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## Christology and Soteriology

### *A Response to Wolfhart Pannenberg's Critique of the Soteriological Approach to Christology*

*Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere, non... eius naturas, modos incarnationis intueri.*<sup>1</sup> In this celebrated statement, Philip Melanchthon drew attention to the fundamental connection between Christology and soteriology. Who Jesus Christ is becomes known through his saving action. It is impossible to separate Christology and soteriology, because it is our interest in salvation, in the *beneficia Christi*, which motivates our interest in the person of Christ. The same point was made more recently by Martin Kähler, who introduced the term *Soterologie* in order to emphasise that Christology was primarily concerned with soteriological considerations: "Jesus Christus den Heiland durch sein Heilswerk".<sup>2</sup> In the present study, we propose to consider the most significant recent criticism of the soteriological approach to Christology, which is due to Wolfhart Pannenberg, and consider its validity and its implications.

In his *Grundzüge der Christologie*, Pannenberg devotes an introductory chapter to a consideration of the relationship between Christology and soteriology.<sup>3</sup> After noting that it is impossible to separate the question of who Jesus Christ *is* from the related question of what Jesus Christ *does*,<sup>4</sup> Pannenberg indicates how the history of Christology has been heavily influenced by soteriological considerations.<sup>5</sup> He then proceeds to criticise the soteriological approach to Christology:<sup>6</sup>

«Damit ist nun aber zugleich die Gefahr hervorgetreten, die in diesem Zusammenhang von Christologie und Soterologie beschlossen ist: Ist es denn überhaupt noch Jesus selbst, von dem da die Rede ist? Handelt es sich nicht vielmehr um Projektionen menschlicher Erlösungs- und Vergottungssehnsucht, menschlichen Strebens nach Ähnlichkeit mit Gott, menschlicher

<sup>1</sup> Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* (1521), preface.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to his father, 15 November 1865. see Chr. Seiler, *Die theologische Entwicklung Martin Kählers bis 1869*, BFChTh 51 (1966) 124ff.

<sup>3</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie*, 1982, 32–44.

<sup>4</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 32–33.

<sup>5</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 33–41.

<sup>6</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 41.

Pflicht zur Genugtuung für begangene Sünde, menschlicher Erfahrung des Gehaltenseins im Scheitern, in der Erkenntnis der eigenen Schuld, und am deutlichsten im Neuprotestantismus: um Projektionen des Ideals vollkommener Religiosität, vollkommener Sittlichkeit, reiner Personalität, radikalen Vertrauens in die Gestalt Jesu? Werden hier nicht nur die Sehnsüchte der Menschen in Jesus zurückgetragen, in ihm personifiziert?»

Pannenberg thus argues that it is improper to construct Christology out of soteriological considerations, and singles out Tillich's unequivocal assertion that "Christology is a function of soteriology"<sup>7</sup> for particular criticism. For Pannenberg, the question of who Jesus Christ *is* must be regarded as prior to the question of what Jesus Christ *does* for mankind: «Jesus hat Bedeutsamkeit «für uns» nur, sofern ihm selbst, seiner Geschichte und seiner durch sie konstituierten Person diese Bedeutsamkeit innewohnt.»<sup>8</sup> Following this principle through to its logical conclusion, Pannenberg asserts the maxim which is so characteristic of his Christological method in general:

«Deshalb muss die Christologie, die Frage nach Jesus selbst, nach seiner Person, wie sie damals zur Zeit des Kaisers Tiberias auf Erden gelebt hat, allen Fragen nach seiner Bedeutsamkeit, aller Soteriologie vorgeordnet bleiben. Die Soteriologie muss aus der Christologie folgen, nicht umgekehrt. Sonst verliert gerade der Heilsglaube selbst jede Grundlage.»

While Pannenberg's comments are clearly of considerable significance, in that they preface his own attempt to ground Christology in the history and fate of Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>9</sup> it must be pointed out that Pannenberg's justification of his rejection of the soteriological approach to Christology is quite inadequate, both in the introductory chapter and in the book as a whole. In the present study, we propose to demonstrate that the soteriological approach to Christology has much more to commend it than might appear from Pannenberg's critique. In the sections which follow, we propose to indicate some lines of criticism which may be directed against Pannenberg's rejection of the soteriological approach to Christology.

