

# A Search for the Body: Is there Space for Christ's Body in Pannenberg's Eschatology?

JOHN McCLEAN\*

---

**Abstract:** Pannenberg's thought makes a constant appeal to 'anticipation', and this concept depends on a metaphysical proposal, temporalized essentialism, which includes an account of eternity as simultaneity of all history in God. This view of eternity has been both applauded and criticized. This article considers Pannenberg's account of the body of the exalted Christ who is in eternity. Pannenberg affirms the resurrection of Jesus, but has no account of the nature of Jesus' resurrected body. He emphasizes the church as the body of the exalted Christ, but describes this body as lacking particularity. His account of the Eucharist does not have any place for Christ's corporeal presence or for participation in Christ's exalted body. His account of the return of Christ is oriented to the revelation of the glorified unity of all reality in Christ. The reason that Pannenberg has no account of the body of Christ is due to his conception of eternity, a conception which differs markedly from that of Paul. The Pauline heavenly realm is part of the creation, and thus has a spatio-temporal relationship to the earthly realm as well as having a spatio-temporal dimension in itself. Pannenberg's conception of eternity is that it is outside of the created realm and has no spatial dimension. Douglas Farrow argues that a theology that lacks an account of the exalted body of Christ fails to have a proper account of the redemption of humanity and creation, and it seems Pannenberg's view is open to this criticism.

---

## **Introduction**

An account of eternity plays a key role in Wolfhart Pannenberg's thought. His thought makes constant appeal to the notion of 'anticipation' and this concept, in turn, depends on a metaphysical proposal. Christiaan Mostert describes

---

\* Presbyterian Theological Centre, 77 Shaftesbury Rd, Burwood, New South Wales 2134, Australia.

Pannenberg's metaphysic as differing from classic 'essentialist' ontology by the inclusion of temporality and the primacy of the future.<sup>1</sup> I will use the term 'temporal essentialism' as a convenient term for his view. Pannenberg's temporal essentialism accepts 'time and becoming as the medium that constitutes the whatness of things'.<sup>2</sup> The obvious sense of this is that substance or essence emerges through time. More startling is the claim that the essence which emerges already exists as future, anticipating the completion of becoming. From this discussion a new definition of the concept of substance emerges: 'things would then be what they are, substances, retroactively from the outcome of their becoming on the one hand, and on the other in the sense of anticipating the completion of their process of becoming, their history'.<sup>3</sup> Pannenberg admits that this counterintuitive proposal is hardly necessary when thinking of typical and self-repeating forms, the focus of Aristotle's essentialism. Temporal essentialism is an account that can also include human lives and societies, which have their identity more obviously decided in historical development. Pannenberg's proposal reconfigures classical metaphysics to deal with the historical nature of reality without adopting the atomism of process thought.<sup>4</sup>

The theological ground of temporal essentialism is an account of the relation of God's eternity and time. Pannenberg appeals to the Bible's presentation in which 'all time is before the eyes of God as a whole', while God is the source of life and creation but is always unchangeably himself. He argues for a conception of eternity much like that held by Plotinus, which is that eternity is the simultaneity of that which becomes divided in temporality and so is both the source of time and the goal of time-bound creatures. In this view eternity is not the antithesis of time but is 'constitutive of the time that is distinct from it'.<sup>5</sup> Pannenberg does not merely replicate Neoplatonic metaphysics, for, as he notes, Plotinus has no way of relating God to the future and so no way of affirming that all reality will return to unity with God.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Pannenberg argues that God's eternity has a structure that reflects the priority of the future. He argues that Exodus 3:14, the *locus classicus* of the view that God's eternity is atemporal, in fact hints at the priority of the future for the God who *will* be who he *will* be.<sup>7</sup>

---

1 Christiaan Mostert, 'From Eschatology to Trinity: Pannenberg's Doctrine of God', *Pacifica* 10 (1997), pp. 73–4.

2 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. P. Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 107.

3 Mostert, 'From Eschatology to Trinity', p. 107.

4 Mostert, 'From Eschatology to Trinity', pp. 107–8 and see further, pp. 125–9.

5 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; 1991–7) (hereafter *ST*), vol. 1, pp. 401–8, cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time, and the Trinitarian God', in Colin Gunton, ed., *Trinity, Time and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 63–5.

6 Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time, and the Trinitarian God', p. 65, observes that, for Plotinus, the soul reaches its goals in 'the self-abnegation in the experience of mystical union'.

7 Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time and the Trinitarian God', p. 65.

More importantly, Pannenberg appeals to the biblical presentation of the kingdom, which is present in Jesus' ministry but lies in the future. He claims that the kingdom establishes God's identity (or essence): 'with the manifestation and recognition of [God's] kingship his divine nature itself is at stake'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the eternal identity of God is established in the life of Jesus. From this basis he argues that the concept of God as both transcendent over changing time and having a real relationship with time, mediated via the future, is only coherent if God is an 'intrinsically differentiated unity' as the doctrine of the Trinity affirms. This trinitarian approach must include an emphasis on the economic Trinity, for God is not only eternally differentiated, but each person of the Trinity is related differently to time and together they draw temporal creation into unity with God's own eternity. Pannenberg holds that God 'does not have ahead of him any future that is different from his present'; he is his own future, and that is 'perfect freedom'. Pannenberg holds that temporal distinctions are not lost in the eternal present of the triune God, but are brought into a perfect unity. His view that in eternity time is united in simultaneity but retains the differentiation of moments means that his ontology genuinely affirms temporality and particularity, and also affirms the unity of reality. One of Pannenberg's stated goals is to provide a theology with an account of the integration of the parts and the whole in a way that does not eliminate the distinctions between the parts.<sup>9</sup>

