


2004

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Recommended Citation

Case, Jonathan P. (2004) "The Death of Jesus and the Truth of the Triune God in Wolfhart Pannenberg and Eberhard Juengel," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 9 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol9/iss2004/1>

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The Death of Jesus and the Truth of the Triune God in Wolfhart Pannenberg and Eberhard Jüngel

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Over several years of reading—and rereading—Wolfhart Pannenberg and Eberhard Jüngel, I have come to be exercised over the questions of how the death of Jesus is said to determine the life of God, and how this determinative death relates to the conceptions of truth with which Pannenberg and Jüngel operate. In this paper I attempt to demonstrate how, in both Pannenberg’s and Jüngel’s theology, the death of Jesus, when understood in a Trinitarian context, instantiates in the life of God the critical moment peculiar to the logic of their respective conceptions of truth. The cogency of this thesis is somewhat surprising, given the fact that Pannenberg and Jüngel develop their understandings of truth differently, the triune relations differently, and Jesus’ death in relation to the resurrection differently.

I.

In his concern for the truth of Christian doctrine, Pannenberg seeks to avoid the temptations of both authoritarianism and subjectivism, recurring -isms, which, in his view, divest Christian claims of their right to claim to be true. His concern for truth in the systematic task emerges from the crucible of the ongoing scientific and philosophical discussions on the nature of truth. In order to appreciate what Pannenberg does on the systematic level it is necessary that I sketch a few relevant features of his notion of truth as it has developed from his reading of these discussions.

Philosophically speaking, Pannenberg’s understanding of truth could be compared to a regulative principle located at the “end” of a continuing process of trial and error.¹ Scientific assertions by their very nature are hypothetical; their truth is open to debate and eventual confirmation or disconfirmation. This western, scientific understanding of truth must be seen in its indebtedness to the Judeo-Christian heritage on at least two counts: (1) The notion of truth as that which shows itself to be reliable over the course of time has its roots in the Hebrew *emeth*.² (2) The modern scientific enterprise of projecting hypotheses which are then tested is

¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, trans. Frances McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 42ff. Hereafter *TPS*. German: *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, “What is Truth?” in *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 2, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) 3–4.

predicated upon the dominant position of the human being in understanding the cognitive process, a position of creativity said to be grounded historically in the Christian anthropological understanding of *imago Dei*.³

Claims to truth thus still open to dispute have the character of “anticipations.”⁴ This does not, in Pannenberg’s view, amount to saying that there can be no serious, present claims to truth. Assertions that have been regularly confirmed can be judged to be “true,” with the provision that their truth status does not preclude the possibility of future debatability, revision or falsification.⁵ Pannenberg’s concern is finally more for the articulation and shifts of hypothetical models or paradigms which account for the totality of our experience of the world—somewhat along the lines of T. Kuhn—than on individual hypotheses.⁶

This emphasis on wholeness or totality bodes well for religious claims about God, according to Pannenberg. His comprehensive (and controversial) description of God in *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* is “the all-determining reality” (*die alles bestimmenden Wirklichkeit*).⁷ Implicitly, one might say, this reality is presupposed in all endeavors—scientific or historical—to explain and/or understand an event or statement in a comprehensive context of meaning.⁸ Explicit, religious claims about the truth of this reality, however, obviously cannot go directly to their object for verification. Instead, Pannenberg says, the “indirect approach” suggests itself⁹ where we must ask how well a particular religious tradition’s claims about God provide illumination for, and integration of, its adherents’ experience of the world.¹⁰

The theological upshot of this discussion can be seen in Pannenberg’s insistence that Christian theology be given a foundation in a general theology of religions,¹¹ and further, that dogmatic statements themselves be regarded as hypotheses, whose truth must be regarded as provisional until the eschaton.¹² Theology has to treat the claim to divine truth in the Christian

³ Ibid, 14–15.

⁴ Pannenberg, *TPS*, 70.

⁵ We should resist at this point the temptation to an easy isomorphism between critical rationalism and Pannenberg’s position, due, at least in part, to the tenuous procedure of isolating and falsifying individual hypotheses.

