

Time, Meaning and the (Final) Future
A Critique of Wolfhart Pannenberg's Eschatology

"When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more"

The belief that God's purposes for creation and humanity in particular will ultimately reach fulfillment is important for any version of Christianity. Yet no aspect of Christian faith generates a greater diversity of opinion and leaves more questions unresolved than the doctrine of last things. Biblical accounts of the eschaton, the transition from this age to the age to come, contain dramatic descriptions of events such as the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the restoration of the earth, and a variety of interpretations surrounds each one. Indeed, none of the books of the Bible have attracted more imaginative interpretations than those most closely associated with eschatology, Daniel and Revelation. As G K Chesterton observed rather unkindly, "[T]hough St. John saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."

I don't think the variations among some well-known Christian thinkers rival these extremes, but they are notable nonetheless. In response to the question, *Does history need an end?* their answers vary from "not necessarily," to "naturally," to "absolutely!" I have in mind Rudolf Bultmann, Oscar Cullmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

Why history needs to end

In the Gifford Lectures of 1955 Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) provides an existentialist account of Christian eschatology. As he describes it, the idea of history as a process has its roots in the Bible, and early Christians believed this process would reach its climax in the imminent return of Christ. But when Christ failed to return as expected, Christians, in particular the apostle Paul, had to look for a new understanding of history's meaning. And they found it, not in the future, but in the past—not in the past exactly, but in the present significance of the past. According to the Gospel, history's decisive event has already happened.¹ Jesus Christ is the key to history's meaning; he is *the* eschatological event.

Christ becomes available to us—more accurately, Christ confronts us—in the preaching of the Gospel. God's word comes to us, says Bultmann, not as a universal truth, but in the form of address, which demands personal decision.² Such a response involves much more than intellectual assent, of course. To believe this word involves "readiness to submit one's whole life to its judgment and its grace," and "readiness always to hear it anew."³ The meaning of history, then, is realized in acts of momentary responsible decision. And as a result, traditional questions about the meaning of history are irrelevant, as are the traditional concerns of Christian eschatology.

¹ *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity*. The Gifford Lectures 1955 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), P. 43.

² Human freedom is "always realized in the freedom of historical decisions" (*History and Eschatology*, p. 152).

³ "How Does God Speak Through the Bible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, selected, translated, and introduced by Schubert M. Ogden (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 169.

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Since the totality of history is not accessible to us, we cannot answer the question of what history means as a whole. Nor can we determine what the future holds or how the world will end or what significance the overall span of human life in the universe may have. But such questions have no bearing on the meaning of Christian faith. From the perspective of faith, “the meaning of history lies always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realized.” To quote the last words of the lectures, “In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it.”⁴

Bultmann’s emphasis on the importance of exercising faith here and now, ever and again, is undeniably moving. Yet, important as it is for us respond to God personally, decisively, and repeatedly, many in the Christian world embrace the time-honored view that the overall course of history does have theological significance and will reach a culmination sometime in the future. As they see it, the Bible portrays a series of historical events as God’s progressive revelation to human beings. And while this sequence came to a climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it will reach its fulfillment with the future establishment of his kingdom. For them, God’s saving activity is not complete as yet. There is more to come. Even though the decisive events in human history have already taken place, the full effects of what Christ accomplished are yet to be realized.⁵

Another New Testament scholar, Oscar Cullmann (1902-1999), rejects Bultmann’s view that the message of the New Testament can be equated with a call to respond to the proclamation of the Gospel. It is wrong, he argues, to “contrast Christian existence and salvation history as opposites.”⁶ This ignores the important role that salvation history—*Heilsgeschichte*—plays in the New Testament. True, he grants, for the writers of the New Testament the “decisive turn of events has already occurred” in Christ, but the death and resurrection of Christ are better understood, not as the end of history, but as the “mid-point” of time, history’s decisive turning point. “It is not ‘a new time’ which is created after Christ,” says Cullmann, “but a new division of time.”⁷

To illustrate this concept, Cullmann appeals to a distinction between D-day and V-day. “The decisive battle in a war may already have occurred in a relatively early stage of the war, and yet the war still continues ... until ‘Victory Day.’” “Precisely this,” says Cullmann, “is the situation of which the New Testament is conscious,” namely, that “that event on the cross, together with

⁴ *History and Eschatology*, p. 155. “Every instant has the possibility of being an eschatological instant and in Christian faith this possibility is realized” (*History and Eschatology*, p. 154).