<sup>7</sup> P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* II, 1957, 150: "Christology is a function of soteriology. The problem of soteriology creates the christological question and gives direction to the christological answer," Cf. Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 42. The longer citation which follows may also be found on this page.

<sup>9</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 22 "Die Christologie hat es also nicht nur mit der *Entfaltung* des Christusbekenntnisses der Gemeinde zu tun, sondern vor allem mit seiner *Begründung* aus dem Damals des Wirkens und Geschickes Jesu".

## I

The first point with which we are concerned is Pannenberg's apparent endorsement of the criticisms of religion due to Ludwig Feuerbach and others, who argued that man creates God by projecting his own nature and aspirations onto an imaginary (or, at least, an unnecessary) transcendent plane.<sup>10</sup> Feuerbach may be regarded as developing, and then criticising, the position of Hegel concerning man's relationship to the Transcendent. In his earlier phase in particular, Hegel laid particular emphasis upon the reality of man's relationship with the Transcendent, although Feuerbach appears to have interpreted his statements to mean that the human mind endows its own existence with an objective character. As a consequence, the concept of "God" is merely a hypostatization of man's deepest being, as characterized by his aspirations and cravings. There is no quality or capacity which man attributes to God which could not better be conceived of as a quality or capacity of man himself. The very notion of "God", and all that is implied by it, has its origins within man himself. "God" is essentially the idealized conglomerate of human aspirations and ideals. For example, in conceiving God as a morally perfect being, man is merely projecting his own will;<sup>11</sup> in conceiving God as love, man is merely projecting his own heart.<sup>12</sup> In similar terms, Feuerbach argues that the Incarnation is nothing more than a manifestation of human tenderness, and the resurrection of Christ nothing but man's own satisfied longing for immediate certainty of his personal immortality. As such, salvation is essentially the projection of man's longing for deliverance and immortality, projected onto an imaginary transcendent plane.

It is this critique of religion which appears to underlie Pannenberg's misgivings concerning the soteriological approach to Christology. If Christology is regarded as being secondary to soteriology, there is a danger that man's longing for salvation or deification will be projected onto the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. If this is permitted, Pannenberg appears to suggest that Christology will ultimately rest upon something which is at least *subjective* (in that it reflects the emotional state of the individual, or the cultural conditioning of his context), and perhaps also *imaginary* (in that it

<sup>10</sup> See M. Chaufflaire, *Feuerbach et la théologie de la sécularisation*, 1970; H.J. Braun, *Ludwig Feuerbachs Lehre vom Menschen*, 1971; A. Schmidt, *Emanzipatorische Sinnlichkeit. Ludwig Feuerbachs anthropologischer Materialismus*, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> L. Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, ed. W. Schuffenhauer, 1956, 95–100.

<sup>12</sup> Feuerbach, *op. cit.*, 101–103.

may reflect nothing more than these emotions, having no objective existence whatsoever). By insisting that Christology is concerned primarily with establishing the historical significance of Jesus of Nazareth, Pannenberg argues that we can be sure that we are not attaching our questions, wishes and thoughts to his figure. In the following section, we shall argue that this is not correct: we may be simply dealing with accounts of the history of Jesus of Nazareth which reflect *someone else's* projection of human questions, wishes and thoughts to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. In the present section, however, we wish to argue that Pannenberg has attached too much weight to Feuerbach's criticism of religion.

Feuerbach is the prophet of anthropotheism. God having created man in his own image, Feuerbach returns the compliment. It is clear that his critique has devastating consequences for those theological systems, such as that of Schleiermacher, which are essentially anthropocentric, interpreting human emotions and feeling in terms of divine consciousness. For Feuerbach, such systems represent nothing more than the human consciousness contemplating itself, and deluding itself if the concept of "God" is thought to have any objective existence of its own. Feuerbach may therefore be regarded as having correctly identified a major weakness in this type of theology, which constructs concepts such as "God", "salvation", etc., of out subjective human emotions and feelings.