Pannenberg's account of eternity, as part of temporal essentialism, allows him to integrate biblical and classical theological themes into an impressive synthesis and offer a coherent response to many pressing philosophical challenges to Christian theism. His proposal provides a context in which his more specific doctrinal proposals make a great deal of sense. Some commentators find his proposal persuasive and suggest that it offers an account of reality that is unitive without being monistic. Mostert refers to Pannenberg's 'vision of a differentiated totality', while Myers offers a defence of Pannenberg's view claiming that in it 'the particular is the locus of the whole, difference is the locus of totality'.<sup>10</sup> Others have raised questions about Pannenberg's account, and particularly his view of eternity. Gilbertson claims that the eschatological expectation of the book of Revelation is 'full of life' and that the apocalypse does not expect movement and development to end in the *eschaton* but that it looks forward to future events in which God's redeeming purposes continue to develop. He finds that Pannenberg's more static account 'leaves a curiously disappointing impression' which 'fails to fire the imagination'.<sup>11</sup> Volf

---

8 Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time, and the Trinitarian God', p. 54.

9 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 607.

10 Christiaan Mostert, *God and the Future* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002), p. 88; Benjamin Myers 'The Difference Totality Makes: Reconsidering Pannenberg's Eschatological Ontology', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49 (2007), p. 150.

11 Michael Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation: New Testament Studies in Dialogue with Pannenberg and Moltmann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 192–3 and n. 161.

wonders if Pannenberg's idea of the preservation of all of life in simultaneity is plausible, and adds: 'even if Pannenberg's account of the resurrection were plausible, would it be desirable?' since 'Pannenberg's citizens of the world to come seem statue-like eternal repositories of their lived lives'.<sup>12</sup>

This article argues that several problematic features in Pannenberg's account of eternity can be demonstrated by noting that his work lacks an account of Christ's exalted body. I will argue that this lack is evidence that Pannenberg's account of eternity is not sufficient to serve a full exposition of the Christian hope and that it calls into question claims that Pannenberg's thought offers a genuine 'vision of a differentiated totality'. The search for the exalted body of Jesus Christ in the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg will take place at four theological sites: Jesus' resurrection, the church, the Eucharist and Jesus' return. After looking in these four places I make some suggestions about what has, and has not, been found and the reasons for these results.

### Is it worth searching?

Before the proposed search begins it may be asked if it is worthwhile. The nature of the body of the exalted Christ is a somewhat esoteric question. Despite Pannenberg's near-encyclopaedic treatment of theology he does not treat every question, so it may be that he has simply not had anything to say on this matter. However, he makes regular references to the exalted Christ. Pannenberg points out that for Paul 'the working of the exalted Christ and that of the Spirit form an indissoluble unity' and suggests this is because 'the Risen Lord is so permeated by the divine Spirit of life that he . . . can be called a life-giving Spirit'.<sup>13</sup> The unity of the exalted Christ with the Spirit is complemented by Pannenberg's emphasis on the exalted Christ as the 'new man' who brings human life to completion as the image of God.<sup>14</sup> Since the exalted Christ is important in Pannenberg's thought, it is worth asking what he thinks of Christ's exalted body.

### The body and the empty tomb

Pannenberg is well known for his vigorous defence of the historicity of the resurrection. He affirms that the tomb was empty and that the resurrection involved Jesus' body. He argues that the contemporary expectations created a 'link between

---

12 Miroslav Volf, 'Enter Into Joy! Sin, Death and the Life of the World to Come', in John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 267–8.

13 Pannenberg, *ST* 1, p. 269. Pannenberg refers to 1 Cor. 15:45 and 2 Cor. 3:17.

14 Pannenberg, *ST* 2, pp. 160, 208.

the resurrection and corporeality', though the exact nature of this link was not clear in the Jewish worldview. Thus the empty tomb 'resists any superficial spiritualising of the Easter message' in which the presence or absence of Jesus' body is irrelevant.<sup>15</sup> However, he makes no explicit comment about *what* happened to Christ's body.

Pannenberg's account of Jesus' resurrection appearances helps to explain why he says nothing about Christ's body. He treats Paul's vision of the risen Jesus as the model for all the appearances of the risen Christ; they are appearances of the Lord from heaven. He appeals to 'the oldest NT witness' in which 'the resurrection and ascension of Jesus form a single event' (Phil. 2:9; Acts 2:36; 5:30–31).<sup>16</sup> That is, he does not allow for a period in which Jesus' had an earthly bodily presence after the resurrection and prior to the ascension. Rather, Jesus is taken into heavenly existence and offers visions of himself. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' appearances are presumed to be later accounts and to have 'legendary and in part tendentious features' and Luke's emphasis on the ascension is a possible 'deviation . . . from the original equation of resurrection and ascension'.<sup>17</sup> In *Jesus – God and Man*, Pannenberg suggests that these reports 'are heavily colored by legendary elements, particularly by the tendency toward underlining the corporeality of the appearances'.<sup>18</sup> In *Systematic Theology* he reports that Alsup's *The Post-Resurrection Appearances of the Gospel Traditions* has led him to 'a more nuanced view of the age and historical value' of the Gospel accounts, though he still does not consider them 'fundamentally reliable historically'.<sup>19</sup> Pannenberg understands the resurrection as something that has happened to Jesus, including his body, which involved the 'changing of the earthly corporeality of Jesus into the eschatological reality of a new life'.<sup>20</sup> The question is: what does this new life mean for his body? In the discussion of Jesus' resurrection this is not explained.

