

Part Two

Commentary on Great Paragraphs of 20th Century Theology

The Awakening Trinity

1. The Void and Rudolf Bultmann's Crisis of Faith
2. Ultimate Trust and H. Richard Niebuhr's Faith in God
3. The Event of Grace and Paul Tillich's "You are Accepted"

The Presence Trinity

4. The Fullness and Paul Tillich's Inescapable God
5. Spirit Love and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Spirit and Psychic Love
6. The Communion of Saints and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life Together

The Action Trinity

7. The Total Demand and Paul Tillich's Vision of the Holy
8. Complete Freedom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Responsible Action
9. The Vanguard and H. Richard Niebuhr's Representational Responsibility

1. The Void and Rudolf Bultmann's Crisis of Faith

This chapter is a commentary on fourteen paragraphs of an essay by Rudolf Bultmann entitled "The Crisis of Faith." I will be quoting from the translation by Edward Hobbs and published in the collection of writings assembled by Roger A. Johnson, *Rudolf Bultmann, Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (Collins Publishers: 1982, pages 240-256).

In section one, entitled "God," Bultmann begins with these questions:

What then, is Christian faith whose crisis is our concern? What is that unworldly reality which is the object of Christian faith? *What is God in the Christian sense?*

Such questions are rarely even asked in 2004. People seem either to think that they already have the word "God" figured out, or they have given up all use of that word. The crisis of which Bultmann wrote has flowered. Nevertheless, it may seem strange to both theists and atheists that Bultmann, a Christian theologian, asks us to begin with a confession of ignorance about what Christian faith is pointing to with the word "God." The following paragraph may seem even stranger.

God in the Christian sense is *nothing other than what he is to every faith* in which the idea of God is taken at all seriously. What then is signified by the idea of "God"?

Bultmann is implying that God is a universal experience not just a particular Christian belief. And what does he mean by "taking the idea of God seriously"? I believe that he means using the word to point to a reality. When we use the word "cat," we are pointing to a specific type of animal that moves and purrs and meows. We are not simply pointing to other words like "feline." But many people use the word "God" to point only to other words such as "Creator," or "Heavenly Father." In order to take the idea of God seriously, we need to point with this word to a reality in our actual experience. Bultmann is going to do this in the following paragraphs.

Every human being knows or can know about its limitations, for – consciously or unconsciously – it is driven to and fro by its limitedness, as long as it exists. It is no more at its own disposal than it is its own creator. It is never complete, but is driven to and fro by *care* which reminds it of its limits and incompleteness.

Bultmann begins his discussion of God with experiences that we are all aware of or can be aware of. We can all experience our limitedness through our having to care about survival, food, shelter, and so on. "Care" is a specialized word here. Its overtones are "concern," "anxiety," "worry." What are we worried about? What do we stay up nights pondering over? These are our cares. And the fact that we do care, that we must care, is a reminder that we are not infinite; we are limited; we are finite. We are not complete. We need much. Bultmann is going to tell us how our experiences of care lead us to an experience of God.

The Everyday Care for the Morrow

First of all there is everyday care for the morrow. One is occupied with the provision, procuring and preparation of the means of living. And yet in his heart he knows that he cannot secure his life with the means of living. Everyone understands the story of the rich farmer who wished to fill his barns with the rich harvest and then say to himself, "Soul, you have ample

goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Everyone sees that the farmer was a fool. And this dark power – the power which limits one and is master of him even when he thinks he is his own master – is God, the master of one's future.¹

Each of us finds it necessary to secure food and shelter and the financial resources that allow a measure of security in our lives. But can we make our lives secure? Ultimately, no. Anything can happen. We can fall off our own porch and crack our skull. We can be in an automobile accident. We can have a heart attack. We can lose all our money in the stock market. The farmer in the Biblical story was not a fool because he set aside riches for tomorrow: he was a fool because he thought he was secure.

What is it that renders our life inherently insecure? If it were up to us we would be completely secure. So we are not making ourselves insecure. We are doing all we can to be secure. Some power other than ourselves is making us insecure. Some dark power, some mysterious power that we do not control, is making us insecure. If we have experienced that dark power, we have experienced what Bultmann is pointing to with the word "God."

We may not feel devoted to that dark power. We may not feel comfortable calling that dark power "God." Perhaps we are calling that dark power by some other name. But at least we must concede that Bultmann is keeping his promise. He is taking the idea of God seriously. He is not pointing to mere abstract ideas. He is pointing with the idea of God to something that we have all experienced or can experience.

The Longing for the True and the Beautiful

Or again, little as life can free itself from this care for the things of every day or for the morrow, it refuses to see in this care what gives life its meaning, but would go beyond it. Life is driven to and fro by the *longing for the true and the beautiful*, or even merely by that *indefinite longing* which awakes in the "deepest midnight" and in which it becomes clear that:

All pleasure craves eternity
Craves utter, utter eternity.

And yet even in all its lofty moments human life is not granted this eternity of pleasure or this pleasure of eternity. Does it indeed know any hours in which it could say to the moment – "But tarry, you are so fair"? And even if it does – the moment just does not tarry! Mankind has no power over the temporal and the eternal. The power which has power over the temporal and eternal is God.

