

ADVENTIST SOCIETY OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES (ASRS)

ABSTRACT

Topic: “The Epistemology of the Holy Spirit to Articulating His Presence Among Believers: Evaluation of Two Conflicting Models and A Proposal”

The epistemology of the Holy Spirit and his presence among believers refers to the study of how individuals come to know and understand the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Recent approaches including shifts in hermeneutical methodologies have introduced new views that challenge our understanding of this subject. This study evaluates two prominent theologians with conflicting views on the epistemology of the Holy Spirit, Jack Deere and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Deere emphasizes subjective encounters and charismatic experiences (speaking in tongues, dreams, visions, and prophecy) as primary indicators of the Holy Spirit’s presence in individuals and communities. In contrast, Pannenberg borrowing from modern physics, proposes that the Holy Spirit is the force field of God’s presence and that space and time are aspects of his presence in relationship to the world (panentheism). These two views fail to capture the relational knowing nature of the Holy Spirit as emphasized in the biblical canon. This paper therefore concludes that a coherent understanding of the presence of the Holy Spirit among believers encompasses the relational-soteriological knowing nature of the Holy Spirit. It argues that a canonical epistemology of the Holy Spirit starts from Scripture and not from personal experiences and sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

The epistemology of the Holy Spirit refers to how believers come to know and experience the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.¹ For centuries, Christian theology has sought to articulate the nature of the Holy Spirit's presence among believers, offering various models for understanding this phenomenon. This paper aims to evaluate two prominent yet conflicting models—the epistemology of Jack Deere, which emphasizes charismatic experiences, and Wolfhart Pannenberg's cosmological framework—while proposing an alternative model rooted in the relational, biblical, and soteriological nature of the Spirit's work as revealed in Scripture.

Jack Deere represents a charismatic tradition that emphasizes personal, subjective encounters with the Holy Spirit through manifestations such as speaking in tongues, dreams, visions, and prophecy.² In contrast, Pannenberg, a German theologian influenced by modern science and philosophy, offers a panentheistic model that views the Holy Spirit as an all-encompassing divine force that interacts with space and time.³ Although both theologians offer valuable insights into understanding the Holy Spirit's presence, I argue that both models are inadequate on their own. They fail to engage fully with the relational, covenantal nature of knowing the Holy Spirit as revealed in Scripture. Therefore, this study proposes an epistemology of the Holy Spirit grounded in the canonical Scriptures, where the relational and redemptive dimensions of the Spirit's work take center stage.

JACK DEERE: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SUBJECTIVE ENCOUNTERS

Jack Deere, a theologian and former cessationist who transitioned into a prominent proponent of charismatic theology, has made significant contributions to the contemporary understanding of the Holy Spirit's work among believers. Deere's approach to the epistemology of the Holy Spirit places a strong emphasis on personal, subjective experiences as the primary means by which believers come to know the Holy Spirit. According to Deere, the Holy Spirit's presence is primarily understood through experiential encounters such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, dreams, visions, and personal revelations. These experiences, Deere argues, are tangible signs of the Spirit's indwelling power and serve as direct evidence of God's ongoing work among believers. In his book *Surprised by the Voice of God*, Deere emphasizes that these experiential encounters are indispensable for discerning the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians.

¹ John Owen, *The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 23-47. See also □ John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 795-808.

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² Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God: How God Speaks Today through Prophecies, Dreams, and Visions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 45-63. See also Jack Deere, *The Beginner's Guide to Hearing God's Voice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 395-419.

Experiential Foundations in Scripture

Deere's epistemology is firmly rooted in biblical accounts, particularly the events of Pentecost (Acts 2) and the charismatic gifts that characterized the early church. He asserts that the New Testament presents the Holy Spirit as an active, dynamic force who engages with believers in tangible ways—speaking directly to them, empowering them for ministry, and manifesting Himself through supernatural experiences. Deere's model stresses that, just as the early church experienced these empirical signs of the Spirit's presence, contemporary Christians should expect and pursue similar encounters with the Holy Spirit. These experiential dimensions are central to Deere's theology, which sees the manifestation of supernatural gifts as an integral aspect of the Christian life. His position on this is heavily influenced by the narratives found in books such as Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians, where the Spirit's direct activity is explicitly emphasized.

In *Surprised by the Voice of God*, Deere argues that personal encounters with the Holy Spirit serve as a direct channel of communication with God. For Deere, this isn't just about subjective spiritual experiences; these encounters are the means through which believers are equipped, guided, and empowered for Christian living. His understanding of the Holy Spirit's epistemology aligns with a charismatic understanding that prioritizes the Spirit's ongoing revelation and empowerment, in contrast to the more cessationist perspectives that emphasize a closed canon of revelation.