### Is Christ's body in the church?

When Pannenberg considers the church, the theme of the body of Christ is prominent. The connection he draws between the exalted Christ and the actualization of reconciliation in the work of the Spirit flows into his ecclesiology:

The work of the Holy Spirit lifts individuals ecstatically above their own particularity not only to participation in the sonship of Christ but at the same

---

15 Pannenberg, *ST 2*, pp. 328–9.

16 Pannenberg, *ST 2*, p. 354.

17 Pannenberg, *ST 2*, pp. 354–5.

18 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. L.L. Wilkins and D.A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1968), p. 89 and, see further assessment of the Gospel accounts, pp. 93–8.

19 Pannenberg, *ST 2*, p. 354.

20 Pannenberg, *ST 2*, p. 359.

time also to experience of the fellowship in the body of Christ that unites individual Christians to all other Christians.<sup>21</sup>

So the Spirit, who is the presence of the exalted Lord, brings the completion of reconciliation as Christians participate in Christ and with one another. Pannenberg views participation in Christ as 'realistic' and so can say: 'calling the church the body of Christ is no mere metaphor'.<sup>22</sup> Because the church is the body of Christ then the public ministry of the church acts *in persona Christi* in the name of the whole church.<sup>23</sup> He argues that there is no obstacle to a woman taking this role since 'the minister is not representing the earthly man Jesus of Nazareth but the exalted Christ in whose body the distinctions of sex, as well as those of social status, nationality, and race, have been overcome'.<sup>24</sup> This conception of the body of Christ has a dual risk: it seems to strip it of the particularities of location (and of history) and to conflate it with his community.

Cobb has criticized Pannenberg's view that the body of the resurrected Christ is located in the future, suggesting that this introduces a dualism in Pannenberg's thought since it presumes an already existing future that stands over against the present.<sup>25</sup> Grenz argues that Pannenberg's presentation of the church as the body of the risen Christ provides a sufficient response to Cobb, since the church, as Christ's body, is the proleptic presence of the kingdom in the present.<sup>26</sup> Grenz's suggestion is not persuasive, for Pannenberg understands that Christ is in God's eternity, which is yet to enter into time. Although God's eternity is the future of the world, until the *eschaton* it does stand over against the present creating a certain dualism in Pannenberg's thought, even if the dualism has an eschatological resolution. Pannenberg could not remove such dualism sufficiently to satisfy Cobb without collapsing his anticipatory account into a process theology. Grenz's comment does not identify the more significant concern about Pannenberg's account of body of Christ, which is whether an ecclesial understanding is sufficient. Grenz comments that 'for Pannenberg the church does not exhaust the reality of the exalted Lord who exists in communion with God the Father as the heavenly head of his body'.<sup>27</sup> This is so, but it leaves open the question for Pannenberg of whether, while the church does not exhaust the reality of the exalted Lord, it may exhaust the meaning of the *body* of the risen Christ and, if so, whether this is a sufficient account.

---

21 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 130.

22 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 102.

23 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 391.

24 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 391.

25 John B. Cobb, Jr, Review of Jesus – God and Man by Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Journal of Religion* 49 (1969), p. 197.

26 Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 191.

27 Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, p. 191.

## Is the body in the Eucharist?

Eucharistic theology is a point at which one would expect to find a discussion of the nature of the exalted body of Christ. Pannenberg affirms the presence of the person of the exalted Christ in the sacrament, but explicitly resists relating this to notions of 'corporeality'.<sup>28</sup> He locates the explanation of the presence of the whole Christ in Spirit-mediated recollection of Christ's death:

By recollecting the dedication to his mission that Jesus sealed by his death, participants in the Supper are drawn into this mission in witness to the reign of God that already became and still becomes present in the ministry of Jesus, and in this Supper, too. In the power of the divine lordship and its future, he himself, the risen Lord, is present in the meal of his community, and in this way the difference in time is overcome that separates the community from the days of the earthly ministry of Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

Participants in the Eucharist are taken outside themselves by the Spirit into the recollection that Jesus is present and in that context 'bread and wine become the medium of Christ's presence'.<sup>30</sup> Pannenberg argues that the word *soma* in the key texts (Matt. 26:26–8; Mk 14:22–4; Lk 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–6) translates the Aramaic word *guph* which Jesus used and which denotes 'the whole person' rather than 'the body'. He takes this to mean that Jesus speaks, in the context of table fellowship, of his ongoing fellowship with his disciples. Likewise Pannenberg focuses the meaning of the cup in the covenant established in Jesus' blood rather than in the blood itself.<sup>31</sup> He states that the presence of Jesus can in no way be thought of as an analogy of the incarnation.<sup>32</sup>

Pannenberg opposes substantialist accounts of the presence of Christ and explains the Eucharist in terms of signs and 'transignification'.<sup>33</sup> At points Pannenberg offers formulations that seem to gesture toward a more substantialist view of the presence of Christ. So he states that 'in the celebration of the Supper a "change" takes place as regards the significance that the participants attach to the eucharistic bread (and wine) but also with regard to the bread and wine themselves'.<sup>34</sup> His explanation of this is, however, decidedly non-substantialist:

Jesus Christ and with him God's rule, is present, but not in such a way that he comes into the bread as a supernatural substance (impanation), rather in such a way that what is signified is there in the sign as an indication of its presence.<sup>35</sup>

---

28 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, pp. 312–14.

