

THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY IN THE THEOLOGY OF  
WOLFHART PANNENBERG: AN ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

**Introduction**

"How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" (1 Cor 15:35 NIV). So begins Paul's discussion of the nature of the resurrection body—a discussion which continues to foster controversy in our own day, just as it did in his. Precisely what sort of existence should we, as Christians, anticipate having in the eschaton? Will it be a purely spiritual (in the sense of *non-physical*) existence? Or should we rather anticipate being raised to once again enjoy some sort of physical, bodily reality?

This paper will offer an analysis and critique of Wolfhart Pannenberg's view of the nature of the resurrection body. Pannenberg has given significant attention to this issue and his views deserve our careful consideration. Although his discussion is not always easy to follow, and at times even seems to suffer from a lack of clarity, he would have us recognize that at least part of the difficulty may lie simply in the nature of the subject matter itself. For as he frankly reminds us, the themes of eschatology are "in a special way . . . beyond human comprehension."<sup>1</sup>

In order to gain an appreciation for Pannenberg's position, we will begin with a brief examination of his views on the problem of metaphorical language, continue with a look at what he has to say about the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and conclude with an analysis of his interpretation of Paul's statements about the nature of the resurrection body. We will also consider the implications which he thinks all this holds for our own resurrection bodies in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 621.

future. Once we have finished our analysis of Pannenberg's position, we will then offer a critique of it.

### **The Nature of the Resurrection Body: An Analysis of Pannenberg's Position**

#### *The Problem of Metaphorical Language*

Pannenberg begins his discussion about the nature of the resurrection body with an important observation; namely, that language about "resurrection from the dead" is metaphorical in nature.<sup>2</sup> The concept of rising from the dead is often described in terms of waking and rising from sleep. We're all familiar with the meaning of the latter concept. Waking and rising from sleep is a common, everyday occurrence (except, perhaps, for the busy Ph.D. student). But resurrection from the dead is not an event of this kind. Rather, it is something completely *beyond* our normal, everyday experience. "In this sense," writes Pannenberg, "speaking about a resurrection is metaphorical. The familiar experience of being awakened and rising from sleep serves as a parable for the completely unknown destiny expected for the dead."<sup>3</sup>

In describing the language of resurrection as metaphorical in nature, Pannenberg does not mean to imply that the biblical doctrine of resurrection is somehow unreal or illusory. In his view, "The matter itself is not metaphor, only the way of stating it. We must not infer the unreality of the matter from the metaphorical form of the statement."<sup>4</sup> Pannenberg does not deny that the doctrine of the resurrection has real content. His concern is simply to recognize that the content of this doctrine is couched in metaphorical language.

How does this affect Pannenberg's understanding of the nature of the resurrection body? To put it rather crudely, it essentially keeps him from thinking of the body that is raised as being similar to that of a revived corpse. He writes:

---

<sup>2</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:621.

The notion of the resurrection of the dead that is most obvious on the basis of the analogy of sleeping and waking would be that of a revivification of the corpse in the sense of what has died standing up and walking around. It is, however, absolutely certain that the resurrection of the dead was not understood in this way in the primitive Christian and, in any case, in the oldest, the Pauline, concept. For Paul, resurrection means the new life of a new body, not the return of life into a dead but not yet decayed fleshly body.<sup>5</sup>

While this statement in itself is largely unexceptional, and one with which most Christians would readily agree, it has a meaning in Pannenberg's theology that *is* rather exceptional (and one with which many Christians would *not* readily agree). In order to see this, however, we must first descend more deeply into Pannenberg's theology, beginning with his interpretation of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

### *The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus*

In Pannenberg's view, the apostle Paul is our only reliable source of information regarding the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. As he sees it, Paul's testimony offers the only eyewitness account of this remarkable event that we have.<sup>6</sup> What's more, the tradition that Paul relies on in 1 Corinthians 15 "arose very early . . . prior to Paul's visit to Jerusalem."<sup>7</sup> If Paul received this formula shortly after his conversion (which is likely), then it "must have reached back to the first five years after Jesus' death."<sup>8</sup> This is incredibly early and lends to the appearance traditions, at least as we have them in Paul, a "good historical foundation."<sup>9</sup>

But what about the appearance stories recorded in the Gospels? Doesn't Pannenberg grant any credence to these? Unfortunately, he does not. In his view, while a "factual core" may still lie behind these accounts, they nonetheless represent "a later stage of the tradition with

---

<sup>5</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 75. See also James T. Bridges, *Human Destiny and Resurrection in Pannenberg and Rahner* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 183.