⁵ Oscar Cullmann’s interpretation of early Christian eschatology stands in sharp contrast to that of Bultmann (see *Salvation in History*, trans. Sidney G. Sowers of *Heil als Geschichte: Heilsgeschichtliche Existenz im Neuen Testament* [Harper & Row, 1967], pp. 183, 185).

⁶ *Salvation in History*, p. 11.

⁷ *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (rev. ed.; London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 92.

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the resurrection which followed, was the already concluded decisive battle.”⁸ The decisive mid-point of history has arrived, but the end of history is yet to come. So, even though the “already” of Christ’s death and resurrection outweighs the “not yet” of the Parousia, the “intermediate” period of time between the two is indeed part of salvation history.⁹ And, “the temporality of this salvation history must not be given up to make way,” as Bultmann does, “for an existential *kerygma*.”¹⁰

What would happen if we started theology at the end instead of the beginning? If we turned the traditional sequence of doctrines upside-down—or back to front—and made eschatology basic to or prior to everything else? As the title of a book on his work suggests, *Beginning with the End*,¹¹ that is exactly what Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014) does in his *Systematic Theology*. In contrast to Bultmann, for whom the meaning of history can be realized in each moment of authentic decision, and in contrast to Cullmann, for whom the decisive event in history has already happened, Pannenberg insists that nothing is more important than the way history ends.

No contemporary theologian gives the future a more prominent role than does Pannenberg. For him, the final future is not the aftermath but the foundation of everything that comes before. Only with the final consummation will the full meaning of history appear,¹² and the truth about God, humanity and creation be fully manifest. Until then, all that Christians believe is fragmentary and inconclusive. Short of the consummation, our grasp of these realities is provisional, not just because our understanding is limited, but also because their identity is not fixed until history has run its full course. Pannenberg is emphatic. “Creation will be complete only with the eschatology consummation of the world.”¹³ “Only in the eschaton does the reconciliation of the world come to completion with the new life of the resurrection of the dead in the kingdom of God.” And “only the eschatological consummation of the world will bring definitive proof of God’s existence and final clarification of the character of his nature and works.”

Until history finally reaches its conclusion, God’s love and wisdom, indeed, his very existence, will always be open to question.¹⁴ In fact, even God’s divinity is an eschatological reality, for God’s lordship, or reign, will be fully established only with the final consummation. To put it starkly, only then is God fully God! Because the drama of God’s inner life unfolds in creaturely history, God’s life becomes complete only when history reaches its conclusion.

⁸ *Christ and Time*, p. 84.

⁹ *Salvation in History*, pp. 183, 185.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹¹ *Beginning with the End: God, Science and Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carol Rausch Albright and Joel Haugen (LaSalle: Open Court, 1999).

¹² This does not mean that the end is a complete mystery until it occurs. Because God’s saving activity contains “proleptic” manifestations of the end of history, we can develop an understanding of the end as it “arrives” ahead of time in the great events of salvation history.

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (3 vols.; Eerdmans, 1991-98), 2:xvi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:631.

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Pannenberg's eschatology is thus closely connected to his understanding of God. Along with a number of contemporary theologians, Pannenberg finds a rich resource for Christian thought in the church's ancient reflections on God as Father, Son and Spirit. He, too, sees salvation history as a disclosure of God's eternal reality and views God's inner life as the ultimate context for all the major concerns of Christian faith—creation, salvation and the final consummation. Love leads God to create a finite reality which he cares for, to redeem this world and restore it to the divine life. So, there is an intimate relation between God's saving actions and the divine essence. God's love propels him into the world, so to speak, and he seeks to bring the world into his embrace. In this regard, Pannenberg's views reflect what is widely known as "Rahner's Rule," the concept that the economic trinity is the immanent trinity, and the immanent trinity is the economic trinity.¹⁵

And just what does this final future consist of? An event Pannenberg variously identifies as "the coming of eternity into time," and "the dissolving of time in eternity."¹⁶ The final future not only renders history a totality, it does so by making all its moments simultaneous. The endpoint subsumes the entire course of history that precedes it and brings temporal passage to an end.