29 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 320.

30 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 308.

31 See Pannenberg, *ST* 3, pp. 287–9 and p. 295, n. 625.

32 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 312.

33 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, pp. 300–2.

34 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 295.

35 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 301.



Grenz's conclusion that Pannenberg has a 'realist understanding of the change of the elements in accordance with Lutheran and Roman Catholic emphases' is not valid.<sup>36</sup> Pannenberg's conception of ontology is tied closely to the development of meaning, so that in his thought 'transignification' is, in a sense, 'transubstantiation'. However, Pannenberg avoids any reference to the bodily presence of Christ, moves the focus of Christ's presence from the elements to the whole celebration and places the emphasis on the work of the Spirit in the faith of the congregation, each of which is a move away from a substantialist view. Pannenberg's transignification is, as Grenz comments, 'a general aspect of the epistemological process', which for Pannenberg is also ontological.<sup>37</sup> Proponents of a substantialist view of the Eucharist usually view transubstantiation as a miracle that contravenes the general ontology in which accidents subsist in subjects.<sup>38</sup>

Surprisingly perhaps, Pannenberg praises Zwingli's view of the Eucharist.<sup>39</sup> Zwingli 'believed in the presence of Christ, but not his bodily presence, nor his presence in his human nature'. For Zwingli, the Supper is a symbol or sign and a memorial and the presence of Christ is mediated by the Spirit to faith, while the words, actions and elements of the Supper are symbols which convey meaning. He says that 'as there is fire in the flint only when it is struck, so Christ is found under the form of bread and wine only when he is sought in faith'.<sup>40</sup> In the 1531 *An Exposition of the Faith*, which contains Zwingli's most positive statements about the presence of Christ in the Supper, he appeals to Matthew 18:20 – 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' – stressing Christ's presence to the congregation who remember him.<sup>41</sup> Zwingli was led to his position by a rejection of both the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation and Luther's view of consubstantiation.

Stephens suggests that Zwingli's Platonism predisposed him to stress the Spirit over the flesh.<sup>42</sup> He also observes that biblical and theological concerns were basic for Zwingli. Zwingli 'saw Luther as denying that Christ was human as we . . . as well as denying the passages which state or imply that his body is in one place'.<sup>43</sup> He suspected that if Christ's body could be offered to all in the sacrament, even to the

---

36 Grenz, *Reasons*, pp. 227–8.

37 Grenz, *Reasons*, p. 228.

38 Aquinas devotes a considerable discussion to the question of how accidents can remain unchanged in the Eucharist. *Summa* III. Q 77. <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4077.htm> (accessed 10 September 2009).

39 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 311.

40 W.P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 94–7. The quotation from Zwingli is from a 1523 letter to Thomas Wytenbach.

41 Stephens, *Zwingli*, p. 106.

42 Stephens, *Zwingli*, p. 108, and see his comments on the role of Erasmus and Augustine in influencing Zwingli in a Platonist direction, pp. 15, 22.

43 Stephens, *Zwingli*, p. 102.



disciples before Christ's death, then the cross was rendered pointless. As well as the christological objection, Zwingli feared that a bodily eating offered to unbelievers as well as believers depreciated faith directed toward the sacrament away from God and gave humans the impression they could control salvation which is, in fact, in the hands of a sovereign God.<sup>44</sup>

Pannenberg's sacramental theology shares several elements with Zwingli's: both stress the role of faith and signification in providing sacramental theology with its foundation, and both have accounts of the body of Christ that appear to be shaped by metaphysical concerns. Pannenberg suggests that if Zwingli had not been 'hampered by [the] idea of the exalted Christ being tied corporeally by his session at the right hand of God' he could have linked commemoration to the real presence of Christ and pointed to a solution to 'the problems of the doctrine of the Eucharist' before the Lutherans.<sup>45</sup>

In dealing with the sacraments Pannenberg's only comments on the idea of Jesus' 'heavenly corporeality' are negative ones. In most cases his comments are to the effect that this idea should not be used to explain Christ's presence in the sacraments. He states that his notion of Christ's 'personal' presence means that the debates about the local nature of Christ's body 'cease to be important'.<sup>46</sup> He affirms Calvin's view that 'Christ is present to his community by his Spirit' and 'present to it in the elements of the bread and wine' but says nothing about Calvin's emphasis on the Spirit-mediated participation in the body and blood of Christ.<sup>47</sup> When he discusses the overcoming of separation in the Lord's Supper he deals with temporal separation and argues that the risen Lord is present in the recollection of the Last Supper so that 'the difference in time is overcome that separates the community from the days of the earthly ministry of Jesus'.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, in the Reformation debates, questions about space and whether the body of Christ occupied a prescribed space or was ubiquitous were key to the debate. Finally, when Pannenberg does discuss the nature of the risen Lord he frames the discussion in purely temporal terms and describes how the 'life of the risen Lord is the reality of his earthly history transfigured by its participation in the eternity of God'.<sup>49</sup>

---

44 Stephens, *Zwingli*, p. 110.

45 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 311.