<sup>6</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

legendary and in part tendentious features (Luke 24:39ff.).”<sup>10</sup> Thus, for reasons such as these, Pannenberg essentially “rules all of the New Testament conceptions of resurrection except Paul’s out of court from the beginning.”<sup>11</sup>

If Paul offers us the only reliable information that we have concerning the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, then what does he tell us about the nature of this event? According to Pannenberg, what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus was probably a vision of the resurrected Lord, who appeared to him from heaven.<sup>12</sup> What’s more, since the other apostles seem to have accepted Paul’s experience as similar to their own, it is likely that the appearances which they experienced were also visionary in nature.<sup>13</sup>

It’s important to point out that when Pannenberg speaks of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples as “visionary,” he does not in any way mean to imply that they were therefore purely subjective or hallucinatory. He writes, “If by ‘vision’ one understands a psychological event that is without a corresponding extrasubjective reality, then one can certainly not presuppose such a ‘subjective’ concept of vision for the resurrection appearances as self-evident.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Pannenberg explicitly objects to what he terms “the subjective vision hypothesis” on the grounds that it cannot adequately account for either “the number of the appearances” or “their temporal distribution.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, Jesus didn’t just appear to a single individual on one occasion. Rather, as William Lane Craig observes, he appeared to many

---

<sup>10</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 353-54.

<sup>11</sup> Bridges, *Human Destiny and Resurrection in Pannenberg and Rahner*, 183. See also Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 141.

<sup>12</sup> Pannenberg qualifies this a bit by noting that “the accounts in Acts are usable only insofar as they are in agreement with Paul’s own statements in Gal. 1:12 and 16 f.” See Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 92.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, “History and the Reality of the Resurrection,” in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 1996), 67.

<sup>14</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-7.

individuals, as well as groups, on multiple occasions, and over an extended period of time.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Pannenberg also accepts the historicity of the empty tomb.<sup>17</sup> This is important because, while the subjective vision hypothesis can offer a *possible* explanation of the appearances of Jesus, it does not even begin to address the issue of the empty tomb. For all of these reasons, then, Pannenberg rejects the subjective vision hypothesis as unsatisfactory. The visionary appearances of Jesus to his disciples were not merely subjective events like hallucinations. Instead, there was a kind of objectivity about the nature of these appearances because they originated, not in the minds of the disciples, but in the will and action of the resurrected Lord himself. In light of this distinction, some scholars refer to Pannenberg's view (and others like it) as "the objective vision hypothesis."<sup>18</sup>

So how might we summarize Pannenberg's views regarding Jesus' post-mortem appearances? Pannenberg himself offers the following answer:

Because the life of the resurrected Lord involves the reality of a new creation, the resurrected Lord is in fact not perceptible as one object among others in this world; therefore, he could only be experienced and designated by an extraordinary mode of experience, the vision, and only in metaphorical language. In this way, however, he made himself known in the midst of our reality at a very definite time, in a limited number of events, and to men who are particularly designated. Consequently, these events are to be affirmed or denied also as historical events, as occurrences that actually happened at a definite time in the past.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 82-4.

<sup>17</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 105-06. See also Pannenberg, "History and the Reality of the Resurrection," 69-70.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 83. See also Stephen T. Davis, "'Seeing' the Risen Jesus," in *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 127. Davis describes the distinction between an objective vision and a subjective vision this way: "an objective vision is a situation where God intentionally and perhaps telepathically grants Jones a vision of something despite the fact that the thing visualized is not objectively there in external reality, and a subjective vision is a situation where Smith's vision of something is in some sense self-induced."

