *power* (according to Luther) to proclaim the word and administer the sacraments, it requires a special calling to *exercise* this ministry.[27] Yet it is something of a misunderstanding to see the power given to individuals; rather Pannenberg, following Luther, sees the power given to the community as a whole. But the 'community as a whole' may also be interpreted in too limited a fashion; it means here not simply the local congregation, but 'Christianity as a whole from apostolic days.'[28] Therefore to say that all Christians are called to a task of mission reflects on our individual responsibility, but also (more importantly and, perhaps, liberatingly) refers to the common calling of the church as a whole, past, present and future, to respond to and participate in the action of God in redeeming and transforming the whole of human society, as a sign of the kingdom.[29]

2.4 The Apostolic Origin of Leadership

To whom was this public focus of exercising leadership originally entrusted? Pannenberg answers, again following Luther,[30] that it was clearly given to the apostles who had been commissioned by the risen Christ, and whose task it was to keep the churches united and faithful to the gospel. Paul's strenuous attempts to emphasise his 'abnormal' but nonetheless authentic witness of the resurrection show the importance for the early church of the direct commissioning of the apostles by Jesus himself.[31] What then happened to the apostolic function following the death of the original apostles? Pannenberg, in line with contemporary New Testament scholarship, sees a varied development in the immediate post-apostolic period. Itinerant charismatics (possibly the evangelists of Ephesians 4:11) served the church, but could not be accepted as guardians of the apostolic gospel. Local house-church leaders and deacons did not have the required authority,

[25] ST III p.398. Pannenberg notes that in this Vatican II is rejecting the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, p.398n.

[26] ST III p.375.

[27] ST III pp.376-7. Pannenberg admits that this is a debated area in Luther scholarship.

[28] ST III p.377.

[29] Hence the stress in ST III Ch. 14 on the importance of election as a historical phenomenon, related to the people of God down the ages. For a more detailed exposition of this, see *Human Nature, Election and History* (Philadelphia 1977).

[30] ST III p.377n.

[31] ibid.

either. The pastoral epistles, whether genuinely Pauline or not, show how a solution was found: a pattern of overseers (*episkopoi)*, with a relationship to all the house churches in a city and understood to have been set up at first by the apostles themselves, developed. The criterion of appointment was faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles, with the result that by the second century leadership and teaching seem to have been inseparably linked, personifying unity.[32]

Pannenberg draws four important points from this historical discussion:

(i) the pattern of episcopal leadership cannot fully be demonstrated to be an apostolically sanctioned development;

but,

(ii) the linking of leadership and teaching relate to the historical core of apostolic function and in this sense bishops are the successors of the apostles;

(iii) it is the word of the gospel, in the form of the apostles' teaching, which is normative and which precedes the pattern of episcopacy;[33]

(iv) the episcopate is linked directly to Jesus by the continuity of teaching, but so equally are churches, and therefore these churches have a right to participation in the choice of bishops.[34]

Episcopacy, or oversight, is therefore instituted directly by God only in the sense that the whole church is sent to preach the gospel, but that this task requires a ministry of leadership and teaching to ensure its continuity and authenticity.[35]

Succession to the apostles is seen as a continuity in teaching and faith, and only as a secondary matter a succession in office.[36] This has been clearly brought out in the historical argument above, and was the approach of the Reformers, too. Pannenberg suggests that Luther and Melanchthon valued this form of the concept of apostolic succession highly, but also that they departed only with regret from the secondary consideration of continuity in office. Rather than deriving their doctrine of ordained ministry from the priesthood of all believers, they too derived it from the ministry of the apostles. The need to ensure the continuity of the apostolic teaching and mission outweighed the need for continuity in

[32] ST III pp.378-9.

[33] ST III pp.380n refers to Vatican II's acceptance of the authority of the 'Word of God', though the relevant documents assume a congruity between Tradition and Word which, of course, Luther and other Reformers (including Cranmer and Henry VIII) rejected.

[34] ST III pp.379-82.

[35] ST III p.382.

[36] ST III p.403.

office, and in these conditions of emergency they ordained those whom they believed the Holy Spirit had called as ministers, not into a sect, but into the church of God, to continue the apostolic ministry of leadership and teaching and as a focus of unity. The rejection of the medieval model of episcopacy, did not imply a rejection of the concept as a whole.[37] The apostolic derivation of ordained ministry leads Pannenberg to emphasise that 'Reformation churches [like the Roman Catholic] should hold strictly to the fact that individual public preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments should be on the condition of prior ordination.'[38] By this he seeks to underline the seriousness of this task: ordination reflects the commission of Christ, not the answer to the needs of a denomination.