46 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 314.

47 Calvin held that the Lord's Supper is a divine gift in which the whole Christ is given. When Calvin says that Christ is 'spiritually present', he means that the body and blood of Christ are made present by the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit. See B.A. Gerrish, 'John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper', in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10 *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. R.C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), pp. 234–6.

48 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 320.

49 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 315.

## The return of Christ and his body

Since Pannenberg places such emphasis on eschatology, he gives an extended exposition of the return of Christ. He discusses how individual and collective eschatology are ‘mutually related in indissoluble unity’. Humanity cannot come to fulfilment unless all individuals participate, and individuals cannot reach fulfilment apart from the whole of human society. The mutual relation of the individual and the whole extends to Jesus, in whose eschatological existence ‘the separation (not distinction) between the I and others’ is removed.<sup>50</sup> In this discussion, Pannenberg develops the theme of the church as the body of Christ which is ‘not just Jesus’ individual form of existence but embraces his community as well’. Pannenberg refers to ‘the corporeality of the risen Christ’ and ‘the new corporeality of the resurrection from the dead’ for believers.<sup>51</sup> Yet this corporeality is so transformed that there is no separation between individual believers, nor between them and Christ; though there is a distinction. The question remains, how does Pannenberg understand this embodiedness?

Pannenberg employs the theme of distinction without separation ‘boldly’, as he says, to argue that Jesus’ eschatological life does not have ‘a form which separates it from others’, but that in him there is ‘the removal of the individual autonomy and separation that are part of the corporeality of earthly life’. Within this unity, Pannenberg insists, ‘there is no erasure of particularity’. Christ’s exalted body is not dependent on the church, but on God’s creative power. While not dependent on the church, it is not ‘self-enclosed’, but ‘establishes, embraces, and transcends’ the fellowship of believers.<sup>52</sup>

Pannenberg concludes that Christ’s return is not about the appearance of his individual form, but is the appearing of all humanity and the whole of creation in glorified unity:

The expectation of Christ’s return is not oriented to the appearing of a single individual but to the making manifest of a vital nexus originating in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth in the light of the glory of God . . . we cannot fix it at a single point in distinction from surrounding areas; instead it embraces all creation.<sup>53</sup>

Pannenberg’s explanation of the return of Christ lies in the tradition of Lutheran theology. Some classical Lutheran theologians held that Christ’s body, invisible and ubiquitous in his exaltation, was made visible and local for a while by a special dispensation of God.<sup>54</sup> Pannenberg, however, makes no reference to a special act of localization at Christ’s return.

---

50 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 328.

51 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 329.

52 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 629.

53 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 630; the reference is to Lk 17:23–4.

54 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 689–90.

It seems that the body of Christ, as a particular body for a human individual, is missing from Pannenberg's thought. Jesus' body is involved in the resurrection, but there are only visionary appearances not physical ones; in the church his body has no sexual or racial particularity; in the eucharistic theology there is no discussion of a presence of Christ's body nor of participation in that body; finally in the return of Christ his body is inclusive and not particular. Why has Jesus' body gone missing? I suggest it is due to Pannenberg's conceptualization of eternity.

### **The Pauline heavenly realm and Pannenberg's eternity: parallels and differences**

It is enlightening to compare Pannenberg's account of heavenly eternal existence with the apostle Paul's view of the heavenly realm. A.T. Lincoln points out that when Paul wishes to stress the realized aspect of eschatology he typically moves to 'spatial categories' and appeals to 'heavenly realities'.<sup>55</sup> Lincoln opposes any confusion of Paul's view of the heavenly realm with a timeless conception, and insists that heaven is the place where the exalted Christ now reigns and is the arena of eschatological salvation that still awaits the end of salvation history:

The image should not . . . leave the impression of the heavenly dimension as a static reality, for it signifies a reality which is, but is yet to come . . . the heavenly realm is part of the forward-moving history of salvation . . . it has a dynamic effect on the believing community, as its mother providing life and as realm of freedom making possible liberation from the bondage of the old age.<sup>56</sup>

When Lincoln writes of 'anticipation' in Paul's view of the Christian life, he means something rather different to Pannenberg.<sup>57</sup> He views the triumph of Christ as already established in the heavenly realm that is contemporaneous with present existence but spatially removed. Christian anticipation is fellowship now in what is already established but is not yet manifest on earth.

Witherington builds on Lincoln's work and gives a lengthy reconstruction of Paul's view of heaven. He suggests there are three possible meanings for the word: 'the eternal abode of God, the invisible, non-material spiritual realm in general . . . and a part of the created world, what we call the sky'. The 'invisible, non-material spiritual realm' is 'coterminous with the material universe and interacts with it and influences it in various ways'. Moreover, he states that both the material and

---

55 A.T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 21–2.

56 Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, p. 29.

57 Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, p. 179, states:

Paul's Christian apocalyptic is defined both by the future and by the recent past and is about what happens when the life of the age to come has been made available through Christ's resurrection and how that life does not remain centred in heaven but works itself out on earth in the present period of history.

non-material heavens 'undergo transformation as a result of the redemptive work of Christ'.<sup>58</sup> Witherington uses the term 'non-material' without definition and its implication is not clear. In a different discussion of resurrection bodies, which are heavenly, Witherington argues that Paul thinks of these bodies having a 'different material substance', but one which is still 'material' and is not 'a spiritual substance'.<sup>59</sup> Witherington is suggesting that Paul held to a view in which the heavenly realm was created, but operated under different conditions to the earth and the astronomical heavens.

