

WHAT DOES BULTMANN UNDERSTAND BY THE ACTS OF GOD?

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One of the first essentials in any good scholarship is a sympathetic understanding of alternate positions. One of the besetting sins of orthodox theology is that of condemning unorthodox or liberal theologies without adequately understanding them. The theology of Rudolf Bultmann is easy enough to attack from an orthodox position. The most superficial reading of his writings would show that he is not and does not desire to be an orthodox theologian. He does not believe in the traditional concept of miracles, the Virgin Birth of Christ, His bodily resurrection, or His second coming. Such ideas as a bodily incarnation, ascension and appearance in glory of the Son of God are to him mythology.

However Rudolf Bultmann is the most influential theologian in Germany today. Although he is now retired from active teaching, the lengthened shadow of his influence may be seen in the fact that his followers such as Kasemann, Bornkamm, Conzelmann, and others are the professors to whom German university students flock to hear by the hundreds, whereas more conservative theologians standing in the old Lutheran tradition number their hearers in the scores. Furthermore, the Bultmannian theology appears about to make a serious impact upon American theological thinking.¹ Therefore it is imperative that we attempt to understand Bultmann's theology. This essay is more an attempt to understand than to criticize his position. We have chosen the particular topic of the paper because it has been the most difficult to understand and is crucial in his system. The difficulty reposes in the fact that the heart of Bultmann's theology is built around paradox. The place where God acts is in the sphere of human existence; yet God has also acted in the historical Jesus.

Discussing "the language of the act of God," Bultmann says, "Since human life is lived out in time and space, man's encounter with God can only be a specific event here and now. This event, our being addressed by God here and now, our being questioned, judged, and blessed by him, is what we mean when we speak of an act of God."² In his Shaffer lectures given in America, Bultmann said, "if we must speak of God as acting only in the sense that He acts with me here and now, can we still believe that God has acted once for all on behalf of the whole world?"³ This is indeed the question. It is significant that Bultmann says that we must speak of God as acting *only* in the sense that he acts with me here and now, rather than "not only" in this sense. Again, in the same lectures, Bultmann said, "When we speak of God as acting, we mean that we are confronted with God, addressed, asked, judged, or blessed by God."⁴

One must note in passing that by such language of God acting with me or upon me, Bultmann intends to avoid the criticism of subjectivism. He refuses to say that God acts *within* me or *in* my spirit. The sphere where God acts is "in my very existence," "God acts on me," "with me."⁵ Bultmann insists that when one interprets his concept of God as acting upon man in terms of subjectivity, he is guilty of a psychological misunderstanding of the life of the soul.⁶ Bultmann insists that God has objective existence and cannot be identified with subjective human experience. Therefore we represent Bultmann most accurately when we say that Bultmann conceives of God as acting in human existence, not within the human spirit or soul.

This concept of God as acting in the realm of human existence is further illustrated by Bultmann's view of revelation. In his essay, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,"⁷ Bultmann discusses two different concepts of revelation: revelation as the communication of knowledge by the Word, and revelation as an occurrence that puts me in a new situation as a self. Bultmann understands that in the New Testament, revelation is not understood as the communication of knowledge

but rather as an occurrence that happens to me. This does not mean that revelation is something which occurs *within* human life: it is something which breaks in upon it from outside and therefore cannot be demonstrated within life itself.⁸ Revelation occurs in the proclamation of the Word of Christ. Revelation can never become an event in the past which one simply perceives; it must be understood as something which takes place in the present, in my particular present. The content of revelation is nothing at all so far as doctrine is concerned. Revelation is an occurrence which happens to me in the proclamation of Christ.⁹ "The revelation of God is realized only in the concrete events of life here and now."¹⁰

This existential interpretation of the act of God further illustrated by Bultmann's understanding of the act of redemption. In his discussion of "Christ's Death and Resurrection as a Salvation Occurrence," Bultmann says clearly, "The salvation-occurrence is nowhere present except in the proclaiming, accosting, demanding, and promising word of preaching The salvation-occurrence is eschatological occurrence just in this fact, that it does not become a fact of the past but constantly takes place anew in the present."¹¹

