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Review: Systematic Theology. Vol 1

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Systematic Theology (vol. 1). By Wolfhart Pannenberg. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, 473 pp., \$39.99.

The Christian Church in the last quarter of the twentieth century is again seeing the publication of a number of systematic theologies. While a number of these are excellent works and worthy of attention, few are truly ground-breaking. The first volume of Wolfhart Pannenberg's projected three-volume *Systematische Theologie*, translated by Geoffrey Bromiley, is at the forefront of such works. After decades of rich and provocative theological-philosophical writing, Pannenberg has given the latter part of his career to synthesizing, clarifying and bringing systematic wholeness to his historical-eschatological theological program. But this volume is no mere rehash of what has already been said. Pannenberg is no mere Hegelian, as he is often characterized. Indeed he is often critical of Hegel's thought for falling short of the historical Christian theological position. He does make critical, careful use of Hegel, as well as Descartes, Schleiermacher, Athanasius, Luther and many others, but his desire is to demonstrate the truth of God, the God who is the God of history, the God revealed in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ, and ultimately in the eschatological consummation. Against all privatized faith of our day, Pannenberg is working to show the open and universal truth of God, which will clarify all life and knowledge in the world. He is preeminently concerned with knowledge of God as God has disclosed himself in history, which participates and anticipates the fullness of the end. Yet Pannenberg is vitally aware of and sensitive to the modern mind to which he brings both criticism and affirmation.

Through the introductory issues and the doctrine of God of this first volume, Pannenberg makes clear that God is the object of every area of theology and central to all of the usual theological topics. Pannenberg is very careful not to present a mere series of theological *loci* and call it a "system." He is saying that if the God witnessed to in the Scriptures is truly God, then God has and will demonstrate his deity and his lordship in history, above all in Jesus, the fullness of which will be self-demonstrated only in the eschaton. Pannenberg is concerned that the truth of God's historical self-demonstration in the religious history of Israel and in the person, work and words of Jesus Christ be presented in ways that overcome past theological shortcomings while adequately addressing and answering cogent philosophical criticisms of Christian theology. This concern is reflected consistently throughout Pannenberg's expression of the theological task, the concept of "God," the self-demonstration of God among the gods, the concept and nature of revelation, the trinitarian God, and the unity and attributes of God.

While Pannenberg's whole theological project promises to be one of the most significant, fruitful and insightful of this century, certain aspects of Pannenberg's thought in volume one stand out. Pannenberg's consistent emphasis upon the demonstrated truth of God, and hence the truth of Christian doctrine, is not only profound, but unique when compared to similar theological discussions, especially over the last two hundred years. His analysis of human religion and the gods, the nature of God's universality and lordship, and his relation to the religions is both instructive and provocative. But Pannenberg's analysis, discussion and presentation of the trinitarian God stands out above all other chapters. Importantly, like Thomas Torrance, Pannenberg follows more closely the Eastern tradition in beginning with the Trinity and then moving to the unity and attributes of God. God is understood in the light of the living, dynamic light of the trinitarian, self-disclosing God. The Western Church has erred and caused itself many woes by beginning with the oneness of God, trying then to make some coherent statement of Trinity and attributes. In light of the trin-

itarian God, the old problematic dichotomies are brought to clarity. Pannenberg's discussion of the relation of the three Persons and of the role of the Spirit both in relation to the trinitarian Persons and to the world is in many ways an advance in the Church's discussion and understanding.

Yet there are still concerns with this first volume, which hopefully will be answered more fully in volumes two and three. Pannenberg regularly seeks to unfold the biblical witness to crucial theological issues, yet some significant related biblical issues are largely avoided. For example, one needs to know by what authority Pannenberg says these things. This is not clear. How and why is the "biblical witness" useful, and how is it actually connected in some way to the self-demonstration of the truth and deity of God? 2 Timothy 3:16 is only mentioned in a negative context regarding Origen's viewpoint. Pannenberg's understanding of the demonstrated universality of God and of God's self-disclosure in the religions, however partial and fragmentary in comparison, to the history of Israel and to the life of Jesus, may leave many concerned—though one must see this in light of his larger theological purpose. The idea of the Infinite is said to be implicitly present in human religious history but only shown as the "true Infinite" in God's embracing of the finite in his reconciliation and redemption.

It may also be briefly mentioned that the (translated) sentences are sometimes unclear, or ideas are given in so succinct a way that the meaning is not immediately clear. Yet even here, if one presses on, the intent of the particular statement is soon clarified in relation to the larger discussion.

This work is must reading and shall be very useful for many years.

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Telling Tales: Making Sense of Christian and Judaic Nonsense. By Jacob Neusner. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993, 170 pp., n.p. paper.

Interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews has been going on since the days of Jesus and his earliest followers. For over one hundred years dialogue between the faiths has been conducted by Americans in good faith, from both sides. Neusner, a committed Jew, maintains that while adherents of the two religions have been talking with each other, true dialogue has yet to take place. We have apparently been talking past each other without really communicating. Attempts to discuss common issues and to bridge the gap between Judaism and Christianity, while conducted with good intentions, have, in Neusner's words, been "clumsy and inexperienced." True dialogue, always difficult over the centuries, has been complicated in modern times by the Holocaust. What is urgently needed, Neusner asserts, is a change of attitude on the part of both religions; otherwise we will continue to have no substantial dialogue taking place, as has been the case since the inception of Christianity.

How do committed Jews and Christians begin truly to communicate with each other? Neusner argues that authentic mutual comprehension leading to deep consciousness of the other's perspective begins with two steps: "(1) making sense of the other in one's own framework, yet (2) making sense of the other so that the other will recognize that sense too" (p. 23). Past attempts at dialogue, he maintains, have been characterized by wrong-headed, distorted understandings of what the other faith believed or practiced. Only when the other side is depicted in terminology that is understandable to one's own faith first, but in ways that clearly capture the essence



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