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The Gospel and History in the Thought of Paul Tillich

D. SCOTT

Theologians need not be afraid of any historical conjecture, for revealed truth lies in a dimension where it can neither be confirmed nor negated by historiography. Therefore, theologians should not prefer some results of historical research to others on theological grounds, and they should not resist results which finally have to be accepted if scientific honesty is not to be destroyed, even if they seem to undermine the knowledge of revelation. Historical investigations should neither comfort nor worry theologians. Knowledge of revelation, although it is mediated primarily through historical events, does not imply factual assertions, and it is therefore not exposed to critical analysis by historical research. Its truth is to be judged by criteria which lie within the dimension of revelatory knowledge.¹

This short paragraph sums up, as well as any, Tillich's understanding of the relation of history and historiography to the revelation of God in Jesus, the Christ. Here he seems to be saying that ultimately scientific research into historical events has no bearing upon the validity or invalidity of faith, and so should not be a matter of concern for the man of faith. However, Tillich would be the first to admit that from the moment that the scientific method of historical research was applied to Biblical literature, the revealed Word of God, theological problems which were never completely absent became intensified in a way unknown to former periods of church history. For the average Christian consciousness shaped by the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration, the analytical-critical element of the historical method was much more impressive than the constructive-conjectural element. Every historical research criticizes its sources, separating what has more probability from that which has less or is altogether improbable. Nobody doubts the validity of this method, since it is confirmed continuously by its

¹ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 130.

success; and nobody seriously protests if it destroys beautiful legends and deeply-rooted prejudices. But Biblical research, understandably enough, became suspect from its very beginning. It seemed to criticize not only the historical sources but the revelation contained in these sources. Historical research and rejection of Biblical authority were identified from the very start. Revelation, it was implied, covered not only the revelatory content but also the historical form in which it had appeared. This seemed to be especially true of the fact concerning the 'historical Jesus'. Since the Biblical revelation is essentially historical, it appeared impossible to separate the revelatory content from the historical reports as they are given in the Biblical records. Historical criticism seemed to undercut faith itself. So the research for the so-called 'historical Jesus' began and by using this as an example we can begin to understand Tillich's approach to the relation of history and historiography to the Gospel.

According to Tillich, the motives behind this research were religious and scientific at the same time. He feels that the attempt was courageous and very significant in many respects. However, he maintains that, seen in the light of its basic intention, i.e. the attempt of historical criticism to find the empirical truth about Jesus of Nazareth, the venture was a failure. He well points out that the situation is not a matter of a preliminary shortcoming of historical research which will some day be overcome. It is caused by the nature of the sources. The reports about Jesus of Nazareth are those of Jesus as the Christ given by persons who had received him as the Christ. Therefore, Tillich maintains, if one tries to find the real Jesus behind the picture of Jesus as the Christ, it is necessary critically to separate the elements which belong to the factual side of the event from the elements which belong to the confessional side. In doing so, one sketches a 'Life of Jesus', and innumerable such sketches have been made. In many of them scientific honesty, loving devotion, and theological interest have worked together. In others critical detachment and even malevolent rejection are visible. But none can claim to be a probable picture which is the result of the tremendous scientific toil dedicated to this task for two hundred years. At best, Tillich would maintain, these are more or less probable results, able to be the basis neither of an acceptance nor of a rejection of the Christian faith.

This does not mean, however, that Tillich is prepared completely to reject the historical element in the Gospel and its reception by the believer. For him 'Jesus as the Christ is both a historical fact and a subject of believing reception. One cannot speak the truth about the event on which Christianity is based without asserting both sides'.² He points out that many

² *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 98.

theological mistakes could have been avoided if these two sides of the 'Christian event' had been emphasized with equal strength. Indeed, Christian theology as a whole is undercut if one of them is completely ignored. If theology ignores the fact to which the name of Jesus of Nazareth points, 'it ignores the basic Christian assertion that Essential God-Manhood has appeared with existence and subjected itself to the conditions of existence without being conquered by them'.³ He maintains that if there were no personal life in which 'existential estrangement' had been overcome, the 'New Being' would have remained a quest and an expectation and would not be a reality in time and space. Only if the 'existence is conquered' at one particular point in history—a personal life, representing existence as a whole—is it conquered in principle. For Tillich, this is the reason that Christian theology 'must insist on the actual fact to which the name Jesus of Nazareth refers'. Indeed, this is why the Church prevailed against competing groups in the religious movements of the first centuries. This is the reason that the Church had to fight vehemently with the gnostic-docetic elements within herself, elements which had entered Christianity as early as the New Testament. And this is the reason, Tillich would say, that anyone who takes seriously the historical approach to the New Testament and its critical methods becomes suspect of docetic ideas, however strongly he may emphasize the factual side of the message of Jesus the Christ.