Instead of a continuation of experiences, human existence, too, will consist of a single all-encompassing experience. The ultimate destiny of creaturely existence is thus to be "taken up" into "the eternal simultaneity of the divine life." When God's creatures share the eternity of God's own life, they will experience in one timeless moment all the events of their historical existence. "The differences of moments of time and the tenses" will be preserved, but they are "no longer seen apart." Our destiny as individuals will be fulfilled when we belong to the whole of human society across all the separate epochs of history.¹⁷

Pannenberg's eschatology is both promising and disappointing. On the positive side, his view that the end of history brings to light the meaning of history suggests a helpful way to understand the final judgment. When history comes to an end, the essential narrative, or the central plot, of all that has taken place before finally becomes clear. Underlying the ebb and flow of events, the bewildering, apparently meaningless, accumulation of experiences from one day to the next, year in and year out, are God's ongoing efforts to bless human life and counteract the effects of sin. For the most part God's workings are imperceptible. Looking back and looking around, all we see is the counterplay between good and evil, both progress and decline, advances in scientific knowledge that improve the quality of life and others that pose new threats to our well-being, social changes that ease tensions in some areas and create new ones in others. Pannenberg suggests that the end of history will bring clarity to the process that precedes it and reveal the true significance of what has gone before.

As we see Jesus' parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), the master's return is a time of reckoning. It reveals which servants have done the master's will, and which haven't. And in his account of

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Herder & Herder, 1970), 22.

¹⁶ *Systematic Theology*, 3:595, 607.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:607.

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the judgment of the nations (Mt 25:31-46), the true significance of people's actions also becomes clear—whether they have lived in harmony with the principles of God's kingdom and whether their lives have been a benefit to others.

Along with the course of history as a whole, then, human beings are confronted with the ultimate destinies they have, in effect, chosen for themselves—either by serving God faithfully or not, attending to the needs of others, or ignoring them. Their destiny is determined by the path their commitments have followed over the course of time. In the work of judgment, Pannenberg says, God is not arbitrary; he does not inflict punishment capriciously, but leaves people to the consequences of their own choices. He executes “what is in the nature of the case.”¹⁸

How history needs to end

“The relation between time and eternity is the crucial problem in eschatology,” says Pannenberg, “and its solution has implications for all parts of Christian doctrine.”¹⁹ I couldn't agree more, which is why I find Pannenberg's account of the future disappointing. From his description of the final future as the fulfillment of all that comes before, one might think that the process whose full meaning is finally apparent would continue. But no. Historical process ends in a moment in which time dissolves. As he sees it, God's mode of existence is an eternal present, and history reaches its final consummation when finite beings are incorporated and united into this single momentary experience. The culmination of history terminates history.

I have two major problems with Pannenberg's notion of the final future. First, It is hard to imagine what timeless finite existence would consist of. Temporality is inherent to existence as we know it. Indeed, it seems inherent to our existence as we could possibly conceive it. So, Pannenberg's designation of the final future as timeless seems incoherent. It is tantamount to putting the universe on an indefinite pause.

To begin with, temporality is essential to our experience, not just moment by moment, as Bultmann emphasizes, but through the succession of momentary experiences. And the end of history, that is, the climax of historical process, is important to the meaning of history, as Pannenberg insists. But in contrast to Pannenberg, suppose we envision the future that supersedes the present order as a continuation of temporal passage. The life to come would then consist of an unending series of experiences in a world from which the ravaging effects of sin have been removed.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 3:611.

¹⁹ Ibid., 3:595.

²⁰ The canon closes with lyrical portrayals of new heavens and a new earth, where life continues, and where suffering, sorrow, and death are no more, and the redeemed rejoice in the presence of God (Revelation 21-22).

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Such a view of our future raises many questions—both religious and philosophical.²¹ A number of people find the idea of endless life problematic. For some, it's basically unnecessary. Like Bultmann, they believe the meaning of life can be fully realized in each moment of authentic existence; how long it lasts is comparatively inconsequential.

For others, the expectation of unending existence is presumptuous; it arrogates to humanity an attribute of divinity. God is meant to live forever, not finite human beings. And the idea that eternal life represents a reward for moral behavior is particularly objectionable. A truly ethical person does what's right because it's right, not because she hopes to be rewarded for it. Then there are people who find the prospect of unending existence downright unappealing. Surely, they surmise, if our lives went on and on, we would eventually have done everything worth doing, and from then on there would be nothing left but mind-numbing repetition. And who would want to live forever under those conditions?

All of these objections seem flawed. First of all, everlasting life represents a gift, not a reward. Its only basis is God's generosity. So, the disproportion between what we deserve and what God provides is a source of wonder and thanks, but not a cause for moral reservation. The fact is, we don't deserve what God offers and never could.²² All of life, future and present, is a gift from God.