Having made it clear that the place where God acts is in human existence here and now, Bultmann insists that God has also acted in Jesus Christ, that is, in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In his famous essay on "New Testament and Mythology," Bultmann severely criticizes the old liberal theology because it surrendered the proclamation of "the decisive act of God in Christ." For this decisive act of God, the liberals substituted religious and ethical truths which were timeless and eternal.¹² He also criticizes the history of religious school on the same basis that they are silent about a decisive act of God in Christ (p. 15). Over against such unbiblical views, Bultmann insists that faith "was only there at a certain moment in history. It had to be *revealed*; it *came* (Gal. 3:23 & 25." Faith became possible only "at a definite point in history in consequence of an *event*—viz., the event of Christ."¹³ Bultmann admits that philosophical analysis can correctly describe the character of authentic existence; but it completely lacks the ability to enable man to achieve his authentic being. This can occur only by virtue of an act of God, an event of redemption which was wrought in Christ.¹⁴ Through philosophical analysis, man "is capable of knowing that his authentic life consists in self-commitment, but is incapable of realizing it At the very point where man can do nothing, God steps in and acts—indeed he has acted already—on man's behalf."¹⁵ This agent of God's presence and activity in history is a real figure of history. It is quite clear that Bultmann means to designate the historical¹⁶ Jesus as the one in whom God has acted. In an essay written in 1940, Bultmann wrote, "The New Testament proclaims that the freedom and the arbitrary nature of God's action is authenticated by the fact that he has acted decisively for all the world and for all time in the person of a concrete, historical man, *Jesus of Nazareth*."¹⁷ Again, he says, "Jesus Christ is the Eschatological Event as the man Jesus of Nazareth and as the Word which resounds in the mouth of those who preach him."¹⁸

This is indeed paradoxical. So sharp is the paradox that one of the main factors in the debate about his theology is whether or not he is self-contradictory and ought to surrender completely any claim that God has acted in the historical Jesus. To try to get beneath the surface of this paradox, we need to pursue further some of the basic elements in Bultmann's theological thinking. First, we must ask about his view of nature and the world. Bultmann views both nature and history as closed systems. He calls *Wunder*, but he denies *Mirakel*. A *Wunder* is an act of God in an historical event which is hidden to all but the eye of faith. There is no outward evidence that God is acting. The idea of *Mirakel* as an intrusion of God into the course of natural events is to Bultmann impossible.¹⁹

History is also a closed system. "The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continual of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect."²⁰ Bultmann takes this stance because he is a modern man. The ancient man could believe in a God who interferes both in nature and in history; but the modern man can accept such views only by the sacrifice of his intellect or by blatant dishonesty.

We must ask further about Bultmann's view of God; and this is probably the fundamental fact in Bultmann's entire theological structure. By definition, God is the absolutely other, the holy transcendent. "God is not the essence and origin of that world of mind of which humanism speaks. God is the absolutely transcendent One, the Eternal One, and his eternity is qualitatively different from everything of this world, to which the world of mind also belongs."²¹ Since God is wholly other, we cannot say what God is like in himself. We can only speak of what God does to us.²² Because God is the utterly transcendent one, theology cannot speculate about God, nor can it speak of ideas about God. It can only speak of the active God, the God who acts upon me. Therefore I can speak of God only when God has spoken to and acted upon me. I cannot say that God in his nature is gracious; I can only say that God is gracious to me. I cannot speak of qualities or characteristics which exist in God; I can only speak of the way God has acted upon me. Therefore to speak of God means at the same time to speak of man; for God can only be known as God acts upon men. It follows therefore that to speak of myself is to speak of God; for it is only in the area of existence that God can be heard and known.²³ Thus for Bultmann, theology does not have as its objective speculative or abstract statements about the nature and being of God. Rather, theology is the explication of the self-understanding which man has achieved when God has spoken to him through the *Kerygma* or the proclamation of the Word of God.²⁴