What are those moments of time that we would like to keep forever? What are those moments to which we might say, "Tarry, you are so fair"? Surely, each of us can identify with the pain of parting with such moments. And they must end. They do not tarry. If it were up to us we would force such moments to stay a while longer, but our hand cannot find the handle of the crank that cranks time. Some other power turns this crank. Some power, other than us cranks up lofty moments and then cranks them down. If we have experienced the operation of this power in our lives, we have experienced what Bultmann is calling "God."

Surely, there can be no argument over whether this power exists; we can only argue over what to call this power. Bultmann returns to this issue later. But first he explores some more

¹ Bultmann used the now obsolete convention of employing "men" and "his" to mean both men and women. I have not attempted to upgrade his language, for I want the reader to understand that my commentary is based on his words, not on some paraphrase of them.

deep experiences of care that bring us into confrontation with this mysterious, dark, all-powerful power.

The Longing for Love

Or again, life is driven to and fro by the longing for love, and by the feeling that there is truth in what Karl Spitteler's Apollo says (in *Olympian Spring*) to Hera, who is haunted by anxiety over death, who would like to escape from death:

In Ananke's cruel domain
In vale or mountain flourishes no solace to remain,
Save the solace of the eyes – twin stars in friendship blest,
And the syllables of love, by grateful lips expressed.

Many a life is poor in friendship and in love, many another rich, but even the rich life is aware of a final solitude into which it is driven.

Can e'er man as he'd wish belong
On earth to his fellow?
In the long night I thought of it and could but answer: No!

The power which drives mankind into this final solitude is God.

In grim moments of any kind we may deeply feel the need for others. In almost every moment we may feel the need for acceptance, appreciation, understanding, affirmation, and recognition. And we may long as well to snuggle with our favorite partner in sensual and sexual contact. Some of us have much of this sort of experience, but we still long for it. Others of us have little, and we long for it as well. Some of us may fear intimacy, yet we still long for it.

The love of which Bultmann speaks here is not the agape or Spirit love praised by the apostle Paul; it is the ordinary love that connects human-to-human in everyday life. Bultmann is not belittling such love. He is making one very simple point: we cannot escape from final solitude by participating in the loving human companionship for which we yearn.

And what is this final solitude? We experience it in every moment of profound decision. We experience it at the moment of our death. As Martin Luther said, "No one can do your dying for you." Luther also said, "No one can do faith for you." In all primal matters, we are alone. We are alone in that final solitude.

We may at some point in our lives come to appreciate final solitude, but in those moments in which we long for love, long to lose ourselves in the arms of others, final solitude may appear as an unwelcome feature of our lives. This solitude comes as a limit on our hope for escape from this very solitude. And that inescapable power that borders all our quests for love with final solitude, Bultmann calls "God."

The Impulse toward Knowledge and Action

Or again, life is moved by the *impulse toward knowledge* and is led to admit, "I see that we can nothing know." Or is it the *impulse to action, to work*? That in fact is the way in which Faust finally sought to reach that moment to which he could say, "But tarry, you are so fair!" Yet behind the want, guilt, and care, to which access to it [the moment] or mastery over it is denied, comes "the brother, Death." And when the blind Faust takes delight in the clanking of the spades, they are not the spades which are accomplishing his work and bringing it to completion, but the spades which are digging his grave; and it is the foretaste of sublime happiness which is the highest and final moment. The power which sets a limit to knowing and doing is God.

Bultmann's discussion of the impulse toward knowledge is remarkably brief, for many of us have found the impulse toward knowledge the most central care of our lives. Perhaps all of us have felt this impulse when various arenas of practical wisdom have come unglued. Perhaps we thought we knew how to build a marriage, and then we saw that we had much more to learn. Perhaps we thought we knew how to raise children, and then we saw that we had a deep need to know more. Perhaps we thought we had our Christian theology all wrapped up, and then we found we had a need for far more study. Our ongoing journey toward more knowledge is summarized in these words of the honest scientist: "The more we know, the more we know we don't know." Bultmann is saying that this ever more Unknown Unknown that is continually limiting our "secure" knowledge is God.

Our impulse to action (to work, to accomplish something) is also a basic care that most of us can easily recognize. Again, Bultmann, with his complex example from Faust, is making a very simple point. The flow of time is not completing our accomplishments, it is taking them and us into the valley of death. Even the pyramids of Egypt are wearing down. Given enough time they will be just more sand in the desert. Here is a personal illustration of this point: I believe that all that I accomplished in my first real job was entirely undone by my successor. The spades of history are digging the grave for all human accomplishments. This power that limits our accomplishments is, according to Bultmann, another experience of God.

The Idea of Duty

Or, finally, existence is dominated by the *idea of duty*, by knowledge of the principle that "You can, for you ought." But it is well aware that life in accordance with the "You ought" is a struggle, in which it is a matter of mastering oneself. It knows the call of conscience which summons to duty, and recalls from thoughtlessness and aberration to everyday things, and pronounces the verdict "Guilty!" on wasted time and lost opportunity, impure thoughts, and mean actions. The summons of the "You ought," divesting one of his willfulness, the call of conscience showing one his pettiness, incompleteness, and wretchedness, is God.