As for the idea that unending life would eventually reach a point of diminishing returns and leave us wishing to be relieved of its tedium, it seems to reflect a lack of imagination. True, many people find the dark side of human existence more intriguing than its opposite. The opening lines of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* are sometimes cited as a reference to the boredom of happiness.²³ Writers sometimes find it difficult to make upright characters interesting. There are so many ways people can do wrong—just think of all the novels, films and television shows depicting dishonesty, betrayal, and crime, for example—that goodness seems bland by comparison. For many, the most fascinating character in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is Lucifer, the fallen archangel, the paragon of evil. So, it would seem, a landscape of perpetual tranquility would eventually leave us longing for release.

From another perspective, this has it backwards. In the long run, goodness is infinite in exciting possibilities and evil is a descent into the black hole of monotonous futility. In a famous response to the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt spoke of the "banality of evil." Though not necessarily what she meant by the expression, it captures the insight that evil is tedious,

²¹ One issue, of course, is whether the notion of life after death is even conceivable. Another is the longstanding issue is whether or not the human soul is inherently immortal, and if so, how it relates to the body. Does individual human life continue beyond death in a non-physical form? Does it come to an end with death, and resume when the body is resurrected? Or does it continue in a non-physical intermediate state and resume a physical form in the resurrection?

²² As many see it, Martin Luther's great discovery five hundred years ago was that salvation is due entirely to God's grace. He redeems us entirely on the basis of outgoing, overflowing generosity, not because he owes us anything.

²³ "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

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monotonous, and ultimately dull. No matter what form it takes, it eventually comes to the same self-destructive end.

Now imagine growing manifestations of goodness and sources of joy. The development of visual art and music provide examples of continuous development, increasing complexity, and the realization of more and more possibilities. Look over the centuries of Western art, for example, and you can see how the creative achievements of one era contribute to another. Great artists often study the works of those that came before, find inspiration in their creations, and respond with creative endeavors of their own. They may incorporate the insights of previous masters or deliberately depart from them in expressing their own aesthetic visions.

The same is true in music. In the symphonies of Brahms we hear echoes of Beethoven, for example, and Beethoven's compositions built on the work of composers who preceded him. According to one biographer, "Beethoven founded everything he did on models from the past," and he "was pushing his models in directions innate to them," such as sharper contrasts; a broader variety of keys; longer and more varied developments; "and so on through every dimensions of music."²⁴

We can think of these and other areas of human activity, including the obvious development of scientific knowledge, as ongoing sources of enjoyment, with people learning from, responding to, the accomplishments of others and adding their own as new insights and ideas accumulate. And as humans continually learn more about God in the life to come, their praises will become more reflective of and responsive to the beauty and majesty of the divine.

So, the idea that unending life would eventually descend into the gloom of unbearable monotony is a serious slight to human creativity. The Bible suggests that in comparison with the fascinating and glorious future God has in store for us, the present is drab and dreary. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly," says the apostle Paul in his famous description of love, "but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully."²⁵

As Jesus' parables of the talents suggests, the reward for faithful service does not bring service to an end. Instead, it provides an opportunity for continued service, with greater responsibilities, and above all a deepening relationship with the master.²⁶ And just as the master finds joy in the service of his faithful servants and welcomes their fellowship, the passage suggests, God enjoys the accomplishments of his people and values their fellowship.

Divine temporality

Another problem with the idea of a timeless eternity is its denial of divine temporality. As we have seen, the concept of the trinity expresses the conviction that God's dealings with creation give expression to God's innermost life. But if God's dealings with the creatures are temporal

²⁴ Jan Swafford, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph. A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 232.

²⁵ 1 Cor 13:12.

²⁶ Mt 25:21, 23.

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through and through, and God's own life is not temporal, then these dealings do not portray God's reality after all.

Pannenberg's eschatology seems to reflect the familiar notion that time and eternity—that change and changelessness—constitute an invidious contrast, with one element inferior to the other. If so, we can understand why he views the final future, ultimate human destiny, as a timeless mode of existence, for that would bring us closer to the kind of existence that characterizes God himself. From another perspective, however, time and eternity are perfectly compatible. According to process theologians and open theists, God is best conceived as both eternal and temporal, utterly changeless in certain respects, and supremely changeable in others; eternally changeless in his essential nature and everlastingly temporal in his concrete experience. Accordingly, if our "final future" reflects God's own life, there is good reason to view it as an ongoing series of experiences that never comes to an end.