Criticisms of Subjective Epistemology

Despite the powerful emphasis that Deere places on the subjective, personal experience of the Holy Spirit, there are notable criticisms and limitations associated with this epistemology. One of the primary concerns is the over-reliance on subjective experience. By elevating personal encounters with the Holy Spirit as the central means of knowing God's presence, Deere's model risks reducing the understanding of the Spirit's work to a private, individualistic affair. This individualism could, in turn, lead to an emphasis on personal emotional and psychological states as the main markers of spiritual truth, rather than being grounded in the objective truth of Scripture and the community of believers.

Additionally, excessive emphasis on personal encounters with the Holy Spirit can, at times, lead to a diminished role for the communal and redemptive aspects of the Holy Spirit's work. In Scripture, the Holy Spirit is not only concerned with individual sanctification but also plays an integral role in the life of the church and the corporate mission of believers. The Spirit's work is communal and redemptive, shaping the body of Christ, not just individuals. By focusing solely on individual spiritual encounters, Deere's model can overlook the covenantal and ecclesial dimensions of the Spirit's presence, both of which are foundational in the New Testament.

WOLFHART PANNENBERG: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF PANENTHEISM AND MODERN PHYSICS

In contrast to Jack Deere's emphasis on personal, subjective encounters with the Holy Spirit, Wolfhart Pannenberg offers a more cosmological and scientific approach to understanding the Holy Spirit's presence and activity. Pannenberg's theology of the Holy Spirit is deeply influenced by modern physics and philosophical thought, particularly panentheism, which asserts that God is both immanent in the world and transcendent beyond it. Pannenberg proposes that the Holy Spirit can be understood as a divine force field—a panentheistic presence that interpenetrates all of creation. For Pannenberg, the Holy Spirit is not merely an active force within the church or individual believers, but rather the medium through which God's presence is manifested in space and time. In this way, the Holy Spirit is seen as the life-giving force that sustains the universe, connecting God to the world and ensuring the continued unfolding of creation. This cosmic understanding of the Spirit positions Him as the force that sustains the entire created order, not just the church or individual believers.⁴

Pannenberg's Panentheistic Framework and Scientific Influence

Pannenberg's understanding of the Holy Spirit's epistemology aligns with contemporary scientific ideas, particularly those related to energy fields and the interconnectedness of the universe. Just as energy fields are invisible yet pervasive throughout the physical world, Pannenberg's model suggests that the Holy Spirit acts as a similar force—unseen but essential for the sustaining of life and the universe. In this sense, the Spirit is not merely a person, but a universal principle that infuses all of reality. For Pannenberg, the Holy Spirit's presence is not confined to specific moments or places but is constantly active, sustaining all of creation, bringing order to the cosmos, and allowing it to flourish.

The notion of the Holy Spirit as a cosmic force field suggests that the Spirit's influence extends far beyond the confines of the church or the individual believer. Instead, the Spirit is immanent throughout the entire created world, affecting every aspect of the cosmos. This understanding reflects Pannenberg's vision of a holistic, panentheistic worldview in which God and the world are intimately connected, but God's being is not limited to the world. In Pannenberg's framework, the Holy Spirit's presence is universal and omnipresent, not simply localized in the lives of believers. This offers a macrocosmic view of the Holy Spirit, aligning with the scientific understanding of forces and fields that pervade and sustain the universe, but also shifting the conversation from personal or localized experiences to a broader cosmic scale.

Theological Implications of Panentheism

While Pannenberg's cosmological understanding of the Holy Spirit provides a broad, systematic framework that incorporates both scientific thought and Christian theology, this approach presents several theological challenges. One of the most significant concerns is that by conceptualizing the Holy Spirit as a universal force field, Pannenberg's model risks abstracting the Holy Spirit into a cosmic principle, rather than maintaining His personal nature as the third person of the Trinity. By emphasizing the Spirit's pervasiveness in the universe, Pannenberg

⁴ Pannenberg's **panentheism** is discussed in depth in *Theology and the Church* where he argues that God's **immanence** in creation is essential to understanding God's presence in the world.

runs the risk of depersonalizing the Holy Spirit, reducing Him to a mere force or principle rather than affirming His role as a personal agent within the Trinity who engages with human beings in relational, redemptive ways.