It is not, however, clear that this criticism has any such force when applied to *other* theological systems. Furthermore, Feuerbach's critique may itself be criticised on our points.

1. Feuerbach's critique is itself as unverified and unverifiable as the systems against which it is directed. Furthermore, it cannot be stated in a form which is capable of demonstrative falsification.<sup>13</sup> Feuerbach's anti-theology is therefore nothing more than a *postulate*. In terms of the logic of the matter, the great contest between theology and anti-theology can only result in a permanent stalemate. Neither side is in a position to disprove the other. Furthermore, Feuerbach's critique may be directed against itself: does not Feuerbach's atheism represent a projection of his wish to be liberated from "God"? The proposition: "Atheism represents a projection of human desires and emotions" has exactly the same status and validity as the proposition: "Christianity represents a projection of human desires and emotions." Both are equally unverifiable: indeed, both may be true, given the variety of human emotions on the subject.

<sup>13</sup> On falsification as a criterion advocated by Karl Popper, see A. O'Hear, Karl Popper, 1980, 90–123.

2. Feuerbach's anti-theology appears to rest upon an elementary logical fallacy. It is certainly true to state that nothing *exists*, or *need exist*, because man wishes it to exist. Nevertheless, it will be clear that it is quite impossible to draw from this the conclusion that, precisely because man *does* wish that something exists, it *cannot exist*.<sup>14</sup> This point is quite irrefutable, and is a major weakness within Feuerbach's anti-theology. This logical point cannot be evaded by appealing to psychology. It may indeed be the case that the notion of "God" is a direct consequence of man's psychological need for security – but this has no significance in relation to the question of whether such a God exists independent of man. There is no *a priori* reason why something real cannot correspond to man's psychological experience: the wish for God can certainly correspond to the existence of God. There is no reason why God should not be the fundamental point of reference for all human desires and emotions, as a properly Christian anthropology would insist to be the case. If man is indeed created in the image of God, one would rightly expect this to be reflected in his desires and longing. The history of Christian spirituality indicates that this principle has frequently been used in the theological interpretation of human emotions. The fact that man desires the existence of God certainly does not disprove that existence, and may even go some way towards proving it!

3. Feuerbach's anti-theology is based upon a confused concept of man, as has frequently been pointed out.<sup>15</sup> When he speaks of the man who he has made God, he is working with a universal concept of man, man in general, whereas it is perfectly proper to assert that the "man" in question is the individual, and as such is prone to egocentricity and the limitations placed upon him by his mortality. When Feuerbach speaks of "man's essential being", he appears to be working with a concept of man which is at least as fictitious as the concept of God against which he argued!

4. For Feuerbach, "man is finally man's God". This view reflects the naive bourgeois optimism of Feuerbach's cultural situation. As Moltmann has pointed out,<sup>16</sup> a century of experience of this human deity has shown that he is totally incapable of the obligations which are placed upon him in this capacity. The new anthropotheists have, in their enthusiasm to make

<sup>14</sup> This point was first made by E. von Hartmann, *Geschichte der Metaphysik*, 1900, Vol. II, p. 444.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. K. Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 1952, 484–489. Of particular interest is the critique of Feuerbach's concept of man associated with the young neo-Hegelian Max Stirner, in his book: *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, 1845.

<sup>16</sup> J. Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie*, 1981, 205–214.



man God, tended to overlook man's darker side. Having liberated himself from one God, man finds himself enslaved to a lesser God of more questionable character.

In responding to Pannenberg, we are particularly concerned with the first two of these points. The possibility that the soteriological approach to Christology will result in the projection of human desires and longings onto the figure of Jesus of Nazareth remains nothing more than a postulate, and is most emphatically *not* a proven fact. It is indeed possible to argue that the way in which the concept of "salvation" has been understood reflects the cultural situation of the period in question – but this is not an effective argument against the soteriological approach to Christology! Theological speculation takes place against a constantly changing cultural background, and it is inevitable that every area of theology will incorporate elements which are culturally conditioned. For example, the concept of "God" itself has been subject to enormous cultural influence during the course of history<sup>17</sup> – yet this is no argument against a Christology "from above"! Similar remarks apply to man's understanding of his own nature – and yet this is no argument against a Christology "from below" (to use Pannenberg's phrases).<sup>18</sup> The ultimate relevance of soteriology to Christology lies in what salvation is understood *to presuppose* and not in how that salvation is *itself* understood.