⁶ Ibid, 56ff; 335ff.

⁷ Ibid, 332.

⁸ Ibid, 55, 195–96, 223–24, 302.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 333–34; cf. also Pannenberg, “Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990) 103.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *TPS*, 416–17; cf. also Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) xii, 119ff, 196f. Hereafter *ST* 1. German: *Systematische Theologie*, Band 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988).

¹² Pannenberg, *TPS*, 417–18; Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 56–61, 442.

doctrinal tradition as an open question.¹³ Consequently, the truth of Christian doctrine functions for Pannenberg as the theme, not the presupposition, of systematics.¹⁴

At this point two possible misperceptions should be addressed. First, one might gain the impression that, in the terms of common “truth-models,” that Pannenberg has qualified the correspondence theory to death, so to speak, and is left to operate with either a “coherence” or “consensus” model, or some combination of the two. Yet Pannenberg retains a strong commitment to the notion of correspondence as basic to the epistemological aspect of the concept of truth.¹⁵ However, we should note that in Pannenberg’s concern for the unity of truth he has emphasized the ontological status of coherence, with the implication that “[c]oherence in the things themselves, not in judgments about them, is constitutive for the truth of our judgments.”¹⁶ The notion of correspondence between judgment and fact and the consensus of those judging would then be understood as derived elements in the concept of truth.

Second, the other and more serious misperception would be to regard this whole discussion of dogmatic hypotheses, debatability, confirmation, etc., as an example of trying to shrink the province of theology to fit truth-conditions stipulated by concerns inappropriate to the object of theology. Pannenberg would object to this, not only because our concern for the object of theology entails a commitment to the unity of truth, but also because the debatability of God’s reality—on which all dogmatic statements stand or fall¹⁷—is said to be grounded in Godself, since debatability is part of the world that Christian theology must present as God’s world.¹⁸

Pannenberg’s insistence that these conditions apply no less to knowledge of God on the basis of God’s revelation might strike us as strange, but this is exactly what he finds at stake in the biblical-apocalyptic idea of revelation as the proleptic self-disclosure of the truth of God’s deity.¹⁹ The fact that this idea of revelation makes the debatability of the reality of God explicit in its claim to God’s eschatological truth indicates such an idea’s capacity for truth.²⁰ This view of revelation informs the New Testament, and frames both the form and content of the Christian message, for, says Pannenberg, “the truth-claim which Jesus made brought him to the cross, and the apostolic gospel as the message of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is always the word of the cross.”²¹

The implications of this reading are that the death of Christ on the cross provides the quintessential (certainly the most dramatic) possibility or condition by which claims to the

¹³ Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 207ff.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 214.

²¹ *Ibid*, 214.

reality of God's deity can be regarded as having the capacity for truth. This implication must be understood within the framework of Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity,²² articulated via a strict adherence to what has come to be known as the "Pannenberg principle," the essence of which states that God's lordship is not external to the deity of God.²³

Where then is the appropriate starting-point for unfolding the doctrine of the Trinity? Pannenberg finds the roots of the doctrine in the relation of Jesus to the Father, as this relationship came to expression in the former's message of the rule of God.²⁴ The aim of Jesus' whole message, Pannenberg says, is that "the name of God should be hallowed by honoring his lordship."²⁵ The primary goal of Jesus is to establish this lordship, in order to give place to the Father's claim to deity. Precisely in distinguishing himself from the Father, Jesus is revealed to be the Son.²⁶ Only on the basis of Jesus' self-distinction from the Father does the former have any legitimate authority to claim that the reign of God is coming through him.²⁷ Only on this basis can the pre-Easter Jesus claim that all things are given to him by the Father (cf. Luke 20:22, Matt. 11:27). The Son, then, is understood, not merely as the representative of God's rule; rather "he [the Son] executes it [*ihm ist ihr Ausübung*]."²⁸ The Son is the holder [*Inhaber*] of lordship, even if this lordship consists in simply proclaiming the lordship of the Father. By handing over lordship to the Son, however, the Father makes his own deity dependent upon the Son; hence the Trinitarian relevance of the cross.²⁹

If we say that the lordship of God is dependent upon the destiny of Jesus, we cannot avoid the implication that in the crucifixion the deity of God is at stake, or, we might even say, the truth of his existence as the All-Determining Reality, and with that, the truth of the world insofar as it is grounded in this Reality. Christ's passion and death must not be regarded as though it did not affect the "eternal placidity" of God's triune life. Because the crucifixion places the importance of Jesus' person as the mediator of God's kingdom in question, it places the deity of his God and

²² Ibid, 259–336.