One of Bultmann's most important essays is entitled "What does it Mean to Speak about God?"²⁵ Bultmann develops a play upon the words *reden von* and *reden uber*. To speak *uber Gott* means that I must take a standpoint outside of that about which I speak. However, there is no possible standpoint outside of God; and therefore it is impossible to speak *uber Gott* in general sentences or general truths. To speak *uber Gott* means that God becomes an object of thought to which I can relate myself as I choose and toward which I may choose a neutral position with reference to God's reality and being. I can therefore speculate about God, I can accept certain propositions about God or reject them. I have thus reduced the reality of God to an object of my thought. However God is the transcendent one; God is always and must be Subject. He can never become object. Therefore to speak in this manner about God is not only erroneous and foolish, it is even sinful. I can only speak about God as I speak about his claims upon me and as I become the object of God's acting. I can only speak of God when he becomes the reality which determines my existence. Therefore I can only speak of God by speaking at the same time of myself, for it is to me that God has spoken. God can be known only out of my existential situation as he speaks to me and shows himself to be God, and as I yield in submission and decision to God. Out of this existential encounter, I can speak *von Gott*, of the One who lays his claim upon me and who determines my existence. As Bultmann says elsewhere discussing God's revelation, the natural man thinks he knows what revelation must look like, and so he finds revelation in nature and history. "He thinks that the criterion for the revelation of God is at his disposal." However, "God's revelation is not at the beck and call of human criteria: it is not a phenomenon within the world, but is his act alone."²⁶

Parallel to Bultmann's concept of a completely transcendent God is his concept of faith. Bultmann describes salvation or redemption in philosophical terms of

authentic existence. He draws upon the existential philosophy of Heidegger in this description of the redeemed life. This redeemed life of authentic existence is the life of faith. In Bultmann's view, one would not say that faith leads to salvation or true existence; the life of faith is itself the life of authentic existence. Inauthentic existence or the fallen life is trusting one's own works, confidence in one's own achievements, the seeking of security in one's own attainments or in the world. For Bultmann, the great sin is the sin of boasting which means finding security in any source whatsoever outside of God. Faith therefore is complete trust in God to the abandonment of all other securities. The life of faith is the life which trusts in God and in God alone. Thus the security of authentic existence can be achieved only by the abandonment of all self-contrived security.²⁷ This is how Bultmann understands the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith apart from works.

Bultmann applies this concept not only to one's personal salvation by which he attains authentic existence; he applies it also to the relationship of faith to history. Since authentic existence means faith in God and God alone, it cannot be faith which rests upon the findings of historical research. Therefore the word of redemption needs nothing to verify or to authenticate it. If Christian faith is established by historical research which proves the Messianic consciousness of Jesus, which establishes the validity of his claims to be the Son of God, then our confidence is in history and the historian rather than in God. It is therefore not the task of historical research to vindicate the truth of the Gospel. Such a procedure would "tie our faith in the word of God to the results of historical research."²⁸

Therefore faith must be emancipated from its association with a world view which is expressed in objective terms. We must not try to project God and his acts into the sphere of objective reality. God is invisible and his acts are invisible. God can be believed in only in defiance to all outward appearance. To identify the acting of God with objective historical facts which can be established by historical research is an invalid procedure, because it leads away from faith in God alone. Speech about such objective acts of God in history is therefore mythological. Thus the radical demythologizing of the New Testament, including the demythologizing of objectifying language about the acts of God in history, is a perfect parallel to Paul's and Luther's doctrine of justification by faith.²⁹ Such faith destroys every false security, whether in the form of good works or ascertainable historical knowledge. Security can be found only by abandoning all security, whether religious or historical.

In spite of his concept of a completely transcendent God who cannot be objectified in historical acts and his view of faith which is self-validating and which must be freed from all historical supports, Bultmann insists that God has acted in the historical Jesus. We must now ask the question, What does Bultmann know about the historical Jesus, and in what sense has God acted in him? *Historisch*, Bultmann knows very little about Jesus. Probably the most frequently quoted sentence from Bultmann's writings is taken from his first book to be translated into English. "I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus."³⁰ Jesus was only a Jewish prophet proclaiming the imminent end of the world which never happened. The reason for this radical statement of ignorance about Jesus is that the Gospels do not portray in biographical terms the development of a human personality but a divine person, in whom there is neither development nor growth. The "historical" Jesus has for Bultmann been lost behind the decades of Christian faith which reinterpreted the historical Jesus as the divine Christ. At this point, Bultmann is noted as one of the most radical of form critics. Historically, Jesus belonged to Judaism not to the substance of New Testament theology and Christian faith. He was merely a Jewish apocalypticist.