It therefore appears to us that Pannenberg's dismissal of the soteriological approach to Christology rests upon an unacceptably weak foundation. This impression is confirmed by several other considerations, which we shall develop in the following sections.

## II

«Die Christologie muss ausgehen von dem damaligen Jesus, nicht von seiner Bedeutsamkeit für uns, wie sie etwa die Verkündigung unmittelbar darbietet. Die Bedeutsamkeit Jesu muss von dem her entfaltet werden, was Jesus damals wirklich war.»<sup>19</sup> Having rejected the soteriological approach

<sup>17</sup> This point was made by Pannenberg himself: W. Pannenberg, *Die Aufnahme des philosophischen Gottesbegriffs als dogmatisches Problem der frühchristlichen Theologie*, ZKG 70 (1959) 1–45. Of particular interest is the appropriation of the concept of *apatheia*: T. Rütger, *Die sittliche Forderung der Apatheia in den beiden christlichen Jahrhunderten und bei Klemens Alexandrinus*, 1949.

<sup>18</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie*, 26–31; 415–416.

<sup>19</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 42–43.

to Christology, Pannenberg points to the analysis of the historical significance of Jesus of Nazareth as the only proper Christological procedure. While there is undoubtedly much to commend this opinion, it must be pointed out that there are insuperable difficulties associated with it. In the following section, we propose to argue that the soteriological convictions of the first generation of Christians are reflected in the sources which Pannenberg is obliged to use in his analysis of the "historical reality of Jesus", so that Pannenberg, while avoiding basing his Christology upon *his own* soteriological convictions, is still obliged to base them upon *someone else's*.

Theological speculation concerning the significance of the history of Jesus of Nazareth must ultimately be based upon the New Testament, and the synoptic gospels in particular. As Martin Kähler and others have emphasised,<sup>20</sup> however, these gospels cannot be used as sources for an objective history of Jesus of Nazareth. The gospels are not objective, detached and impartial records of the history of Jesus, but are in themselves witnesses to and expressions of the faith of the first Christians in Christ as Saviour. It is impossible and improper to attempt to treat the gospels as if they were "raw data" requiring analysis to yield a Christology: they themselves already express a particular Christology, or range of Christologies. Far from being "raw data" requiring objective interpretation, they are themselves *interpretations of raw data*. Far from being objective accounts of the grounds of Christian faith, the gospels are actually records of the faith of the first Christians, with occasional tantalising hints concerning the ultimate grounds of their faith. While Pannenberg is undoubtedly correct in emphasising the significance of the resurrection as one such ultimate ground,<sup>21</sup> he is quite unable to state, with the precision which his method requires, what interpretation would have been placed upon this event by the first generation of Christians. We are simply unable to recreate and enter into the thought-world of first century Palestine. We do not fully understand the messianic and soteriological hopes of the period which helped to shape the first Christologies, to which the New Testament sources testify. As Dilthey has emphasised, experienced meaning is trapped within the historicity of the experiential situation, so that unless it is possible to enter that precise experiential situation, with all its presuppositions, we cannot hope to understand why the first Christians came to the Christo-

<sup>20</sup> See Alister McGrath, *Justification and Christology. The Axiomatic Correlation between the Historical Jesus and the Proclaimed Christ*, *Modern Theology* 1 (1984) 45–54.

<sup>21</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 47–112.



logical conclusions which we find expressed in the New Testament material. Every testimony which we possess to the historical and existential significance of Jesus of Nazareth is thus an expression of and a consequence of the writer's faith in him, and cannot be isolated from this faith.