The concept of eternity functions in Pannenberg's view in a similar way to the heavenly realm in Paul's thought. Pannenberg states that the kingdom of God is established in eternity and so now anticipated until eternity enters time.<sup>60</sup> Paul views the risen Christ as in heaven and expects the bodily return of the glorified Christ from heaven.<sup>61</sup> Pannenberg uses 'heavenly' language drawn from the New Testament. For example, he refers to the 'exalted Lord who sits at the right hand of the Father', but describes the return of Christ as 'the entry of eternity into time'.<sup>62</sup> Since he views death as entry into God's eternity it seems most likely that for him the phrase 'the right hand of the Father' is a symbol for Jesus' existence in eternity, the realm from which he will 'return'. For Paul, those who have died 'in Christ' are envisaged as being 'with Christ' in the heavenly realm (Phil. 1:23). Pannenberg understands death as entry into eternity, which is God's eternal present. His solution to the problem of whether individuals appear immediately at death in God's presence or await the end of history is that 'the identity of creatures [after death] needs no continuity of their being on the time line but is ensured by the fact that their existence is not lost in God's eternal presence'.<sup>63</sup>

The primary difference between the Pauline heavenly realm and Pannenberg's notion of eternity comes in the spatio-temporal relations of heaven/eternity to the present historical dimension and in the account of an internal spatio-temporal aspect. The Pauline heavenly realm is part of the creation, and thus has a spatio-temporal relationship to the earthly realm as well as having a spatio-temporal dimension in itself. Paul, along with other New Testament authors, perceives the heavenly realm as the arena of God's fully revealed glory and so holds that whatever comes to dwell there is transfigured and glorified. Hence, Paul refers to Jesus' ascended existence in 'the body of his glory' in Philippians 3:21. Similarly, Paul's discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 asserts a radically transformed character for

---

58 Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 232–3.

59 Ben Witherington, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 197–8.

60 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 595.

61 Phil. 3:20–21; see Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, pp. 102–3.

62 Pannenberg, *ST* 2, p. 387; *ST* 3, p. 627.

63 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 606; cf. the statement affirming Greshake's view of 'resurrection in death', that those who die 'move on at once from time to eternity', p. 577.

the continued embodied existence of the glorified Lord Jesus and believers. 1 Corinthians 15:42–4 describes the resurrection body as imperishable, glorified and empowered, in sum a 'spiritual body'. Paul describes Christ, the archetype of the resurrection, as the 'heavenly man'. However, this transfiguration does not imply an expectation that the body of the ascended Christ does not participate in time and space, even if heavenly time and space should be thought of as somewhat different to that of earthly existence. The fact that Paul's thought retains a clear place for a body of the ascended Jesus, and that this body is one which occupied space and time in the resurrection and will do so again in the parousia, implies that it continues to do so in Christ's heavenly session.<sup>64</sup>

Pannenberg recognizes the biblical conception of heaven as a part of creation and explains that in biblical texts 'heaven is the sphere of creation that is not under human control'.<sup>65</sup> However, when he comes to make use of the idea of heaven in theological discussion he interprets the biblical imagery in metaphysical terms, explaining heaven as 'the sphere of [God's] eternal presence which is inaccessible to us' and as 'a figure of speech for the eternal presence of God in which he is present to all temporal things'.<sup>66</sup> This second meaning refers to eternity, which is not part of creation, and this is the theologically significant meaning of heaven in Pannenberg's thought. Pannenberg's eternity lies in the future in relation to present human experience and is characterized by simultaneity.<sup>67</sup> Pannenberg presents eternity as the summation, and therefore, the ground of time:

This idea of eternity should not be confused with timelessness, because it does not exclude the notion of a sequence of events, provided that such a sequence is enjoyed simultaneously as a whole. As in the case of timeless eternity the idea of unchanging identity is included, but the reference to the wholeness of life allows for a plurality of events in that life, events that may form a sequence among themselves but are integrated in the wholeness of that life that is enjoyed

---

64 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 1278–9, concludes that for Paul 'the totality of the mode of life in the resurrection existence in the Holy Spirit is more than physical but not less' and that Paul's discussion of a resurrection body 'affirms the biblical tradition of a positive attitude toward physicality as a condition for experiencing life in its fullness, but also assimilates, subsumes, and transcends the role of the physical in the public domain of this earthly life'. Andrew Johnson, 'Turning the World Upside Down in 1 Corinthians 15: Apocalyptic Epistemology, the Resurrected Body and the New Creation', *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (2003), p. 307, concludes that 'there is no compelling reason to imagine that [Paul's] view of resurrection life is characterized by anything other than embodied materiality, possibly even non-corruptible fleshly materiality'.