Pannenberg affirms God's relation to history as the key to understanding the divine reality, but when he describes the final future, he variously identifies it as "the coming of eternity into time," and "the dissolving of time in eternity. The final future is not a continuation of temporal experiences, but a single, all-encompassing, momentary experience, an endpoint that subsumes the entire course of history that precedes it."²⁷

What happens to the divine temporality in the face of assertions like these? It evaporates. Instead of experiencing time sequentially, God experiences all things at once, as we see in assertions like these. The divine life is characterized by an "eternal simultaneity." "To God all things that were are always present." In the eternity of God, time is "taken up" into "the eternal simultaneity of the divine life."²⁸ God exists in "an undivided present."²⁹ Whereas creatures are "subject to the march of time," "All things are always present to [God]." "The eternal God has no future ahead of him that is different from his present."³⁰

To be faithful to the biblical portrait of God, we will view the mighty acts of God as revelatory of the divine reality. But to do this, we must find an alternative to Pannenberg's eschatology. He affirms that God is related to the temporal sphere, and then proceeds to speak of God as overcoming time or as incorporating all of time in a single moment. Such language depreciates the significance of temporal passage.

²⁷ *Systematic Theology*, 3:595, 607.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:607.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:630.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:410.

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If history begins and ends with God's decisive activity, and if God's acts contribute to the course of events, it makes sense to conclude that God experiences events as they happen.³¹ If God's mighty acts—creation, redemption, consummation—reflect the reality that God is, as the doctrine of the Trinity affirms, it is reasonable to conceive of God's reality as an ongoing series of experiences.

Many will object to this conclusion on the grounds that it collapses the difference between God and the world and reduces God to the level of the creatures. Instead of isolating God from the world, as the Greeks did, it seems immerse him in it and turn him into another version of ourselves. The assumption here is that temporal passage represents loss rather than gain, and is therefore unworthy of divinity. If God changes with time, then God could lose value, becoming less than he was before. On the other hand, if God learns or grows over time, then God is always less than he could be. Either account conflicts with the idea of divine perfection—the concept of “a being than which a greater cannot be thought.” The challenge, then, is to think of divine temporality in a way that preserves God's generic excellence.

Schubert M. Ogden addresses this challenge in an essay entitled, “The Temporality of God.”^{32, 33} Careful reflection reveals that human existence exhibits a twofold character. Each human individual embodies certain characteristics which provide identity over time, including characteristics that are common to all human beings, along with distinctive physical features and unique qualities of personality and character. In addition, each concrete moment of life presents a person with stimuli which he or she incorporates into a new synthesis of experience. So human existence consists of a number of relatively enduring features, *and* a sequence of momentary experiences which include or embody these features. By analogy, the being of God consists of an ongoing sequence of discrete experiences, each of which includes the various qualities which are unique to the divine reality. On this view, all persons, human and divine,

³¹ This point requires extensive development, which space prevents us from providing here. For a classic discussion of the issues, see Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (Schocken, 1970; reprint Wipf and Stock, 2002). For a more recent discussion, see Greg Ganssle and David Woodruff, eds, *God and Time* (Oxford, 2001). William Lane Craig argues for the tensed theory of time endorsed here in “Omniscience, Tensed Facts, and Divine Eternity,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 2 (April 2000), 225-241. Richard E. Creel also deals with a wide range of issues connected to the theme of divine eternity in *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge, 1986). Creel argues, confusingly, that God's knowledge of the actual world changes but that God is nevertheless changeless in his will and his feeling, as well as in his nature (ibid., 204-206).

³² “The Temporality of God,” in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (Harper & Row, 1966), 144-63. In this essay Ogden provides a succinct account of the process view of God and time, which receives its definitive expression in the writings of Alfred North Whitehead (particularly *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* [Macmillan, 1929]) and Charles Hartshorne (*Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* [Open Court, 1970]; *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* [Yale, 1948]; *Reality as Social Process: Studies in Metaphysics and Religion* [Free Press, 1953]).

³³ Since our own reality is the best entrée we have to reality as such, human existence gives us an answer to “the ultimate philosophical question of the meaning of being itself.” *The Reality of God*, 148.

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exist as concrete moment-by-moment occasions of experience, each of which has certain defining characteristics.³⁴ Time is therefore real for God, as it is for everything else.