The question we are forced to ask is therefore this: in the light of what convictions were the traditions concerning Jesus, in the form in which they are preserved in the New Testament, formulated? It is, of course, clear that there are numerous such convictions underlying the New Testament material:<sup>22</sup> it is equally clear that one of the most important of these convictions, if not *the* most important, is soteriological.

Pannenberg argues that it is possible to go behind the New Testament material, and discern the real Jesus from the interpretations which are placed upon him. «Man kann und muss vom Zeugnis der Apostel auf Jesus selbst zurückschliessen, indem man die jeweilige Situationsbezogenheit der neutestamentlichen Texte zu erkennen sucht und sozusagen in Abzug bringt. Man kann durchaus die Gestalt Jesu selbst, sowie Umrisse seiner Botschaft, von der jeweiligen Sicht, in der sie und durch diesen oder jenen neutestamentlichen Zeugen überliefert ist, unterscheiden... Der Rückgang hinter das apostolische Kerygma auf den historischen Jesus ist also möglich. Er ist aber auch nötig.»<sup>23</sup> One must, however, ask whether this really is the case. It is quite simply impossible to reconstruct the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth from the New Testament material with the precision which would be necessary. Any such reconstruction would inevitably be the subject of dispute among scholars, as it would have to proceed upon universally recognised principles – and there is no general agreement upon such principles. Furthermore, the necessary application of the principle of analogy in any such reconstruction would exclude from the outset any suprahistorical or transcendent interpretation of the person of Christ, leading to an Ebionite Christology through the historiographical process itself! Further, it must be questioned whether it is in any way *necessary* to go behind the New Testament witnesses to Christ in order to legitimate Christology. As we have argued, the recreation of the experiential situation of the *mens auctoris* must be regarded as quite impossible – it is also quite unnecessary. The essential question is whether the New Testament witness to Christ is an adequate or accurate interpretation of the historical and

<sup>22</sup> E.g. J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making. An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 17.

existential significance of Jesus of Nazareth. In practice, this question cannot be answered with any degree of certainty, and it is for this reason, among others, that we have suggested that such correlation should be regarded as *axiomatic*.<sup>24</sup> Pannenberg, however, is in no better a position: if the New Testament witness to Christ is incorrect, this inaccuracy will be reflected in the reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth, in that this reconstruction *must* be based upon the New Testament itself. Pannenberg is inevitably trapped in a hermeneutical circle, in that he is obliged to presuppose his results – or else construct a picture of Christ which rest upon arbitrary foundations. By using the apostolic kerygma as starting-point for the reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth, Pannenberg has, in effect, predetermined the nature and character of the reconstruction. Pannenberg cannot hope to verify or falsify the kerygma, precisely because he is obliged to base his analysis upon it!

Why, then, is it in any sense *necessary* to go behind the apostolic kerygma to the historical Jesus? All that it is necessary to affirm is that a real historical figure lies behind the apostolic kerygma, and that this kerygma adequately represents his true existential and historical significance. No more is necessary, and no more is possible.

The essential point with which we are here concerned, however, is that Pannenberg's rejection of the soteriological approach to Christology appears to be partly based upon his conviction that it is possible and necessary to go behind the kerygma and deal directly with the history of Jesus of Nazareth. On the basis of this analysis, a proper Christology may be reconstructed. While this approach is attractive, it is nevertheless accompanied by insuperable difficulties. Nor, indeed, is it clear why it is *necessary*. We cannot hope to show that the apostolic kerygma is incorrect, precisely because we are obliged to base our analysis upon this kerygma. The kerygma itself provides a perfectly adequate starting point for Christological speculation. When one inquires into the *content* of this kerygma, it is clear that it is intensely *soteriological*, emphasising the benefits of Christ to the believer. It is therefore clear that the grounds upon which Christological speculation must begin are themselves heavily influenced by soteriological considerations, so that, for the theologian of today, soteriological

<sup>24</sup> McGrath, *Justification and Christology*. This paper develops in much greater depth the general point being made in the present section, with particular reference to Martin Kähler, rather than Pannenberg. In particular, it is argued that the criticism of Kähler's position by W. Herrmann (*Der geschichtliche Christus, der Grund unseres Glaubens*, ZThK 2 [1892] 232–273) rested upon much weaker grounds than is generally appreciated. Pannenberg's appeal to this study is significant here: Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 17 n. 8.