<sup>19</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 99.

*The Nature of Jesus' Resurrection Body*

If the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are to be thought of as “objective visions,” then what are we to think about the *nature* of Jesus’ resurrection body? Pannenberg speaks about Jesus’ resurrection “body” in two distinct ways. On the one hand, he speaks of Jesus as “this individual in distinction from all others” being raised from the dead.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, he also speaks of Jesus’ resurrection body in terms of the church.<sup>21</sup> Although these are two distinct conceptions of the resurrection body of Jesus, they are intimately related in Pannenberg’s thinking as the following remark makes clear:

If Jesus gave his life for the salvation of the world, the new life of the risen Lord, even as bodily life, cannot have a form of existence that separates it from others. If the resurrection appearances in the Gospel traditions involve only individual corporeality for the risen Lord, they betray a one-sidedness that needs correction by the Pauline concept of the church as the body of Christ. We must also say conversely, however, that the reality of the risen Lord involves more than the existence of the church.<sup>22</sup>

Pannenberg makes use of the Pauline terminology of “spiritual body” (i.e.  $\pi$  \_\_\_\_\_, 1 Cor 15:44) to describe the nature of Jesus’ resurrection body. In his view, “the resurrection of Jesus . . . was not a return to earthly life. It was a transition to the new eschatological life.”<sup>23</sup> This is a life “permeated by the Spirit, and hence immortal.”<sup>24</sup> If we want to gain a clearer understanding of Pannenberg’s view of the nature of the resurrection body, we must now take a closer look at his interpretation of the relevant data in Paul’s writings.

*Paul's Discussion of the Resurrection Body*

In Pannenberg’s view, Paul speaks about the resurrection of the body in two different senses. On the one hand, he often speaks of how “our present earthly life will be ‘transformed’

---

<sup>20</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:628.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 628-30. See also Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 142.

<sup>22</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:629.

<sup>23</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:348.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

into the new imperishable life that has become manifest first in Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor 15:52).<sup>25</sup> Understood in this sense, there is some sort of *continuity* between the life we have now and the life we shall have in the resurrection. On the other hand, Pannenberg also finds in Paul the idea that our present body will be “replaced” with a completely new body. He finds this idea, for example, in 2 Corinthians 5, “where the reader is told that when this earthly tent—an image for the human body—will be destroyed, another eternal home is waiting for us in heaven (5:1 ff.).”<sup>26</sup> Understood in this second sense, there appears to be *discontinuity* between the body we now possess and the one we shall have in the resurrection.

Although Pannenberg seems primarily to lean toward the notion that Christians will experience the second (i.e. replacement) option in regard to their own resurrection from the dead,<sup>27</sup> he nonetheless sees this view as problematic when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus. Given the strong historical evidence supporting the empty tomb, the resurrection of Jesus “has to be understood in terms of transformation of the old life into the new rather than in terms of replacing the perishable body by another one.”<sup>28</sup> In the case of Christians, however, Pannenberg thinks that our resurrection life “will be something entirely new.”<sup>29</sup> He thus sees a “lack of analogy at this point between the content of the Christian hope and the resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>30</sup> In

---

<sup>25</sup> Pannenberg, “History and the Reality of the Resurrection,” 67.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>27</sup> I will develop this more in what follows. For now, however, I do need to note that Pannenberg does still speak of “transformation” in regard to the destiny of believers, but it is “transformation” of a much different sort than what Jesus experienced as the following remarks make clear: “In the case of the Christians whose bodies decayed in their graves and whose earthly lives are preserved only in the eternal memory of God, the issue is different. There, the transformation occurs through participation of whatever is remembered of our earthly lives in the life of God’s eternal life, and when a new life of their own is given to them, it will be something entirely new. Hence in any event there is a lack of analogy at this point between the content of the Christian hope and the resurrection of Jesus.” See Ibid., 71.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

spite of this, however, he still believes that our hope “is to share in the new life that became first manifest in Jesus’ resurrection.”<sup>31</sup>