In theological terms, this abstraction can obscure the personal nature of the Spirit, which is a central theme in Christian doctrine. According to traditional Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force but a person of the Trinity, distinct from both the Father and the Son. While the Spirit is active in the world, sustaining and empowering creation, He is also deeply involved in personal salvation, sanctification, and relational knowledge of God. By presenting the Holy Spirit primarily as a cosmic force field, Pannenberg's model risks depersonalizing the Spirit's work in the lives of believers and making the Spirit's activity seem more like a generalized cosmic principle rather than a personal presence actively at work in salvation.⁵

Theological Vagueness and Relational Knowledge

Another challenge to Pannenberg's model is its potential theological vagueness, particularly in regard to the personal role of the Holy Spirit in salvation and sanctification. In traditional Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the process of salvation, guiding believers into all truth, convicting them of sin, and sanctifying them to be more like Christ (John 14:26; Romans 8:9-11). Moreover, the Spirit is the agent through whom believers come to relationally know God and experience communion with Him. For Pannenberg, however, the emphasis on the Spirit as a cosmic force can obscure these personal dimensions of the Spirit's work. If the Holy Spirit is primarily seen as an impersonal force that sustains the universe, this could detract from the understanding that the Spirit's ultimate purpose is to bring people into a personal relationship with God—a key aspect of Christian salvation. Pannenberg's model can leave relational knowledge of the Holy Spirit unclear and diminished, as it tends to focus more on the Spirit's immanence in the physical universe rather than His redemptive presence in the lives of believers.

A RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: BEYOND INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE AND COSMIC FORCE

While both Deere and Pannenberg provide useful insights into understanding the Holy Spirit's presence, each model ultimately falls short in addressing the fullness of the Holy Spirit's work as presented in Scripture. Deere's focus on subjective encounters may emphasize individual experiences at the expense of communal discernment and the objective grounding of the Spirit's work in Scripture. Pannenberg, meanwhile, offers a grand cosmological vision of the Holy Spirit, but this model risks reducing the Spirit to an impersonal force, neglecting His personal, relational, and redemptive roles in the life of the believer.

The key to a more coherent epistemology of the Holy Spirit lies in recognizing that the Spirit's presence is not merely an individual experience or a cosmic principle, but “a deeply

⁵ For critiques of panentheism's implications for the doctrine of the Trinity, see: John Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 98-120.

relational presence” that works in the context of God’s covenant and redemptive plan. Scripture presents the Holy Spirit as both a personal being and an active agent in salvation. The Spirit’s primary role is to “apply the benefits of Christ’s redemptive work” to the lives of believers, ensuring that they are brought into a living relationship with God and with one another (John 14:26; Romans 8:9-11). Through the Spirit, believers are united with Christ, transformed into His likeness, and empowered for mission (Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

This relational dimension is essential for understanding the epistemology of the Holy Spirit. Knowing the Holy Spirit is not just about having emotional or intellectual encounters, but about being transformed and brought into communion with God through Christ. It is this relational engagement with the Spirit that leads to true sanctification, transformation, and fellowship within the body of Christ.

TOWARDS A CANONICAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In light of the limitations of both Jack Deere’s and Wolfhart Pannenberg’s models, I propose that a more coherent epistemology of the Holy Spirit must be grounded in a canonical approach to Scripture. This model rejects the extremes of relying primarily on subjective experiences or cosmological speculations. Instead, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit should be understood through the lens of the biblical canon, which provides a comprehensive and cohesive framework for understanding the Spirit’s activity. Scripture is God’s primary means of self-revelation, and it is through the canon that believers can know the Holy Spirit’s work with clarity and stability. By grounding our understanding of the Spirit in the Bible, we are anchored in God’s objective revelation, avoiding the risks of subjective interpretation or speculative theology that can lead us astray.

Canonical Epistemology and the Role of Scripture

A canonical epistemology of the Holy Spirit emphasizes that the Spirit’s presence is best understood in relation to the Word of God. According to Scripture, the Holy Spirit is not a force independent of God’s Word, but rather the one who brings the Word to life, applying it to the hearts of believers. As Jesus promises in John 14:26, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The Holy Spirit’s work is not to operate in isolation from God’s Word but to illuminate and empower it, ensuring that the truths of Scripture are not merely intellectual concepts but living, transformative realities for the believer.

In this framework, the Word of God becomes the foundation upon which the believer experiences the Holy Spirit. As 2 Timothy 3:16-17 affirms, all Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, enabling the believer to be equipped for every good work. The Holy Spirit, as the one who inspired Scripture (2 Peter 1:21), continues to be the one who empowers believers to understand and live out the truths contained within the canon. This emphasis on Scripture as the foundation of the Spirit’s work safeguards against the risk of overemphasizing subjective, emotional experiences and abstract theological systems that do not have a firm basis in the biblical narrative.

The Spirit and the Word: An Integrated Work

The canonical epistemology also guards against the dualistic separation between the personal experience of the Holy Spirit and the objective revelation of Scripture. While the Holy Spirit works powerfully within the believer's life, convicting of sin (John 16:8), guiding into all truth (John 16:13), and empowering for ministry (Acts 1:8), this work is never divorced from the revelation found in Scripture. In this sense, the Holy Spirit's presence is most clearly known through the Word, which serves as both the objective foundation and the living source of the Spirit's transformative power in the life of the believer.