²³ Ibid, 313. Roger E. Olson so dubs this principle, in his "Wolfhart Pannenberg's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43,2 (1990) 175–206.

²⁴ For a concise summary of Pannenberg's doctrine of the Trinity in the context of twentieth century discussions of this doctrine, see Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: WJK, 1993) 135–42.

²⁵ Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 309.

²⁶ Ibid, 310.

²⁷ Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion on the Trinitarian Doctrine," *Asbury Theological Journal* 46 (Fall 91) 36, 41. Cf. Pannenberg, "A Theology of the Cross," *Word and World* 8 (Spring 1988) 167–68.

²⁸ Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 312.

²⁹ Ibid, 313–14.

Father in question also.³⁰ The truth-claim disputed on the cross is not something that could be decided without somehow affecting the divine reality at stake. To suggest that the truth of God as Lord is disputed via the death of the eternal correlate of the Father is to suggest nothing less than this: *the fundamental condition, or critical moment, of truth is moved into the very life of God.*³¹ Further, if, because the lordship of the Father was disputed on the cross, the deity of God was at stake, then the crucifixion in light of “Pannenberg’s principle” will affect whatever we might say later about the divine essence, its reciprocity of relations and unity. For this reason Pannenberg can say that an understanding of the crucifixion that depicts “the deity of the Father as affected and questioned by the death of the Son [implies] that in their intratrinitarian relations the persons depend on one another in respect of their deity as well as their personal being....”³²

If we press Pannenberg at this point and ask precisely how he understands Christ’s death to affect the Triune life, we receive a less than satisfactory response. Christ’s passion and death affected more than the human nature that the Logos assumed, yet Pannenberg will not speak of the death of God on the cross, and he also will not speak directly of even the death of God in the Son, for fear of what he calls a “reverse monophysitism.”³³ The following distinction emerges: it is permissible to say that “on the cross the Son of God certainly died and not just the humanity that he assumed. Nevertheless, the Son suffered death in his human reality and not in respect of his deity.”³⁴ Why is Pannenberg so cautious at this point? Because he wants to avoid confusing, even in the death of Jesus, the careful distinction Christ observed between himself and his heavenly Father.³⁵ But, if to be dogmatically correct we must say that the Son of God died according to his human nature,³⁶ we must also say that “Jesus was affected [*betroffen*] by the suffering and death on the cross in person, i.e., in the person of the eternal Son.”³⁷ In this event,

³⁰ Ibid. See also Pannenberg, “Der Gott der Geschichte: Der Trinitarische Gott und die Wahrheit der Geschichte,” in *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Band 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967) 123. Note that on this central point of the *Infragestellung* of God’s deity via the cross, Pannenberg has claimed support of sorts from both Moltmann and Jüngel. See Pannenberg’s “Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God,” *Dialog* 26,4 (1987) 252.

³¹ Note also that the “Pannenberg principle,” which hints here at the eternal relations and thus provides the link between economic and immanent trinity, does so in such a way that subordinationism is ruled out. Thus, Roger Olson correctly observes that “Rahner’s Rule” (which stipulates the identity of immanent and economic trinity) must be interpreted through “Pannenberg’s principle.” See “Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 199.

³² Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 329.

³³ Ibid, 314.

³⁴ Pannenberg, *ST* 2, 388.

³⁵ Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 82.

³⁶ Luther writes that although “God in his nature cannot die [yet]...now that God and man are united in one person, it is called God’s death when the man who dies is one substance or one person with God.” M. Luther, “On the Councils and the Church” (1539), *Luther’s Works*, ed. Pelikan and Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86) 41:104.