The important fact about the relationship of the historical Jesus to Christian faith is this: Bultmann does not need nor want the historical Jesus, for faith must be independent of historical proofs. Thus he says in a very eloquent passage, "I have never felt myself to be uncomfortable in my critical radicalism but entirely comfortable. However, I have frequently had the feeling that my conservative colleagues in the New Testament have felt quite uncomfortable, for I see them constantly engaged in rescue operations. I let the fire quietly burn, for I see that all that burns in fantasies and pictures of the life of Jesus school, that is, only *Christos kata sarka*. However *Christos kata sarka* has no concern for us. I have no idea, nor do I want to know what was in Jesus' inner thoughts."³¹ The *Christos kata sarka* is the historical Jesus who is capable of being established by historical criticism. Bultmann does not need such a Jesus nor is he interested in the inner consciousness of Jesus. It is a matter of indifference whether Jesus felt himself to be Messiah or the Son of God. All of this belongs to history, and faith is reposed directly in God, not in the findings of historical research. Thus Bultmann's skepticism about the historical Jesus is not only the result of his historical criticism but also of his positive theological stance.

In spite of this, Bultmann is certain that God spoke in the historical Jesus. Jesus announced the imminent apocalyptic end of the world; but Jesus was also the bearer of the Word of God for the last hour.³² As the bearer of the Word of God, his Word demanded decision of man, and his person demanded decision. Bultmann is fond of quoting Luke 12:8, "And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God." In this passage, Bultmann thinks of the Son of Man as some future apocalyptic figure other than Jesus; but the destiny of men is determined by their reaction to Jesus' person. Jesus did not teach that he himself was the Son of Man. He had no teaching about his own person. However, the decisive fact was the fact of his person and work. His teaching held nothing new by way of content; but the fact that he now taught in this last decisive hour is the novel element which determines everything. Thus the decisive element about Jesus is not the *Was*, but the *Dass* of his preaching.³³ By the *Was* Bultmann means the "whatness," that is, the content of the person and consciousness of Jesus. By the *Dass*, he means the "thatness," that is, the mere fact that Jesus lived and taught. Thus Bultmann insists that the historical Jesus is absolutely necessary for faith; but it is only the fact that Jesus lived and was the bearer of the Word of God which brought men to decision. It is not the content of his personality or his teaching which is important. In fact, Jesus had no new teaching about God or man or salvation. He was merely a Jewish apocalypticist announcing the imminent inbreaking of God to end history and to inaugurate an apocalyptic kingdom, an event which never took place. The decisive fact is the hour, the Now of his speaking (*Gesprochenwerdens*) the event of the Word. In his Word, the will of God meets men. His Word has the power which is peculiar to the will of God. In the decision of the hearers rests their fate (Mark 8:38). Jesus' person is embodied in his Word; that is, his Word is event, the event of the power and the will of God.³⁴

However this is not something which can be recovered as a past event of history. *Historisch*, Jesus is only a Jewish Rabbi. It was contrary to all appearances that he was the bearer of the Word of God. There was an ambiguous factor about his person. His role as the bearer of the Word of God was not an unequivocal fact of the world which everyone can observe and which historical research can reconstruct. It is an ambiguous fact which can only be understood in its true character in the hearing of the Word. This is why Jesus refused to give signs of

self-authentication. His Word alone brought men under decision.³⁵ Thus God can no longer speak to us through Jesus or his words because they are facts of past history and can be reconstructed only by historical research; and faith can never become dependent upon the findings of history. God must act directly and immediately upon man.

