The Working of the Spirit of God in Creation and in the People of God:¹ The Pneumatology of Wolfhart Pannenberg

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen

_Spirit and Truth: The Perils of the Subjectivization of the Spirit_

Even in the beginning stages of his extensive career, Wolfhart Pannenberg sounded a note that has come to guide his theology in general and pneumatology in particular, namely, to avoid the privatization of Christian doctrine and faith:

The Spirit of which the New Testament speaks is no “haven of ignorance” (asylum ignorantiae) for pious experience, which exempts one from all obligation to account for its contents. The Christian message will not regain its missionary power . . . unless this falsification of the Holy Spirit is set aside which has developed in the history of piety.²

No other theologian since Barth has produced such a massive, full-scale systematic theology as Pannenberg with his three-volume _Systematic Theology_. In an age when the prophets of the academy swear in the name of postmodernity—and thus abhor world-embracing systems—Pannenberg is a stalwart defender of the historical-critical methodology and the rationality of Christian faith and its truth claims vis-à-vis competing religious and philosophical claims.³ Pneumatology is no exception to his program: it is only to the detriment of Christian doctrine that pneumatology

---


³ Cf. the title for the first chapter of Pannenberg, _Systematic Theology_, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991): “The Truth of Christian Doctrine as the Theme of Systematic Theology.” Thus, for him, the task of systematic theology is the exposition of Christian doctrine in a way that leads to a coherent presentation in harmony with what we know of God and reality as a whole. In that sense, theological claims have the nature of hypotheses to be tested and, if possible, confirmed. The truth of Christian claims cannot be presupposed but is the goal of the presentation (Systematic Theology 1:50-60 esp.).
has too often been relegated to the interior life of an individual believer apart from creation, science, and the consummation of God’s Kingdom.

Although Pannenberg is undeniably one of the most noteworthy pneumatologists for the third millennium, he has not produced a separate pneumatology. Rather, his doctrine of the Spirit is integrated with his ambitious theological program. This is no coincidence, since for him it is a methodological choice: the doctrine of the Spirit is interwoven with every major locus of his systematics, especially with God, creation, human beings, Christology, the Church, and eschatology. He also has a rich discussion on the Spirit with regard to salvation, as typical Protestant pneumatologies have, but he tries to avoid the dangers of privatizing the Spirit to subjective areas only. Understandably, he is critical of the secondary place given to pneumatology in theology since the Middle Ages, and of the restriction on the action of the Spirit to soteriology in Reformation theology.

In this essay I will offer a critical dialogue with Pannenberg’s pneumatology, first outlining its major themes and then assessing its strengths and potential, with a view to implications for Pentecostal theology. After concluding this introductory section with its focus on the question of truth in Pannenberg’s pneumatology, I will then discuss his view of the Spirit as force field. There follows a discussion of how Pannenberg casts his doctrine of God and creation in a pneumatological framework. Then I will relate the Spirit to salvation and the Church and highlight how this points to the eschatological consummation. While I offer critical notes during the treatment of main pneumatological themes, I will offer a more sustained critical assessment at the end of the essay.

The way Pannenberg depicts the relationship between the Spirit’s ministry and truth arises out of his theological method, described above. The truth of the Christian message is “provisionally . . . [established] in human hearts by the convicting ministry of the Spirit of God.” This sentence,

---