God is “an experiencing self who anticipates the future and remembers the past and whose successive occasions of present experience are themselves temporal occurrences.”³⁵ Consequently, it is misleading to speak of God as “outside” time, “above” it or even “ahead of” it. Instead, God is the supreme embodiment of temporality. His life, like all life, consists in a series of momentary experiences.³⁶ This conflicts with the familiar view that God has no past or future, but only a single, eternal present.³⁷ But only such a concept gives the notion of divine action meaningful content. If action is essential to the biblical portrait of God, then this atemporal notion of eternity is inadequate. To act in the world is to be genuinely related to the world, to affect the world and be affected by the world.

Furthermore, it is not necessary to deny divine temporality in order to preserve God’s generic excellence. God is distinguished from everything else, not because he is atemporal, but because he is supremely temporal.³⁸ Unlike God, creatures are not only temporal, they are temporary. Their experience begins and ends. But God’s own experience is “everlasting.” The sequence of events that constitute the divine life is without beginning or end.³⁹ We might say that God’s experience, then, and God’s alone, is “eternally temporal.”

God is also distinguished from all creaturely reality by the fact his experience is utterly comprehensive. God responds to everything that exists; each momentary experience encompasses the entire contents of the world.⁴⁰ In Ogden’s words, “God’s distinctiveness [is] not an utter negation of temporality but its supreme exemplification. God’s eternity is not sheer timelessness, but an infinite fullness of time.”⁴¹ God’s experience is thus the perfect and complete register of all that happens in the world. In contrast to the unmoved mover of

³⁴ This view of things reverses the familiar notion that reality consists of “things,” or enduring objects, which “have” experiences. Rather, reality consists of a multiplicity of momentary experiences, some of which share certain qualities with previous experiences and therefore belong to a sequence of events that have sufficient similarity for us to think of them as an enduring object, that is, as a “thing,” or a person.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

³⁶ And to express this, it is better to say, “Time is real for God,” than to say, “God is in time.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁹ “In the case of God,” Ogden argues, “what is distinctive is the complete absence of ... temporal finitude and limitation.” “God’s temporality is not itself temporally determined, so that there is neither a time when God was not yet nor a time when he shall be no more.” “God’s being has neither begun nor will it end, and the past and future to which he is related in each successive occasion of his present experience can be nothing less than a literally limitless past and future” (*ibid.*, 154).

⁴⁰ To preserve God’s unique identity, we need not conceive him as the exception to metaphysical principles; we can think of him as their chief exemplification (Cf. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* [Free Press, 1969], 405).

⁴¹ “In their truly primal forms, temporality and relations structure are constitutive of being itself, and God’s uniqueness is to be construed not simply by denying them, but by conceiving them in their infinite mode through the negation of their limitation as we experience them in ourselves” (*The Reality of God*, 154).

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Aristotelian thought, the Bible in many passages portrays God as the “most moved mover,”⁴² as one who is more sensitive to what happens in the world than anyone or anything else could be.

Conclusion

As Pannenberg conceives it, what begins here finds fulfillment in the life to come, and the final future is crucial to our understanding of everything that comes before; indeed, it gives meaning to everything that comes before. But that does not require the concept that the final future terminates the progressive or successive nature of life. To the contrary, the accumulation of experiences that give temporal life its intrinsic character, indeed, that constitute life now, could conceivably continue in a transformed setting in which all the factors that inhibit the flourishing of our lives now have been removed.

Since love is fundamental to God’s character, God seeks the fellowship of his creatures and respects their response(s) to his invitation. God so loves and values the ones he created in his image and rescued from sin that he invites them to enter his kingdom forever. Consequently, whatever the specific features of the future life may be, it will involve a renewed and transformed relationship between God and human beings. Relieved of the inhibiting and debilitating effects of sin, the redeemed will experience ongoing uninterrupted fellowship with God. Their insights into God’s wisdom will deepen, their appreciation for God’s character will grow, their sense of God’s majesty will expand, their joy in God’s presence will increase. As a result, they will reflect God’s glory more and more fully, and their role as God’s representatives in creation will continue. And God’s joy, too, will grow as they fulfill the purposes for which they were created. Instead of the final future bringing time to an end, it represents a new beginning. The history that comes to an end in the eschaton is a but a prelude to the history that will never end.

⁴² This is the title of one of Clark H. Pinnock’s books (*Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* [Baker, 2001]).