This is why Bultmann finds the Word of God for man today only in the *Kerygma*—the proclamation of the Gospel, not in the historical Jesus. The *Kerygma* goes back to the early church. The early church interpreted the meaning of Jesus to them in mythological terms. Jesus had been the bearer of the Word of God and had brought men under decision. After Jesus' death the early church interpreted the meaning of Jesus' death in mythological terms. They combined two great myths: the myth of Jewish apocalyptic with its two ages and an eschatological kingdom of God, and the myth of Gnostic dualism with its idea of the heavenly redeemer who comes to earth for the salvation of men. In the early church, Christ was proclaimed in terms of these combined Jewish and Gnostic myths as the pre-existent heavenly being who came to earth for man's salvation, who died and rose again, ascended to heaven and will come again to bring history to its end. All of this is mythology; but in this mythological *Kerygma*, God continued to speak in the early church. In this *Kerygma*, decision continued to take place. And in the proclamation of the *Kerygma* today, God meets us in direct existential confrontation. God no longer meets man and speaks to us through the historical Jesus. He remains a figure of the past, to be unearthed only by historical research. God meets us in the proclamation of Jesus Christ, in the contemporary *Kerygma*. The event of Jesus' Word found its continuation in the *Kerygma*, in the proclamation of Jesus Christ, even though this proclamation assumed mythological form. Here is found the necessity and significance of the historical Jesus: the source, the beginning, the first instance of the redemptive event. The Word of God found its beginning in the historical Jesus. However, all we need today is the present living Word of God, and the *Dass* of the historical Jesus to explain the rise of the *Kerygma*.³⁶ "In its redemptive aspect the cross of Christ is no mere mythical event but a permanent historical (*geschichtlich*) fact originating in the past historical (*historisch*) event which is the crucifixion of Jesus."³⁷ "God encounters us in His Word, i.e., in a particular word, in the proclamation inaugurated with Jesus Christ. . . . That is why the living Word of God is never a word of human wisdom but an event encountered in history. The fact that it originates in an historical event provides the credentials for its utterance on each specific occasion."³⁸

Thus we have the paradox, "that a human figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and the destiny of that figure—i.e., a human being and his fate, with a recognizable place in world history, and therefore exposed to the objective observation of the historian and intelligible within their context in world history—are not thus apprehended and understood as what they really are, namely, as the act of God, as the eschatological event."³⁹ "Thus the *ephapax* is understood as never before in its true sense as the 'once' of the eschatological event. For it does not mean the datable uniqueness and finality of an event of past history, but teaches us in a high degree of paradox to believe that just such an event of the past is the once-and-for-all eschatological event, which is continually reenacted in the word of proclamation. This proclamation is a word which addresses me personally, and tells me that the preventive grace of God has already acted on my behalf, though not in such a way that I can look back upon this act of God as a datable event of the past, but in the sense that God's having acted is present as an eschatological Now."⁴⁰ This act of God "must denote an act in a real, objective sense, and not just a symbolical or pictorial expression. On the other hand, if the action of God is not to be conceived

as a worldly phenomenon capable of being apprehended apart from its existential reference it can only be spoken of by speaking simultaneously of myself as the person who is existentially concerned. To speak of the act of God means to speak at the same time of my existence. Since human life is lived out in time and space, man's encounter with God can only be a specific event here and now. This event, our being addressed by God here and now, our being questioned, judged, and blessed by him is what we mean when we speak of an act of God."⁴¹ "Jesus Christ is the Eschatological Event as the man Jesus of Nazareth, and as the Word which resounds in the mouth of those who preach him."⁴²

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FOOTNOTES

1. See J. M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville: Allenson, 1959); Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ without Myth* (New York: Harper's, 1961).
2. *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. by H. W. Bartsch (London: S.P.C.K., 1953); Harper Torchbook, 1961); pp. 196-197.
3. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, (New York; Scribner's 1958), p. 78.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 63; 64, 67, 70; 67, 73, 78.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
7. See *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, Schubert M. Ogden, editor (New York: Medias Books, 1960), pp. 58-91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 85, 87.
10. *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, p. 58.
11. *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's 1951), I, p. 302.
12. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 13.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
17. *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1952), II, p. 75; Eng. tr. by J.C.G. Greig; *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: S.C.M. 1955), p. 85.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
19. See *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1933) I, pp. 214-228.
20. *Existence and Faith*, p. 291.
21. *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, p. 153.
22. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 202.
23. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, pp. 117, 118.
24. *Theology of the New Testament*, II, pp. 237-240.
25. "Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?" in *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, pp. 26-37.
26. *Essays*, p. 113.
27. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 211.
28. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41.
29. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 211.
30. *Jesus and the Word*, (New York: Scribner's 1934), p. 8. The German edition was originally published in 1926.
31. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, p. 101.
32. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, p. 174.
33. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, p. 265.
34. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, pp. 273 f.; *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 216-219.
35. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, p. 174; *Existence and Faith*, pp. 195-196, 253.
36. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, p. 292.
37. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 37; see *Kerygma und Mythos*, I, p. 43.
38. *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 206f.
39. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 208.
40. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 209.
41. *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 196.
42. *Essays*, p. 286.