convictions may be regarded as underlying Christological speculation. Our understanding of who Jesus Christ *is* ultimately rests upon the first Christians' understanding of what benefits Jesus Christ bestowed upon those who believed in him. Even if this point is not conceded, the intense difficulties associated with Pannenberg's approach to Christology must be regarded as greatly increasing the attractiveness of the soteriological approach. It remains our conviction, however, that a soteriological approach to Christology is latent in Pannenberg's, even if he does not acknowledge this.

### III

Our third point is epistemological. If the Kantian principle of the inalienable subjectivity of experiential knowledge is conceded, the noumenon, or "Ding-an-sich" must be regarded as a transcendental object, and the emphasis thus placed upon the phenomenon, or the perceived significance of this object. This is, of course, not in any way to question the *existence* of the transcendental object: it is merely to point out that the emphasis falls upon the subjective perception of this object. Perception entails subjective evaluation of the "Ding-an-sich". It is for this reason that Ritschl refuses to separate the doctrines of the person and the work of Christ: the nature and attributes of a thing are perceived only in terms of its effect upon us.<sup>25</sup> If the inalienable subjectivity of experiential knowledge is conceded – and it must be emphasised that this need not be stated in Kantian terms – then the perception of Christ's significance for us takes priority over his essential being. In other words, the question of who Jesus Christ *is* is reduced to the question of who I perceive Jesus Christ to be for me. The question of the identity of Jesus Christ becomes secondary to the subjective perception of his significance. To use Kantian terms: the soteriological approach to Christology deals with Christ as a phenomenon, whereas the approach advocated by Pannenberg tends towards dealing with Christ as a noumenon. There is, of course, some danger in this generalisation: the essential point which we are making is that the subjective evaluation which is inherent in the process of perception and cognition necessarily entails a soteriological approach to Christology, in that Christ is perceived in terms of his significance for the subject, rather than in terms of his own objective

<sup>25</sup> A. Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* III, 1874, 343.

essence. The question: Who is Jesus Christ? must be recognised as expressing the deeper question: Who is Jesus Christ for me? The recognition of the benefits of Christ may therefore be argued to be prior to the recognition of the identity of Christ.

Pannenberg, of course, is aware of the significance of the Kantian subjectivity of experiential knowledge, noting that it involves the “Ding-an-sich” becoming inaccessible.<sup>26</sup> However, he cites the Hegelian critique of Kant to make the point that in the actual process of reflection, the “Ding-an-sich” and its appearance are mutually conditioned, each by the other. In response to this, however, it may reasonably be pointed out that Hegel’s critique of Kant’s epistemology is necessitated by his own concept of the Absolute, and the mode of its perception by the subject. If an *empirical* epistemology is adopted,<sup>27</sup> the emphasis then falls upon *the manner in which we experience Christ* – i.e. our perception of Christ *pro nobis*, rather than Christ *in se*. By this, we are not confusing Luther’s concept of Christ’s dedication to us with the Kantian subjectivity of experiential knowledge: we are simply stating the fact that our experience of Christ is prior to our recognition of the identity of the source of this experience. With this point in mind, it is interesting to return to Martin Kähler’s statement that what is truly historic about Jesus is his personal effect.<sup>28</sup> Kähler here draws our attention to the fact that our present experience of Christ consists in the personal effect which he has upon us. While it is, of course, impossible to separate Christ’s person from his work, considerations such as these point to his work being prior to his person in the *ordo cognoscendi*, whatever it may be in the *ordo entis*.

While we do not wish to rest our case for the soteriological approach to Christology upon the disputed questions of epistemology, it is reasonable to state that the subjectivity of experiential knowledge, once conceded, leads to the recognition of the priority of the significance of Christ over the person of Christ in the order of knowing. There is therefore very reason to assert that the question of what Christ does for us is prior to the question of he is, and that Christological speculation should therefore begin from the kerygma – which contains an interpretation of Christ’s significance for us – rather than from the potentially inaccessible data concerning the history of Jesus of Nazareth.