³⁷ Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 314.

in which Jesus accepts the final consequence of his self-distinction from the Father, Jesus reveals himself to be the Son of the Father. Pannenberg says further that we must not think of the Father as “unaffected” (*unberührt*) by the passion of the Son, for the Father’s deity is thrown into doubt by the event of the cross; so we may also speak of the Father’s sharing the Son’s suffering, “his [the Father’s] sym-path[y] [*Mit-Leiden*] with the passion.”³⁸

While the resurrection through the power of the Spirit provides a confirmation of Jesus’ claims and his message—and hence confirms the eternal relations—this confirmation of God’s deity continues to have an anticipatory status; the truth will be definitively manifested only at the eschaton.³⁹ Until then, the historical controversy surrounding the truth of God’s deity continues; with our truth claims regarding this God remaining “unavoidably debatable,” continually challenged by the march of events in our world.⁴⁰ Yet, in light of Pannenberg’s programmatic emphasis on the priority of the future and the principle of retroactivity, there is excluded any thought that the Trinity achieves its reality only at the end of the age. This end is only “the locus of the decision [*Ort der Entscheidung*] that the Trinitarian God is always the true God from eternity to eternity.”⁴¹ Whether this retroactive angle then mitigates the force of Pannenberg’s emphasis on genuine debatability is another question, I suppose. With this principle in mind, it may seem to some that the truth of God’s deity is a pretty safe bet.

II.

Jüngel’s world of thought is oriented in a dramatically different way than Pannenberg’s. John Webster has termed it “heavily prescriptive,”⁴² but I think this description carries too many

³⁸ Ibid. Along similar lines Moltmann writes that while the Son suffers and dies on the cross, the Father suffers also with him, “but not in the same way.” *The Crucified God*, trans. R. W. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) 203. I am not so sure, however, that Pannenberg would have much use for Moltmann’s statement that God also suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son, even if we cannot say that the Father died (243). Pannenberg has also brought Jüngel into this discussion a couple of times in support of the idea that in the death of Jesus God “asserted” his deity in opposition to death, as can be read off the resurrection. As we shall see, the matter is considerably more complicated in Jüngel than the bare theological assertion of God’s assertion against death. See Pannenberg’s comments in “Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God,” 251, and in *ST* 1, 314. For Jüngel, God’s deity *happens in the event* of the death of Jesus.

³⁹ Pannenberg, *ST* 1, 442.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 331. This futurist position, which understands present appearance in the mode of futurity, i.e., as anticipation, is consistent with Pannenberg’s earliest work. See, for example, his “Erscheinung als Ankunft des Zukünftigen,” *Studia Philosophica* (Basel) 26 (1966) 192–207.

⁴² John Webster, “Jesus’ speech, God’s word: An introduction to Eberhard Jüngel,” *Christian Century* 112,35 (Dec. 6, 1995) 1174. See also Webster’s fine introduction, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology* (New York: Cambridge, 1986).

negative connotations. A more charitable description may be possible if we keep in mind Jüngel's single-mindedness in attempting to "think God" primarily and consistently from God's self-identification with the Crucified. Jüngel himself has described the contrast between his way of thinking and Pannenberg's by stating that the latter attempts to think God *remoto deo*, while he (Jüngel) pursues a path "from the inside toward the outside," that is, from the definitive event of God's self-disclosure to the demonstration of the Christian truth's universal validity "on the basis of its inner power."⁴³

Unlike Pannenberg, Jüngel's concern for the notion of truth does not proceed from engagement with the wider scientific community. Heavily influenced by Heidegger, Jüngel does not make much of the difference between "Greek" and "Hebrew" understandings of truth⁴⁴ (as Pannenberg does), and relies more initially on what might be called a phenomenology of the truth-experience. This descriptive enterprise foreshadows one of Jüngel's basic concerns that we will trace through some of his other reflections and formulations dealing with truth, namely, his concern to understand how truth bears upon human life. He does this in a way that has a more pronounced existential emphasis than in Pannenberg.