So how does Pannenberg bring all of these disparate elements together in order to craft a doctrine regarding the nature of the resurrection body? Although it’s extremely difficult to understand precisely what Pannenberg has in mind, he seems ultimately to conceive of only *one* resurrection body, namely, the body of Christ, in which all individual believers will participate as members. Consider the following, rather lengthy, citation:

[If] we take what Paul says about the church as the body of Christ just as it stands, it follows that we must understand the new life of the resurrection, the life of the risen Christ, as a removal of the individual autonomy and separation that are part of the corporeality of earthly life, though with no simple erasure of individual particularity. . . . The distinction between head and body preserves the individual distinction of Jesus from his people notwithstanding his unity with them in the fellowship of his body. Similarly we must say of the resurrection of believers that their individuality will not disappear even though their separation from each other in their earthly existence is one of the things that will be profoundly changed by the eschatological transformation of this mortal life into the new corporeality of the resurrection from the dead. Individuals become members of *one* body when they no longer have to assert themselves against one another, but mutually accept one another for what they are in their individuality. . . .<sup>32</sup>

When Pannenberg mentions “the new corporeality of the resurrection from the dead,” he seems to be referring to what he takes to be Paul’s conception of the “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). He writes, “In one place Paul deals expressly with the question about the corporeality of those who are raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:35-36). It is self-evident for him that the future body will be a different one from the present body . . . not a fleshly body equipped with a soul but a spiritual body (vs. 43f.).”<sup>33</sup> If my interpretation of Pannenberg is correct, he seems to conceive of this one spiritual body, the body of Christ, in which all resurrected believers will participate, as a purely *spiritual* (as opposed to *physical*) reality. In a footnote to his remarks cited above he notes that “because of the eschatological significance of the idea of spirit, the

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>32</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3:628-29.

<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*, 75.



*pneuma* designates the resurrection reality as such, and thus a spiritual body would be a body corresponding to the reality of the resurrection.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Pannenberg seems to conceive of the resurrection body as a spiritual reality in which all believers, while maintaining their individual identities, are nonetheless united into one “spiritual body,” which is none other than the eschatological body of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

## **The Nature of the Resurrection Body: A Critique of Pannenberg’s Position**

### *The Issue of Metaphorical Language*

We can begin by noting our general agreement with Pannenberg’s position concerning the Bible’s use of metaphorical language to communicate truths about the eschatological resurrection of the dead. Pannenberg is correct in saying that the early church (and Paul in particular) did not conceive of resurrection as the revivification of a corpse. Although some of the Rabbis of that day may have held “that the body to be raised would be identical with the body that died,” the New Testament clearly rejects such a view.<sup>36</sup>

For example, the Gospel writers describe the risen Jesus as appearing to the disciples in a locked room (John 20:26) or suddenly vanishing after the breaking of bread (Luke 24:31). Clearly, we are not dealing simply with a revived corpse here! Moreover, when Paul comes to discuss the nature of the resurrection body he compares it to a plant which grows up from the seed which was planted (1 Cor 15:37-38). Peter Lampe comments on this passage, “For Paul, the postresurrection body will transcend the earthly body in the same way that a beautiful, intricate

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>35</sup> Gunter Thomas seems to interpret Pannenberg in the same way. He writes, “Pannenberg calls into question any notion of an individual eschatological body.” And a bit later, “Almost any concept of a bodily resurrection is removed. Not only temporality with an open future but also any kind of physicality, that is to say, any natural dimension to life, is left out of this bodiless existence. A bodiless identity seems to be at the center of interest.” See Gunter Thomas, “Resurrection to New Life: Pneumatological Implications of the Eschatological Transition,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 260-61.

<sup>36</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 223.

plant transcends the plain seed of grain from which it grows.”<sup>37</sup> So we can certainly agree that the Bible uses metaphorical language to describe the eschatological resurrection of the dead and that it doesn’t naively conceive of this event as the mere resuscitation of a corpse.