<sup>26</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 42 n. 31.

<sup>27</sup> The term “experience” may be used either in the phenomenalist or the realist sense in this context, although the phenomenalist sense greatly strengthens our argument.

<sup>28</sup> M. Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, 1892, 19.

## IV

In the previous sections, we have considered several aspects of Pannenberg's criticism of the soteriological approach to Christology, and attempted to respond to them. We now propose to consider how a soteriological approach to Christology might be constructed which avoids some of the weaknesses which Pannenberg detects in that approach. Some of these weaknesses may, of course, be rejected without further consideration – for example, Pannenberg's suggestion that the approach involves the projection of human desires for salvation onto the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Pannenberg does not actually *state* that this is the case, preferring to leave the suggestion in the form of a rhetorical question.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, as we indicated above, this suggestion is nothing more than an interesting postulate, and need not detain us. A more serious objection is that the soteriological approach to Christology involves the detachment of the proclaimed Christ from the historical Jesus – i.e., the isolation of the kerygma concerning the suprahistorical and existential significance of Christ from the distant historical figure upon which it is ultimately based, and with reference to which it must ultimately be justified. This point was made with characteristic force by Wilhelm Herrmann,<sup>30</sup> who criticised Kähler's approach on the grounds that it was impossible to be sure whether faith was based upon something which was not historical fact, but was itself the product of faith. Pannenberg himself takes up this criticism, and develops it.

It seems to us, however, that neither Herrmann nor Pannenberg gains any advantage whatsoever from their stated intention to return to the historical Jesus from the apostolic kerygma. Indeed, they appear to be at a distinct disadvantage. Whereas the soteriological approach begins directly from the kerygma (in either its apostolic or its contemporary forms), and proceeds from that point to consider the significance of Christ, Pannenberg's approach necessitates beginning from the kerygma to reconstruct the history of Jesus, and *thence* to consider his significance. Pannenberg is himself obliged to begin from the Christian kerygma, moving backwards before he can move forwards. The Christian kerygma must be recognised as having had a far greater influence upon the content and the context of the New Testament material than he appears to concede. It is quite simply impossible to begin Christological speculation from the history of Jesus of

<sup>29</sup> See the citation at n. 6.

<sup>30</sup> W. Herrmann, *Der geschichtliche Christus, der Grund unseres Glaubens*, ZThK 2 (1892) 232–273.



Nazareth, precisely because the primitive Christian kerygma has influenced the interpretation placed upon that history, and hence upon the presentation of that history within the New Testament, by the first Christians.

Furthermore, if the history of Jesus were to be objectively reconstructed by universally accepted means, the question of the interpretation to be placed upon that history would then become acutely pressing. Can a twentieth century mind really be expected to come to the same interpretation of every aspect of that history as a contemporary mind? The experienced meaning of that history, which is transmitted to us in the kerygma, is itself trapped in the historically of the experiential situation. Only by being born again as a first century Palestinian, immersed in the matrix of the messianic hopes and expectations of the period, and by observing at first hand all that Jesus said and did, could Pannenberg hope to reconstruct Christology with the precision he demands. But why is this necessary? As we noted above, all that it is necessary to affirm is that the kerygma is based upon a real historical person, and that the interpretation which it places upon his historical and existential significance is adequate. Only if it was felt that the kerygma was seriously in error or inadequate could there be any *theological* (as opposed to *scholarly*) justification for the undertaking in question. And, as the modern study of the historical Jesus has made clear, it is simply inconceivable that there should be any serious discontinuity between the figure of Jesus and the kerygma concerning him. The simplest, most reasonable, and ultimately the most honest way of dealing with the problem is simply to assert that there is an *axiomatic correlation between the historical Jesus and the proclaimed Christ*.<sup>31</sup> This does not solve the problem – but neither does it pretend to. It simply restates a fundamental presupposition of the Christian faith, which Pannenberg himself is obliged to work with, even if he does not make this explicit. All theology, and particularly all Christology, ultimately begins from the Christian kerygma, and Pannenberg's, as we have argued above, is no exception.