According to the classical definition of truth as correspondence, the correspondence between knowledge and object is possible only on the presupposition that there exists in the object of knowledge a correspondence with itself. However, Jüngel says, when we consider our experience as knowing subjects, we recognize that our immediate self-correspondence or continuity must be interrupted if we are to know at all. Thus Jüngel's anthropological axiom: "to be human is precisely *not to be in immediate correspondence* with oneself."⁴⁵ Although the most dramatic experience of the interruption of our life's continuity may occur through the death of a loved one, death is always involved whenever this continuity is interrupted—by implication then, "all our knowing contains an experience of death."⁴⁶ Even though this interruption brings discovery and ultimately an enhancing of our lives, our shared problem as humans, we might say, is that we try to make our self-correspondence so secure that we are incapable of interruption. The result is that the occurrence of truth is suppressed or restricted to particular spheres in which its occurrence does not seem so threatening.⁴⁷

⁴³ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), viii. Hereafter *GMW*. German: *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1982).

⁴⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, "The Truth of Life: Observations on Truth as the Interruption of the Continuity of Life," in *Creation, Christ and Culture. Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. R. W. A. Mackinney (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976) 232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, emphasis original.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 233.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 234. Cf. *GMW*, 181–82.

The above analysis is helpful for understanding Jüngel insofar as some fundamental terms in the truth discussion and their relationships are sketched out. He does not, however, finally rest content with the received notion of correspondence. This section began by recognizing Jüngel's radical theological orientation on God's self-identification with the crucified Jesus. Through his critical and sustained concentration on this event, Jüngel has attempted to demonstrate that "a thinking which accords with the existence of God"⁴⁸ witnesses a breakthrough of the conceptual conditions or limits that surround the received notion of truth as correspondence. This breakthrough, we shall see, engenders a fresh understanding of that truth manifest in the gospel (understood as the story of God's being in becoming), an understanding that bears not only upon the peculiarity of this event but also, in keeping with Jüngel's existential concern, affects human living.

The genesis of these ideas can be found in Jüngel's insistence on the priority of revelation, the character of which emerges from a robust doctrine of the Word of God. "[O]nly the speaking God himself can say what the word 'God' should provide us to think about."⁴⁹ The "Word which precedes thought," Jüngel says, is the "place" where God can be legitimately conceived, for God *has* spoken definitively in Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ In making such a claim Jüngel confesses that the event of faith is the necessary precondition for such thought—it is always the "thought of faith."⁵¹ To genuinely restrict our thinking to the event announced in this word, however, entails a dramatic departure at the outset from any notion of an abstract philosophical *ens perfectissimum*. It involves, rather (to use Jüngel's terms), a type of thinking which has the character of a reflective "following," as it is "taken along" on the "path" God has chosen in the event of God's self-disclosure.⁵² This is Jüngel's stylized way of characterizing a type of thinking that attempts "to conform [*entsprechen*] to God with the capacity of human reason."⁵³ In advocating this mode of thinking, Jüngel is far less sanguine than Pannenberg about the prominence of the Cartesian *cogito* and the dominance of the human subject in the rise of modern epistemology, in which the search for truth becomes a means of securing the self.⁵⁴

This thinking which "follows" holds to the identity of God's being in God's coming to the world in the man Jesus. That God has chosen this path means, however, that our attempt to think God must proceed on the basis of God's unity with perishability (*Vergänglichkeit*)⁵⁵—a consideration that Jüngel flings in the face of the metaphysical tradition. At stake in this unity is nothing less than a redefinition of the being of God. If there is to be as much substance as style

⁴⁸ Jüngel, *GMW*, 153.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 150, 152ff.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 159–60, 166–68.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 108–26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 184ff.