65 Pannenberg, *ST* 2, p. 107.

66 Pannenberg, *ST* 1, p. 413.

67 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, p. 175, notes a similar difference between Pannenberg's eschatology and the worldview of the Apocalyptist. He writes that 'Pannenberg's understanding of divine transcendence is expressed in predominantly temporal terms, whereas in Revelation divine transcendence is expressed in both temporal and spatial terms.'

as present in its wholeness and therefore not subject to change. This idea of eternity could be called omnitemporal, since it comprehends the wholeness of life, but not in the sense of an everlasting process, but rather as continuous presence of the whole of life.<sup>68</sup>

While Pannenberg's view of the relation of eternity to time is clear, he does not clarify his view of the relationship of space and eternity. This is presumably because he treats time as the fundamental reality 'because the concept of space as order of togetherness presupposes already the temporal notion of simultaneity'.<sup>69</sup> The implication of this statement seems to be that space is a function of time and is susceptible to being expressed in terms of time. It is, however, not obvious why space should be considered a function of time and this is not a common assumption in most contemporary thought about space-time.<sup>70</sup>

The impression that Pannenberg's view of eternity has no spatial dimension is reinforced by a recent article, in which Pannenberg is appreciative of the cosmological speculations of Frank Tipler.<sup>71</sup> Tipler claims that the omega point is the point to which the universe converges in its final state after the Big Crunch. At the omega point the matter of the universe collapses to the smallest possible space which is infinitely rich in information and it is the point at which space-time is both immanent and transcendent. In the omega point eternal life is 'maximum use of information'.<sup>72</sup> For Tipler, the omega point is equivalent to the idea of God. Pannenberg suggests that Tipler's cosmology approximates Christian theology and develops Tipler's ideas, suggesting that God is the omega point which is 'limitless storage of information' and eternal life is 'the identical repetition of what has been, according to the model of a computer simulation'. As such, eternity 'does not involve a material continuity or identity with previous bodiliness'.<sup>73</sup> Such a conception of eternity has no space for bodies. Even if we accept that Pannenberg's relation to Tipler's thought is more one of appreciation than appropriation, it is still remarkable that he would find so much to appreciate in what Delashmutt terms a 'posthuman'

---

68 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time, and Space', *Zygon* 40 (2005), p. 102.

69 Pannenberg, 'Eternity, Time and Space', pp. 97–8.

70 D.H. Mellor, *Real Time II* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 56, makes much of the analogies between time and space and yet states that 'relativity does nothing to conflate time with space'.

71 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'A Modern Cosmology: God and the Resurrection of the Dead', in Niels Henrik Gregersen, ed., *The Historicity of Nature: Essays on Science and Theology* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), pp. 205–11.

72 Pannenberg, 'A Modern Cosmology', p. 206, refers to Frank J. Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 163, 199. Tipler's suggestions have been comprehensively dismissed by both scientists and theologians; see for example George Ellis, 'Piety in the Sky', *Nature* 371 (1994), p. 115 and Hans Schwarz, 'Modern Scientific Theories of the Future and Christian Eschatology', *Word & World* 16 (1996), pp. 473–81.

73 Pannenberg, 'A Modern Cosmology', p. 209.

view.<sup>74</sup> Delashmutt observes that 'whereas humanism tends to advance the cause of the individual and his or her place within the community, posthumanism is characteristically oriented toward the dissolution of the individual in favor of a networked vision of society'.<sup>75</sup>

### Does it matter that the body is missing?

The absence of the particularized, exalted, body of Jesus may seem a minor point over which to raise a concern. There are, however, reasons to think that it indicates a problematic aspect of Pannenberg's thought. It makes Pannenberg's account of the return of Christ a contrast to that of the New Testament writers. The New Testament gives every indication that the early Christians expected Jesus' return to bring the revelation of his reign and the transformation of all things and also expected the appearance of Jesus' individual exalted body. The angelic assurance that Jesus will return 'in the same way as you saw him go' (Acts 1:11) suggests this. Paul's teaching that Christ will descend and that the redeemed will meet him implies a distinction between the physical individuality of Christ and that of others (1 Thess. 4:16–17). Philippians 3:21 also indicates that Paul expects the appearance of an individual who will be seen, not with the redeemed included in his body, but in order to transform lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. As noted above, Lutheran dogmatics, in the face of such texts, affirmed a local and visible manifestation of Christ's invisible and ubiquitous body.

Farrow argues that the Christian tradition has often failed to incorporate Jesus' corporeal ascension into its thought. He finds the cause of this in a long struggle between a genuinely christological confession, which witnesses to Christ as the particular incarnate God, and the tendency to make Christology subservient to general questions:

Ancients and moderns are allied in misconstruing the alienation between God and humanity in terms of epistemological or ontological distance. Consequently they are allied also in constructing systems of mediation which, even when christological, operate by denying Christ's particularity. For the only way to overcome alienation, thus understood, is to eradicate distance and otherness: to unite, to homogenize, to divinize, to universalize the incarnation. And there is no way to do that without turning away from the human Jesus, or indeed from what makes us human.<sup>76</sup>

---

74 Michael W. Delashmutt, 'Perspectives on Techno-Science and Human Nature: A Better Life Through Information Technology? The Techno-Theological Eschatology of Posthuman Speculative Science', *Zygon* 41 (2006), pp. 277–81.

75 Delashmutt, 'Perspectives on Techno-Science and Human Nature', pp. 273–4.

76 Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999),



In Farrow's account Irenaeus' anti-Gnostic affirmation of the 'ascension of the flesh of Christ' is the 'measuring rod' for all later thought.<sup>77</sup> Farrow's point is that Irenaeus' rich theology largely hinges on his assertion of the ascension and return of Christ in the flesh. He comments on the effect of the assertion on Irenaeus' theology:

However resistant to a purely rational explanation, it demonstrated *in concreto* that redemption does not mean the prising apart of creation to liberate what is divine in it, but rather the prising open of creation to the Spirit of God that it might be filled with divine glory.<sup>78</sup>

According to Farrow, when theology fails to incorporate the bodily ascension of Christ then it fails to give an adequate account of the redemption of humans *qua* humans and of the eschatological setting of the church.