Although the analysis of the history of Jesus of Nazareth may indeed be the most desirable and appropriate method of constructing a Christology, that method is no longer open to us today. We are primarily concerned with

<sup>31</sup> This is the substance of our argument in another study: Alister McGrath, *Justification and Christology. The Axiomatic Correlation of the Historical Jesus and the Proclaimed Christ*, *Modern Theology* 1 (1984) 45–54. We further developed this point in another study: Alister McGrath, *Der articulus iustificationis als axiomatischer Grundsatz des christlichen Glaubens*, *ZThK* 81 (1984) 383–94.



the question of how a Christology may be constructed here and now, twenty centuries after the history of Jesus of Nazareth has taken place.<sup>32</sup> The only persons who were in a position to attempt such an analysis of this history were the Apostles, and their conclusions are encapsulated in the apostolic kerygma. No other data are available to us upon which we may base our Christological speculation, apart from the present-day proclamation of the community of faith, and the response which this evokes in individuals. Pannenberg would dispute this: «Die Christologie muss ausgehen von dem damaligen Jesus, nicht von seiner Bedeutsamkeit für uns, wie sie etwa die Verkündigung unmittelbar darbietet. Die Bedeutsamkeit Jesu muss von dem her entfaltet werden, was Jesus damals wirklich war.»<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg's point only has force under two circumstances:

1. The actual historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth is ignored, so that the proclamation of the community of faith is not grounded in the history and fate of Jesus. This is a real possibility within the context of the theologies of A. E. Biedermann and Paul Tillich – but it is not an inevitable consequence of the soteriological approach to Christology.

2. A discontinuity is suggested between the proclamation about Christ and the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth – i.e., that the Christian proclamation is either an *inadequate* or an *incorrect* representation of the significance of the history of Jesus of Nazareth. This suggestion lay at the heart of the quest for the historical Jesus during the *Aufklärung*,<sup>34</sup> but receives relatively little sympathy today. It most emphatically does not underlie the soteriological approach to Christology!

The soteriological approach to Christology involves the appreciation of the significance of Jesus Christ for us, and thence asking: Who must Jesus Christ be if he is to possess this significance? In other words: beginning with Christ's function, one proceeds to his nature; beginning with his work, one proceeds to his person. The proclamation of the community of faith gives us Christ's contemporary significance *directly*, and thus forces us to ask who Christ must *be* if he is to have this significance. Underlying this, of

<sup>32</sup> It is, of course, possible to argue that the present-day existence of the community of faith is itself part of the history of Jesus of Nazareth, if Kähler's principle, that part of the historical reality of any important figure is the personal effect which survives in a significant way for future generations is conceded: see n. 28. We use the term "history of Jesus of Nazareth" to refer simply to the period enclosed between Christ's birth and ascension.

<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg, *op. cit.*, 42–43.

<sup>34</sup> See A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 6 (1956); R. Slenczka, *Geschichtlichkeit und Personsein Jesu Christi. Studien zur christologischen Problematik der historischen Jesufrage*, FSÖTh 18 (1967).

course, is the question of the ultimate justification of the Christian kerygma itself, which can only be answered in terms of a theological axiom, as noted above. However, as we have insisted throughout the present study, this does not introduce any difficulties which are not also present in Pannenberg's approach, which is itself open to similar difficulties.

## V

It is clearly impossible to do justice to the comprehensiveness of Pannenberg's approach to Christology in the limited space available in the present study. We have therefore been concerned with the single question of the relationship between soteriology and Christology, which Pannenberg is obliged to deal with as a prolegomenon to the main body of his *Grundzüge der Christologie*. Without in any way questioning the main substance of that work, we are concerned to show that his rejection of the soteriological approach to Christology appears to rest upon unsatisfactory foundations. While it is undoubtedly true that some examples of the soteriological approaches to Christology are open to the criticisms which Pannenberg directs against them (and we have that of Tillich particularly in mind), this does not in any way invalidate the approach. *Abusus non tollit usum!*

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