in these remarks, however, we must attempt to seriously think through what it can mean to thus implicate the being of God in the event of death. Is not such talk of something happening in *death*—what Jüngel describes as “non-event” (*ereignislos*)—sheer nonsense? Yet the resurrection says to us that something *did* happen in Jesus’ death. In the death of Christ, God involves himself with nothingness, but not so as to destroy it. Rather, Jüngel says, nothingness is taken up into God’s own history. By bearing and suffering “the annihilating power of nothingness, even the negation of death,” without being destroyed by it, God proves to be victorious over it, even to the point that nothingness, now taken up into God’s own being, has a new function creatively set for it.⁵⁶ Thus Jüngel wants to consider the difference between God and nothingness, as constituted by God, just as he wants to consider the difference between God and the Being of the metaphysicians.⁵⁷ This difference found is the event of differentiation in which God relates himself to nothingness through his identification with the dead Jesus. As it is taken up into the divine life, nothingness will now be understood in its *differentiating* function in God’s being between Father and Son. In a radical stroke, Jüngel says that although we commonly think of being dead as the opposite of an event, “what we are saying is that in this [Jesus’] death God himself was the event which happened.”⁵⁸ These are tantalizingly cryptic comments, but from what perspective can they be made conceptually clearer and their relationship to the biblical story made more explicit? Strangely enough, Jüngel would answer this question from the perspective of the *resurrection*.

The resurrection reveals that God has identified himself with Jesus’ experience of God-forsakenness and death. Identifying with another implies the capacity for self-differentiation, expressing the fact that another can define one’s own being from the outside of oneself; here we must say that God’s identification with the dead Jesus forces us to speak of a differentiation between God and God.⁵⁹ Not that this is forced upon God apart from God’s own motive of identifying himself with the Crucified—we must say that God *defines* himself in this act of identification.⁶⁰ In terms of this self-definition, the interruption of God’s being by the cross

⁵⁶ Jüngel, *GMW*, 219. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity refers to this process of becoming (in which God goes out into nothingness and returns to Godself as the “internal works” (*opera ad intra*) of God, but this is maintained on the basis of the outward works of the Trinity (*opera trinitatis ad extra*). *Ibid*, 224. Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, “Thesen zur Grundlegung der Christologie,” in *Unterwegs zur Sache: Theologische Bemerkungen* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1972), 293.

⁵⁷ Jüngel, *GMW*, 224.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 363. See also Jüngel’s discussion in *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery*, trans. Iain and Ute Nicol (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 108–14.

⁵⁹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 363.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 363–64. See Jüngel, “Vom Tod des lebendigen Gottes: Ein Plakat,” in *Unterwegs zur Sache: Theologische Bemerkungen* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1972), 116–20. “The essential act of death is essentially God’s own: admittedly not something alien which alienates God. *Nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse!* But so that God himself allows a negation [*Verneinung*] in himself, which creates in his being space for another being” (120). The “space” of which

would mean that God allows himself to be interrupted by the truth of our God-forsakenness. However, the fact that the resurrection overcomes this death, transforming it into the event of love,⁶¹ means that in the event of this death God has defined himself forever as God *for us*. The resurrection, in announcing God's victory over death, confirms that God, in the crucified Jesus, has allowed God's own inner life to be interrupted for us.⁶² The phenomenon of interruption, which brings the occurrence of truth in the experience of the human knower, has come to be instantiated in God's own being, through God's experience of humanity and death. This divine self-interruption on our behalf assures us that our encounter with God will not be deadly, as it would be if we were to be confronted by God's uninterrupted eternity.⁶³

This reflection on the theme of divine self-interruption has dramatic consequences for our theological reading of Jesus' death in the Gospels. If, as Jüngel has argued, the location for the humanity of God lies in the Word which corresponds to God's own self,⁶⁴ we are justified in reading implicit Trinitarian themes in those Gospel accounts. For example, in Jesus' death-cry we would recognize God's own voice as that language-event defining the humanity of God in such a way that enables us to discern, in this death, the event of God's differentiation.⁶⁵ We would then be, I think, on the way toward developing Walter Ong's stimulating suggestion, made over thirty years ago, of "an oral-aural theology of the Trinity, which could explicate the 'intersubjectivity' of the three Persons in terms of communication conceived as focused (analogously) in a world of sound rather than in a world of space and light,"⁶⁶ but in such a way that keeps the differentiation

Jüngel speaks in this particular passage is for those destined in Christ to live in God's being. See also Jüngel, "Das Sein Jesu Christi als Ereignis der Versöhnung Gottes mit einer gottlosen Welt: Die Hingabe des Gekreuzigten," in *Entsprechungen: Gott—Wahrheit—Mensch: Theologische Erörterungen* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1980) 277.