Is Pannenberg's view susceptible to Farrow's critique? If his ecclesiology is measured against Farrow's concerns he receives a mixed report. He holds that 'the mystery of salvation achieves only broken anticipation in the church's historical form'.<sup>79</sup> This locates the church in a similar way to Farrow's description, as awaiting Christ and participating in him but without an over-realization. However, when Pannenberg suggests that the church is a sign of the mystery of salvation in the same way that Christ was and is, Farrow would presumably find this too close a co-ordination of Christ and the church.<sup>80</sup> We can reach a provisional conclusion that Pannenberg's thought fails Farrow's test at this point.

A more significant question for this study is how fully Pannenberg's view of redemption allows humans to remain human. He affirms that the goal of redemption is the perfection of creation.<sup>81</sup> However, he has no clear account of any embodied humanity in that eternal perfection. Further, he refers to the renewal of creation and a new heaven and earth, but this is given no thematic development in his eschatology and is explained as 'participation in God's eternity'.<sup>82</sup> It would seem that the eschatological state of creation has no room for movement, change or development since it is characterized by simultaneity. Farrow suggests that in Pannenberg and others the adoption of Boethius' view of eternity tends to 'smother creaturely time by insisting on presenting it whole or all at once'.<sup>83</sup>

---

p. 255. See John Webster's thoughtful review, 'Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension', *Journal of Theological Studies* 54 (2003), pp. 440–5.

77 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 46; see full discussion on Irenaeus, pp. 41–85.

78 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 83.

79 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 43.

80 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, pp. 43–4.

81 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 642; see references to the New Creation, pp. 551, 584, 588, 630.

82 Pannenberg, *ST* 3, p. 644.

83 Douglas Farrow, 'Resurrection and Immortality', in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 229.

Torrance, with whom Farrow largely agrees, explores the implication of Christ's corporeal ascension for a general cosmology.<sup>84</sup> Torrance argues that the ascension occurred in earthly space-time for the disciples but that Jesus experienced a renewed space-time as a result of his resurrection, in which he 'healed and redeemed our creaturely existence'. This renewed space-time cannot be described apart from apocalyptic language 'that breaks down in its very using'. So Torrance does not offer a scientific account of space-time for the ascension, but insists that 'the humanity of Jesus . . . was fully and truly human, and indeed more fully and truly human than any other humanity we know' and that 'creaturely space and time, far from being dissolved are confirmed in their reality before God'. The ascension moves beyond our conceptions of space and time and although we say that Jesus is in heaven we do not claim that we denote by this a place as we might understand it, but we do mean that Jesus continues to exist 'without any diminishment of his physical, historical existence'. Torrance explains that in the ascension there is 'the meeting of man and God in God's place' and by the Spirit, believers, still properly existing in space-time, may meet God in God's place.<sup>85</sup>

Farrow and Torrance raise a serious question about Pannenberg's affirmation of the inclusion of creation in the *eschaton*. Can an eternity that is pure simultaneity and has no spatial dimension genuinely include creation *qua* creation?

The absence of Jesus' individual, exalted body raises the question of how successfully Pannenberg keeps totality from subsuming the particular in temporal essentialism. Eternity conceived as apparently placeless threatens to undermine particularity. Volf's suggestion that Pannenberg's eschatological citizens are 'statue-like' may understate the problem, since it seems that they will have no space to occupy at all. While there is no simple continuity of bodily life between this life and the resurrection life (especially when bodies are considered at a molecular level), a vision of the *eschaton* that is something like a singularity in which space-time is collapsed to a point (or toward a point) is so far from what we know as creaturely life that it offers no continuity with historical embodied life.

## Conclusion

From this discussion there are two pressing questions for Pannenberg's thought. The first is how he understands that eternity, which is the future of reality, relates to the present. In Pauline thought the heavenly realm runs alongside earthly space-time. Christian thought has suggested that it does so in a very different mode to the earthly realm, but still in a temporal mode. For Pannenberg the wholeness of reality lies in

---

84 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, pp. 262–6, criticizes Torrance for appealing directly to Christ's divinity to establish his universal Lordship and for a lack of emphasis on the work of the Spirit.

85 T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976), pp. 29–30.

the future. Does this distance the present experience of the church too far from its future? Farrow argues that Calvin, for instance, grasped the spatial absence of Christ but did not give sufficient weight to the expectation of his return. It may be that Pannenberg has done the reverse. Gilbertson suggests this in his comparison of Pannenberg with the book of Revelation. He notes that Pannenberg gives a reinterpretation of apocalyptic which does not depend on a 'three-decker' universe, but this is achieved 'at the cost of reducing the sense of the hidden *presence* of God's power'.<sup>86</sup> If Pannenberg can avoid this criticism it will be because his doctrine of the Spirit accounts for the presence of a God who is futural. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider that question.

The question on which I have focused is that of *what* is anticipated. Pannenberg is committed to a unified metaphysic in which the disintegration that marks our present experience is overcome. This leads him to an anticipatory metaphysic in which the movement of time gives way in the *eschaton* to simultaneity. However, this metaphysic does not seem to leave room for a genuine humanity or the continued existence of creation *qua* creation.

---

86 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, p. 179, emphasis added.