Indeed, the Christian philosopher Stephen Davis humorously observes that what he finds puzzling (as something of an outsider to this discussion) is *not* that theologians should claim that Jesus’ resurrection was not a resuscitation, but that they should sometimes feel the need to argue for it with such vehemence. “One almost gets the impression,” he says, “that there are defenders of resuscitation hiding behind every tree, and that everything depends on their being refuted.”<sup>38</sup> He goes on to say that perhaps “some unlettered Christian folk, if asked what they believe about resurrection, would come up with an inchoate version of resuscitation, but I am aware of no scholars who defend such a view.”<sup>39</sup>

#### *The Nature of Jesus’ Resurrection Body*

Here we encounter more substantial disagreements with Pannenberg’s position. In the first place, while I would agree with Pannenberg regarding both the early date and the significance of the appearance tradition which Paul hands on to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:3-8), it is far from obvious that the Gospel accounts of the appearances should be looked upon as historically unreliable and legendary in character. Indeed, very compelling arguments can be advanced for treating the Gospels as fundamentally historically reliable accounts of the life, ministry, death, *and* resurrection of Jesus.<sup>40</sup>

This is important. If the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances are basically historically reliable, then it becomes extremely difficult to argue (as Pannenberg does)

---

<sup>37</sup> Peter Lampe, “Paul’s Concept of a Spiritual Body,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 2002), 107.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, “‘Seeing’ the Risen Jesus,” 132-33.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987).

for the visionary nature of the appearances. According to the Gospels, *all* of the appearances of Jesus were physical, bodily appearances. In this regard, William Lane Craig, in a masterful survey of the evidence, writes:

All the separate traditions agree that Jesus appeared physically and bodily alive to the various witnesses. There is no trace of nonphysical visions in the traditions, a remarkable fact if *all* the appearances were really visionary. It seems incredible to think that a series of heavenly visions could become so thoroughly corrupted or recast as to produce a uniform tradition of physical appearances. . . . Incredible as it may seem, the evidence for the physical, bodily appearances of Christ after his death is quite strong and cannot, it seems, be plausibly rejected on historical grounds.<sup>41</sup>

But not only do we have good grounds to accept the historical reliability of the Gospel appearance stories, we also have good reasons for believing that the appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus was not *merely* visionary in character. Granted, the appearance to Paul was different from the appearance stories in the Gospels, but that doesn't mean it was *only* a vision. As it's narrated in the book of Acts, the appearance was accompanied by extra-mental phenomena that were experienced not only by Paul, but by his traveling companions as well (Acts 9:7; 22:9; 26:13-14).<sup>42</sup> Because of these extra-mental accompaniments, the appearance to Paul "cannot be properly conceived of as a simple vision."<sup>43</sup>

In light of the reasons offered above, therefore, it seems to me that we really have no compelling reason to follow Pannenberg in his rejection of the physical, bodily appearances of Christ to his disciples. On the contrary, it seems that the evidence points persuasively in the direction of accepting these appearances as historically trustworthy and relatively straightforward

---

<sup>41</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 396-97.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 393. Of course, Acts 1:3 indicates that Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days prior to his ascension. This could be one of the reasons why the appearance to Paul is different from the appearances recorded in the Gospels—it is a post-ascension appearance. According to Davis, the Church has traditionally understood Luke's words to mean that "after the ascension, there were no more resurrection appearances of the paradigmatic sort." Thus, the appearance of Jesus to Paul was "in at least some important sense different from the earlier ones to Mary Magdalene and the others." See Davis, "'Seeing' the Risen Jesus," 138. Regardless of the differences, however, the main point still stands: the appearance to Paul was not *merely* visionary in nature because it was accompanied by the extra-mental phenomena experienced not only by Paul, but also by his companions.

accounts. If this is correct, then the resurrection body of our Lord, while *qualitatively* different from the body that was buried, should nonetheless still be regarded as in some sense a physical body. But doesn't Paul's discussion of the nature of the resurrection body cast doubt on this conclusion? It is to this final issue that we must now turn our attention.

*Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection Body*

As we noted previously, Pannenberg contends that Paul speaks about the future resurrection body in terms of both "replacement" (for believers) and "transformation" (in the case of Jesus).<sup>44</sup> Although he thinks that both ideas can be found in Paul's writings, he is somewhat forced into this position by the evidence for the empty tomb of Jesus.<sup>45</sup> The fact that Jesus' tomb was empty makes it difficult to argue that his resurrection body was something completely new and unrelated to the body that was buried. Rather, as Pannenberg observes, the empty tomb should incline us to view Jesus' resurrection body in terms of a transformed, spiritual body.<sup>46</sup> In spite of this admission, however, he is still inclined to view the believer's resurrection body as a "replacement" of the body that was buried. In support of this view, he cites Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (v. 1). Pannenberg interprets this to mean that when our present earthly body is destroyed, we have a different, unrelated, spiritual body, waiting for us in heaven.<sup>47</sup> But how convincing is this interpretation?

There are a number of persuasive reasons for rejecting the notion of "replacement" and interpreting Paul's doctrine of the resurrection body solely in terms of "transformation." In

---

<sup>44</sup> For the details of this discussion, see Pannenberg, "History and the Reality of the Resurrection," 67-71. Please also see footnote 25 where I qualify this statement just a bit to take into account the subtle nuances of Pannenberg's discussion.

<sup>45</sup> From the tenor of his discussion, it appears that Pannenberg would *prefer* the evidence to simply favor "replacement".

<sup>46</sup> Pannenberg, "History and the Reality of the Resurrection," 67-71.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

the first place, it is helpful to remember that Paul was a Pharisee—and the Pharisees adhered to a doctrine of physical, grave-emptying, resurrection from the dead. According to Craig, when it comes to his discussion about the resurrection, “Paul’s language is thoroughly Pharisaic, and it is unlikely that he should employ the same terminology with an entirely different meaning.”<sup>48</sup>

Second, both Jewish pseudepigraphical literature (e.g. 1 Enoch 51:1), as well as the Hebrew Bible itself, clearly imply the resurrection of the dead from their graves. As we read in Daniel 12:2, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” Along with his Pharisaism, this literature provides the religious context in which the apostle would likely have understood the doctrine of the resurrection.

Third, as Pannenberg himself realizes, Paul teaches that Christ’s resurrection body provides the model for our own.<sup>49</sup> Paul describes Jesus’ resurrection as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). And elsewhere he says that Christ, “by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will *transform* our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21).

Fourth, Paul’s imagery of the seed and the plant in 1 Corinthians 15 makes it clear that the apostle was thinking of resurrection in terms of transformation. He writes, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:42-44). Notice that, according to Paul, it is the *same* body that is sown that is subsequently raised and transformed.<sup>50</sup>

But what about Paul’s reference to a “spiritual body”? Doesn’t this lend some support to Pannenberg’s “replacement” hypothesis? Wouldn’t this be a body completely different from

---

<sup>48</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 145.

<sup>49</sup> Pannenberg, “History and the Reality of the Resurrection,” 67-8.

<sup>50</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 143-44.

the body that is buried, a *spiritual* (as opposed to *physical*) body? Here we must examine the apostle's terminology a little more closely.

In 1 Corinthians 15:44, Paul is contrasting the “natural body” (i.e. \_\_\_\_\_) with the “spiritual body” (i.e. \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_). The Greek term \_\_\_\_\_ is a term which can mean “soul,” “self,” or “life”. The term π \_\_\_\_\_, of course, is usually translated “spirit”. Now immediately we can see that there's a translational problem here. When Paul uses the terminology of \_\_\_\_\_, he “clearly does not mean a body made out of \_\_\_\_\_.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Paul is not even speaking about the *composition* of these bodies; he's speaking about their *orientation*.<sup>52</sup> This becomes clear when one considers his earlier use of these same terms in 1 Corinthians 2:14-15. There he contrasts “the man without the Spirit,” who does not accept the things of God, with the “spiritual man,” who judges all things. The phrase translated, “man without the Spirit,” comes from \_\_\_\_\_ π \_\_\_\_\_, while the term “spiritual” is, of course, from π \_\_\_\_\_. This passage makes it clear that Paul is not using these terms to tell us about the *composition* of these men, he's using them to speak of their *orientation*. Thus, as Craig rightly observes, the contrast in 1 Corinthians 15:44 “is not between physical body/non-physical body, but between naturally oriented body/spiritually oriented body.”<sup>53</sup> And Thiselton declares, “Neither a purely ‘nonphysical’ nor merely ‘bodily’ (in any quasi-physical sense) explanation offers an adequate account of 15:44. To express it in crude terms, *the totality of the mode of life of the resurrection existence in the Holy Spirit is more than physical but not less.*”<sup>54</sup>