⁶¹ Jüngel, *GMW*, 364.

⁶² Jüngel, "Truth of Life," 235–36.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Jüngel, *GMW*, 300ff. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom is determinative of his humanity, and just so it becomes a fundamental theme for Christology: "One can say that Jesus' entire humanity was so unlimitedly molded by his proclamation of the kingdom of God that his humanity is virtually defined by it. His human life was a being in the act [*ein Sein in der Tat*] of the word of the kingdom of God, whose time he proclaimed as coming now" (353).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁶⁶ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967) 180. Ong makes the point that although there is a vast and rich literature on the Word in Christian tradition, there is a marked tendency to understand the Word in terms of knowledge-by-vision instead of sound. Trinitarian theologies of "relation" usually are visually based; "the communication of the Persons with one another is typically treated in terms of 'circumincessio,' a 'walking around in' (one another)...[which]...is patently a concept based on a visual analogy with strong tactile and kinesthetic components" (181). Robert W. Jenson has suggested, in a far more developed vein, that the discourse of the triune relations (or, better, the discourse which is the triune relations) be likened to a fugue. See the close of his *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 236.

of God's deity, which compels us to speak of such "intersubjectivity," rooted in the actual historical economy of our salvation (in particular in the passion and death of Jesus).

To this point, however, we have been speaking in rather abstract terms about divine "differentiation." When Jüngel uses the names of the relations taken from the biblical story, his description of what happens in the death and resurrection of Jesus runs roughly as follows⁶⁷: God the loving Father gives up his beloved Son, in the event of which he turns to all of us marked by death. In this separation the Father remains in relationship to the Son, who in turn relates to him. In this relation, in the midst of the separation, God is Spirit, who enables the Father and Son to be one yet differentiated in the death of Jesus, establishing the unity in such a way that we are drawn into the relationship, and who in the resurrection proves this unity of life and death to be for the sake of life. Thus God's identification with the Crucified is the mutual work of all three persons, or we could say that such identification requires the threefold differentiation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁶⁸ Only by way of this threefold differentiation, Jüngel says, can we truly understand what it means to say that God is love; this eternally new relationship between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit established by the resurrection is "the being of love itself."⁶⁹ That God is the event of love constitutes the most fundamental difference between God and humanity.⁷⁰

To return for a moment to some of his further disagreements with the metaphysical tradition, Jüngel says that God's unity with perishability in the Crucified heralds a profound shift in the usual order of such basic ontological categories as *actuality* and *possibility*, a shift relevant to the present discussion because of the dependence of the idea of truth upon such categories.⁷¹ The antithesis typically set against perishability (at least since Aristotle) is timeless imperishability (eternity), defined as pure *energeia* (actuality), purest act (*actus purissimus*) etc., devoid of further potentiality and possibility (*potentia et possibilitas*). The notion of possibility, connoting a deficiency in reality, has been relegated to the realm of the perishable—hence actuality's priority over possibility. On the basis of God's being in God's becoming, however, Christian theology is compelled to think God's unity with perishability, with the result that possibility is now seen as that which is ontologically positive about perishability.⁷² Indeed, Christian faith and the thinkability of God are indebted to the "primacy of the possible."⁷³

The classical definition of truth, however, is scarcely able to comprehend the "primacy of the possible" (the received concept of identity is indebted to the primacy of actuality). In Jüngel's

⁶⁷ See Jüngel, *GMW*, 328, 368.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 329.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 374.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 375.

⁷¹ Eberhard Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality. The Ontology of the Doctrine of Justification," in *Theological Essays*, trans. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989) 95–123.