The "care" that Bultmann is examining in this paragraph is perhaps the most difficult one to understand, and its limits are perhaps the most painful to experience. So what is this care? I have put it to myself in this fashion: if I cannot make my life absolutely secure, if I cannot hold on to my true and beautiful moments, if I cannot lose my solitude in companionship, if I cannot find final completion in my knowledge or my work, at least I can do my duty and thereby have a positive view of my own person. Yet whatever duty I take on, whatever criteria of judgment I choose to evaluate myself in a positive way, those same criteria condemn my actual performance. I do not do my duty, no matter what I decide that duty is. I do not master myself, no matter what self mastery I take up. I do not avoid the limit of "Guilty" no matter what conscience I have. In these times of awareness about the relativity of all standards, we may think that we can escape from experiences of guilt. But we cannot. We can be guilty of forgetting about the relativity of all standards. We can be guilty of finding that our interior superego beats us up even when we are clear that all its ideas of the "You ought" are inappropriate for our current lives. And even if we have learned to defeat our superego and our cultural conditioning and have created valid guidelines for living our lives, we find ourselves violating those self-created and wholesome guidelines. Even if we take on the ought that says we ought to never feel guilty, we find ourselves being guilty for feeling guilty. This experience of limitation, like all the others, is unavoidable.

And what power places us in this dreadful predicament? Bultmann says that the summons of the "You ought" and the "call of conscience" are also experiences of that ever-limiting power that he dares to call "God."

In the first sentence of the next paragraph, Bultmann summarizes all that he has said in the five examples cited above.

God is what limits mankind, who makes a comedy of his care, who allows his longing to miscarry, who casts him into solitude, who sets a limit to his knowing and doing, who calls him to duty, and who give the guilty over to torment.

There is no reason to doubt the presence of such a power in our lives, but how can we talk about worshiping this power? Why would we ever view this power as God? Most people find hatred of this power or tolerance of this power more congenial than praise, or worship, or devotion. Let us consider the possibility that fear and hatred can be our first experiences of the God who is truly God. As an old proverb says, "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." This ancient teaching is still relevant for us.

But God, for Bultmann, is something more than the limiting power. In these next sentences, he tells us about that something more.

And yet at the same time it is God who forces one into life and drives him into care; who puts longing and the desire for love in his heart; who gives him thoughts and strength for his work, and who places him in the eternal struggle between willfulness and duty. God is the enigmatic power beyond time, yet master of the temporal, beyond existence, yet at work in it.

God is also the power that creates, sustains, and gives us our life with all its vital cares. What is given is also limited, so this addition may not change our dread, fear, or hatred of God. In fact, we may take offense that these strong cares are put into our lives. Why desire love so much if final solitude is inescapable? Why long for the true and beautiful if such moments never last? Why seek knowledge so passionately if ignorance is to be our final condition? And so on. To worship a God who both gives and takes away can seem preposterous to most of us most of the time. Bultmann addresses this topic in the opening paragraphs of Section Two of his essay:

But what we have said is not adequate as a description of the Christian idea of God, nor indeed of the idea of God at all. *For why do we call this dark power "God"? Why give the enigma, the mystery which drives us this way and that and hedges us in, any other name than simply "the enigma," or "fate"? Does the name "God" not gloss over the fact that we are in the dark, and are at the mercy of fate? Or, if there must be a name, why not equally well that of the devil? Does not this power play a cruel game with us, destroying and annihilating? Is not unfulfillment the mark of every life? Is not death, nothingness the end?*

It is over, then! What moral have we won?
It's just as if life never had begun,
Though going full circle just as if it had.
Give me eternal nothingness instead –

thus speaks the devil, Mephistopheles. And is this true? Or, in view of the enigma and this finiteness of ours, does a diabolical temptation perhaps lie in this approach? And is it not the point, in face of the enigma and the darkness, to insist on the meaning of life with a cry of "Nevertheless"?

However that may be, this "Nevertheless" is in any event the meaning of faith in God. It is the courage to designate that dark enigma, that sovereign power as God, as my God. It is the courage to assert that in the knowledge of this power every being acquires its meaning, that in knowing this power I also realize I belong to it, and that the limit which fences my being about is inwardly removed. This will, of course, happen when I give up my pretense to make my own way; when I submit to this power as that which brought me into existence, when I can say "Yes" to it. Faith in God is the courage which utters this "Nevertheless": "Nevertheless I am continually with you: you hold me by my right hand." [Psalm 73:23]

Bultmann makes clear in these paragraphs that "God" is a devotional word – that when we are meaningfully calling this dark power "God," our lives have been transformed. How we view this Awesome Mysterious Finality has also been transformed. The seemingly untrustworthy darkness has become trustworthy. More must be said about the nature of this transformation, but for now let us be content to notice that Bultmann has given us a real experience to point to with the word "God," and indicated that faith (that is, trust) in this God is possible.