With this discussion clearly before us, we are now ready to drive the final nail into Pannenberg's “replacement” hypothesis. The evidence cited on behalf of this view, from 2 Corinthians 5, does not actually teach the “replacement” position. To cite Craig again:

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. See also Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1275-81.

<sup>53</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 135.

<sup>54</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1277.

The idea that our house or body exists already in heaven may be seen to be untenable by reflecting upon the fact that the resurrection body is a  $\pi$ . The notion of an unanimated  $\pi$ , stored up in the closets of heaven until the Parousia, is a contradiction in terms, since  $\pi$  is the essence and source of life itself.<sup>55</sup>

In light of this, it does not seem that we have good reason to follow Pannenberg in believing *either* that our resurrection bodies will completely “replace” our current bodies, *or* that our resurrection life will be completely spiritual (in the sense of *non-physical*). Granted, the church’s eschatological existence will certainly be characterized by a spiritual oneness both with Christ and with each other (John 17:20-23), but this is very different from the kind of “oneness” Pannenberg seems to envision. In particular, it is not in any way opposed to the consistent teaching of the New Testament that we will be raised in individual, transformed bodies, to enjoy fellowship with God and one another in the new heavens and new earth.

### Conclusion

This paper has offered an analysis and critique of Pannenberg’s perspective on the nature of the resurrection body. If my analysis is correct, Pannenberg appears to hold that all believers will maintain their individual identities as members of the *one* spiritual (as opposed to physical) body of Christ. In other words, Pannenberg seems to deny an individual, physical, bodily resurrection of believers into a new heavens and new earth. I have argued that, on the contrary, this is precisely what the New Testament seems to affirm. Just as Christ was raised from the dead with a powerful, glorious, transformed body fit for the eschatological kingdom of God, so also (we are told) he “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). In contrast to Pannenberg’s portrayal of the resurrection life as a timeless, bodiless, *end* to human existence,<sup>56</sup> the hope we are offered in the New Testament appears rich, dynamic, eventful and colorful. It is, I think, a hope truly worth *anticipating*.

---

<sup>55</sup> Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence*, 151.

<sup>56</sup> See Thomas, “Resurrection to New Life,” 261.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barrett, C. K. *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Harper's New Testament Commentaries. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Blomberg, Craig. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987.
- Bridges, James T. *Human Destiny and Resurrection in Pannenberg and Rahner*. New York: Peter Lang, 1987.
- Bruce, F. F. *1 and 2 Corinthians*. New Century Bible. London: Oliphants, 1971.
- Craig, William Lane. *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.
- Davis, Stephen T. *Risen Indeed : Making Sense of the Resurrection*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993.
- Davis, Stephen T. "'Seeing' the Risen Jesus." In *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, 126-47. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Grosheide, F. W. *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1953.
- Lampe, Peter. "Paul's Concept of a Spiritual Body." In *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker, 103-14. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 2002.
- Morris, Leon. *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958.
- Neie, Herbert. *The Doctrine of the Atonement in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*. New York: De Gruyter, 1979.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *The Apostles' Creed in the Light of Today's Questions*. Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1972.



- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Jesus: God and Man*. Translated by Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Systematic Theology*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. "History and the Reality of the Resurrection." In *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D'Costa, 62-72. Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 1996.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Systematic Theology*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Schep, J. A. *The Nature of the Resurrection Body : A Study of the Biblical Data*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1964.
- Tenney, Merrill C. *The Reality of the Resurrection*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Thomas, Gunter. "Resurrection to New Life: Pneumatological Implications of the Eschatological Transition." In *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker, 255-76. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.