⁷² Jüngel, *GMW*, 213ff.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 225.

view, the ontological shift represented here compels us to reconsider the character of that truth confronting us in the event of God's being in God's coming. God's unity with perishability in God's experience of humanity has a *history*; it must be told in language that structurally expresses time and history: *narrative*.⁷⁴ God's humanity, says Jüngel, is a story to be told. This recognition of the irreducibility of narrative for Christian theology has further led Jüngel to capitalize, for theological purposes, the semantic fecundity latent in *metaphor*,⁷⁵ for at least two reasons: 1) Metaphor is able to take account of the temporal character of narrative even while coalescing it. 2) Metaphor, by virtue of its ability to maintain the tension of similarity and difference, is able to bring new possibilities to language.⁷⁶ Hence metaphor is well suited to the peculiarity of *this* event and the "primacy of the possible." Given Jüngel's reflections on God as a "lingual" being, one might describe the Trinitarian God as a metaphorical event mediated through God's experience of humanity and the cross.

However, to speak (as Jüngel does), of metaphorical *truth* still implies a claim about a metaphor's "connection" or reference to reality, in a way that bears upon our being. To use Northrop Frye's helpful terms (but to disagree with him), the language of metaphor does not merely have "centripetal" force⁷⁷; its movement is also "centrifugal," so that *new possibilities for being* are opened or "flung out" into the world, as it were. Of course the effects of the centrifugal force of metaphorical truth can be felt foremost in Christian proclamation. The justification of the sinner is grounded in God's experience of humanity and is thus indebted to the primacy of possibility.⁷⁸ The word that speaks of God's self-interruption addresses *us* and interrupts *our* self-continuity.⁷⁹

While the rich texture of Jüngel's reflections is highly suggestive for Christian theology and proclamation, I think that in closing this treatment we should press the adequacy and clarity of Jüngel's focus on metaphorical *truth*, at least with respect to any referential claims implied here. I do not think that Jüngel would agree with the judgment that metaphor simply transforms the way we perceive the world. And yet it seems to me that if metaphor refers to genuine possibilities in the world, some sort of confirmation, and adjudication between good and bad possibilities, are tasks that still need to be addressed in detail.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 302.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 289–93. Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, "Metaphorical Truth," in *Theological Essays*, 16–71. Jüngel's analysis of narrative and metaphor relies heavily on the work of Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur's more fully developed reflections on narrative and metaphor, see *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1979); *Time and Narrative*. Vols. 1–3 (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985, 1988); *Oneself as Another* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁷⁶ Jüngel, *GMW*, 288–89.

⁷⁷ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957) 73ff. See Ricoeur's discussion of "Metaphor and Reference" in *The Rule of Metaphor*, 216–56.

⁷⁸ Jüngel, *GMW*, 291.

⁷⁹ Jüngel, "The Truth of Life," 235–36.

III.

In closing I will summarize the results of this paper and suggest how in other areas in Pannenberg and Jüngel this death exerts a decisive function. In Pannenberg, the death of the Son provides its determinative function by establishing, within public (i.e., intersubjective) and historical parameters, conditions for the possibility of legitimate theological truth claims. The truth of God's deity is publicly placed in question on the cross and anticipated in the resurrection, but decisively confirmed (or disconfirmed) only at the end of history. If we consider for further reflection other conceptual shockwaves sent out from this event in Pannenberg's theology, the death of the Son also functions to stimulate critical engagement with and appropriation of the metaphysical tradition, and to open engagement with competing religious truth claims. However, given Pannenberg's theological anthropology, the coordination of the death of the Son and the death of the human being remains somewhat unclear, one of the chief neuralgic points here being found perhaps in the doctrine of justification.

In Jüngel, the death of the Son is understood not only to instantiate in the being of God the phenomenon of interruption intrinsic to the truth experience, but is also understood as that event which reorients our conception of truth. Previous notions of truth are overcome in the word of the cross, in which God's unity with perishability manifests the ontological "plus" of possibility. To suggest further effects, given the sweep of Jüngel's theology, the metaphysical tradition is shown to be incapable of thinking God's identification with the Crucified, and so its use for theological reflection is drastically curtailed. And while the correspondence between the death of the Son and the death of the human being in the experience of truth is developed more carefully in Jüngel than in Pannenberg, implications for a theology of religions and public engagement with competing religious truth claims need to be explored further.