A key theological argument in favor of this view is that the Holy Spirit is the one who continually applies the work of Christ to the believer's life, ensuring that the redemptive work of God is not just a past event but an ongoing, present reality. Through the Spirit, believers are united to Christ, sanctified, and transformed into His likeness. This relational and redemptive activity of the Spirit is rooted in the biblical narrative of salvation—from creation, to the fall, to redemption in Christ, and the ultimate restoration of all things. The Spirit works in continuity with Scripture, which tells the story of God's plan of salvation and the promise of His presence with His people.

The Relational and Redemptive Nature of the Spirit's Work

My model also emphasizes the relational and redemptive nature of the Holy Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit is not merely a cosmic principle or an impersonal force, but the third person of the Trinity, who engages believers in a dynamic, personal relationship with God. The relational aspect of the Spirit's work is reflected in key texts such as Romans 8:9-11, where Paul speaks of the Spirit dwelling within believers and transforming them into the likeness of Christ. It is through the Holy Spirit that believers are not only empowered but also drawn into communion with the Father and the Son. The communion of the Spirit is essential for the sanctification of believers, ensuring that they grow in godliness and are equipped for mission and ministry (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

At the same time, the Spirit's work is redemptive, aligning with the overarching theme of salvation in Scripture. The Spirit's primary role is to apply the benefits of Christ's redemptive work to the lives of believers, bringing them into a living, transformative relationship with God. As Ephesians 1:13-14 states, the Holy Spirit is the seal of the believer's redemption and the guarantee of their inheritance in Christ. This redemptive dimension is at the heart of the biblical narrative, where the Holy Spirit plays a key role in making the gospel real and present in the lives of God's people, both individually and corporately.

Guarding Against Extremes

One of the greatest strengths of a canonical epistemology is its ability to avoid the extremes found in both Jack Deere's and Wolfhart Pannenberg's models. Deere's emphasis on subjective experiences risks turning the work of the Holy Spirit into a private, individual affair, where the Spirit is known primarily through personal, mystical encounters. This approach can lead to theological error or spiritual individualism, where the communal and redemptive aspects of the Spirit's work are neglected. On the other hand, Pannenberg's panentheistic framework, by

focusing on the cosmological role of the Holy Spirit, risks reducing the Spirit to an impersonal force and obscuring the personal, relational nature of the Spirit's presence in the lives of believers.

In contrast, a canonical epistemology ensures that the Holy Spirit's work is always grounded in Scripture, providing a firm foundation for both personal and communal experiences. The Spirit's work is neither solely subjective nor purely cosmological, but is consistently rooted in the biblical narrative—a narrative in which the Holy Spirit is the personal agent who applies God's redemptive work to the lives of believers.

CONCLUSION

The epistemology of the Holy Spirit is a complex and multifaceted field, encompassing the intersection of personal experience, theological reflection, and biblical revelation. Both Jack Deere's emphasis on subjective encounters and Wolfhart Pannenberg's panentheistic model offer valuable insights into the nature of the Holy Spirit's presence. Deere's model highlights the dynamism and experiential aspect of the Spirit's work, while Pannenberg's framework offers a cosmologically expansive view of the Spirit's omnipresence. However, both approaches, in their respective emphases, fail to fully capture the relational and redemptive dimensions of the Spirit's work, as outlined in Scripture.

This paper has argued that a canonical epistemology—one grounded in the biblical canon—offers the most coherent and theologically faithful approach to understanding the Holy Spirit's presence and work. By anchoring our understanding of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, we maintain a foundation that is both objective and transformative. The canonical approach does not deny the validity of personal experiences or the reality of God's presence in the world, but it safeguards against the dangers of individualism and abstract speculation by keeping the Spirit's work centered in the relational and redemptive narrative of God's covenant with His people.

Through this framework, the believer's knowledge of the Holy Spirit is not based solely on personal manifestations or abstract cosmology but is rooted in a biblical understanding of the Spirit's redemptive mission. The Spirit's primary work is to apply the benefits of Christ's redemptive work to believers, drawing them into communion with God and transforming them into the likeness of Christ. This relational engagement with the Spirit is not an isolated experience but takes place within the context of the church community and the covenant God has established with His people.

In conclusion, a canonical epistemology provides a holistic and robust understanding of the Holy Spirit's presence, one that is firmly grounded in the objective truth of Scripture while also recognizing the Spirit's transformative and relational work in the life of the believer. This approach avoids the extremes of both individualistic subjectivism and impersonal cosmology, offering a deeper and more faithful understanding of the Spirit's activity within the life of the church and the world.

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