2.5 Levels of Leadership

Pannenberg sees the apostolic task of teaching and leadership as being exercised at three levels. In the *local* church the ordained minister represents the church's apostolic mission to the world. By virtue of his or her ordination in the name of Christ he or she is entrusted to preserve unity by preaching and teaching the common gospel. At the *regional* level the same task applies, as it does at the supra-regional or *provincial* level (which may, in fact, often correspond to the national). Thus we see that bishops and presbyters differ only in the level of the exercise of their ministry, a matter which even the Council of Trent accepted. The development of the threefold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons was a result of the rapid expansion of the church beyond the local level.[39] A logical further development would be a world-wide or *universal* ministry, though whether this should appropriately be attached to the Bishop of Rome is unclear. Only custom and the historical evolution of that position can justify Rome's claim to speak for the whole church throughout the world, not a competitive outbidding of other bishops or spurious claims to the primacy of Peter.[40]

The discussion of the material identity of episcopal and presbyteral offices raises the question, what is the 'local church'? Is it, to put it simply, defined by bishop or eucharist? This question , which Pannenberg has previously raised, has in effect been given an answer already: if eucharistic worship is the place where the kingdom is actualised, then the individual congregation becomes the primary unit, though we should be careful not to forget also the importance of the church community as a whole, in both geographical and temporal terms. The local church is 'real'

[37] cf. ST III p.419.

[38] ST III p.404.

[39] ST III p.416. Trent did oppose the Reformation contention that the distinction is merely one of human order, however, claiming that it was divine in origin, a view not upheld by Vatican II (ST III p.418).

wherever a eucharistic community is formed, for there the Lord is present. Pleas, such as Rahner's, that it is only in the bishop's church that the local congregation is fully realised are not adequate. Rather, 'the fellowship of local churches rests on the unity in the one Lord that is already there, and that is present in a special way in the eucharist.'[41] It is not a bishop, but Christ himself who is the ground of unity between different congregations.

2.6 Pannenberg's Vision

Finally, to sum up this brief exposition of Pannenberg's views on ministry, it is important to remember again that ecclesiology has an important place within the overall scheme of his *Systematic Theology*. Precise forms of ordained ministry vary, according to Pannenberg, depending on the level at which they are exercised; what is not negotiable, however, is the co-ordinating role they fulfil:

> Love and unity are not *adiaphora* in the life of the church. Preserving love and peace by establishing and observing an order of community life, even if the form of this order is not fixed for all time by divine authority, is a necessary part of the life of the church of Christ, and for this task we have regional leaders as members of the one ministry that God himself ordained to be of service to the church's unity by teaching the gospel.[42]

In Pannenberg's vision, the task of the ordained ministry is to bear witness to the historic teaching of the apostles about Jesus; to continue the apostolic mission given by Christ; and to celebrate the Lord's supper. These tasks are to be fulfilled in order that the church may be 'a sign of God's will to save humanity, a sign of reconciliation with God and of the resultant renewal in intrahuman relations, a sign of the future fellowship of humanity in the kingdom of God...a provisional representation of the future of humanity.'[43] By doing this the whole people of God is empowered to fulfil their individual ministries in the world.

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[40] ST III p.431.
[41] ST III p.107.
[42] ST III pp.419-20.
[43] ST III pp.432-3.

3. Some Questions

By way of conclusion, let us formulate a few questions:

1. Pannenberg sees ordained ministry as basically singular in form, apostolically derived, dedicated to pastoral leadership and teaching. Though he emphasises the need for the ordained to point to the apostolic mission of the church, does his model assume that this mission will not be fulfilled by ordained ministers in particular? That is to say, will following this pattern lead to an internal concern with the workings of the church, rather than an (apostolic) missionary engagement with the world by ordained ministers? How could this dimension of apostolicity be recovered?

2. What does the emphasis on the importance of maintaining the teaching of the apostles say about our patterns of ministerial formation and training?

3. Pannenberg's emphasis on there being one form of ordained ministry, albeit exercised at different levels, entails a setting aside of the 'threefold order' of bishop, presbyter and deacon. In his discussion of the material identity of bishop and presbyter he is on ecumenically agreed ground, but what of the diaconate? Is this the great lost ministry of the church? Is it a historical accident that was an early expression of the development of bishops into regional leaders, but whose role was quickly subsumed into that of presbyters? What implications does this have for our current practice of ordaining 'apprentice priests' as 'deacons in the Church of England'?

4. What role is left to lay people by the stress on a single form of ordained ministry, and the need for it to retain sole responsibility for the ministry of word and sacrament within the church? Does the logic imply the abolition of the office of Reader in favour of Ordained Local Minister, for example? Schillebeeekx says:

> Our age has rightly done away with the sub-diaconate and the so-called minor orders. However, we may well ask whether in the meantime we have not forgotten how to revive the ancient theological view which is implied by these orders: catechists in many countries, pastoral workers, who in many places lead a community, are not

recognised as such theologically or in church order..[44]

Does Pannenberg' view practically lead to the impoverishment of the variety of ministry?

5. Finally, Pannenberg's work implies that we stand on the threshold of a new era, as the long reign of Enlightenment reason comes to an end. He believes that to speak to this new era convincingly, the church must recover a measure of unity and tolerance which has not been manifested in the post-Reformation centuries, in order to point to the future goal of the kingdom of God. How might this ecumenical and eschatological insight be integrated into the theory and practice of the church's ministry today?

Richard Cooke
For Coventry Diocese
Vocations and Training Department,
Launde Abbey, Feb 23 1999
Revised April 1999

[44] E.Schillebeekx *Ministry: A Case for Change* (London 1981) p.140.