Nevertheless, Tillich asserts that the other side of the coin, the 'believing reception' of Jesus as the Christ, calls for equal emphasis. Without this 'reception' the Christ would not have been the Christ, that is to say 'the manifestation of the New Being in time and space'. If Jesus had not impressed himself as the Christ on his disciples and through them on all subsequent generations, the man who is called Jesus of Nazareth would perhaps be remembered as a historically and religiously important person. As such, he might belong to the preliminary revelation, perhaps to the preparatory segment of the history of revelation. He could then have been a 'prophetic anticipation of the New Being, but not the final manifestation of the New Being itself'. He would not have been the Christ even if he had claimed to be the Christ. For Tillich, then, the receptive side of the Christian event is as important as the factual side. And only their unity creates the event upon which Christianity is based. If the Church is to move ahead into the ever-increasing contact with the religions of the world which the future promises she will have to hold these two elements in creative tension.

In order to explain this Tillich turns to the example of the historical approach to Biblical literature which he sees as one

³ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II., p. 98.

of the great events in the history of Christianity, and even of religion and human culture. This, he says, is one of the elements of which Protestantism can be proud. It was an 'expression of Protestant courage'. The result of this courage is that Christianity was able to join in the 'general historical consciousness', and was not forced into an isolated and narrow spiritual world of its own without influence in the creative development of spiritual life. He admits that the courage to subject the holy writings of the Church to a critical analysis through the historical method was not without serious risk. But the groups which took this risk have kept alive, in spite of the various crises into which radical historical criticism threw them. And, he points out, it became more and more manifest that the Christian assertion that Jesus is the Christ does not contradict the most uncompromising historical honesty. Of course, the way in which this assertion is expressed has had to be changed under the impact of the historical approach.

For Tillich, the first and most important of these changes is that theology has learned to distinguish between the 'empirically historical', the 'legendary', and the 'mythological' elements in the Biblical stories of both the Old and the New Testaments. It is obvious, he maintains, that this distinction between these three semantic forms has important consequences for the work of the theologian. In the first place, it prevents him from giving dogmatic validity to judgements which belong to the realm of probability, be it higher or lower. The Christian cannot give any dogmatic validity to historically probable judgements. Whatever faith can do in its own realm, it cannot overrule historical judgements. It cannot make the historically improbable probable, or the probable improbable, or the probable or improbable certain, for the certitude of faith does not imply certainty about questions of historical research. This insight is widespread today, but Tillich sees its greatest contribution as being to theology. He asserts, however, that it is not the only one; there are several others, one being the insight into the development of the christological symbols.

Tillich points out that by analysing the difference between 'historical', 'legendary', and 'mythical' elements in the Gospel reports, historical research has given theology a tool for dealing with the Christological symbols of the Bible. Theology, he would maintain, cannot escape this task, since it is through these symbols that theology from the very beginning has tried to express the 'logos' of the Christian message. Some of the Christological symbols mentioned are: Son of David, Son of Man, Messiah, Son of God, Kyrios, and Logos. Tillich shows their development in the following four steps:⁴

⁴ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 109.

1. The origin and growth of the symbols in their own religious culture and language.
2. The use of the symbols by those to whom they had become alive as expressions of their self-understanding and as answers to the questions arising out of their existential situation.
3. The transformation in meaning the symbols underwent when they were used to interpret the event on which Christianity is based.
4. The distortion of the symbols by popular superstition, supported by theological literalism and supernaturalism.

Tillich then traces the development of a number of the Christological symbols through these four steps, showing how the symbols have been destroyed. For the purposes of this essay it will suffice to follow the development of only one symbol to illustrate what he is driving at. His first example is the symbol 'Son of Man'.

The symbol 'Son of Man', which is used most frequently by Jesus in pointing to himself in all four Gospels, designates an original unity between God and man. Especially is this the case if one accepts a connection between the Persian symbol of the Original Man and the Pauline concept of the Spiritual Man. This is the first step. The second step follows from the way in which the Man from Above is contrasted with man's situation of being subjugated to the forces of evil and so separated from God. This contrast includes the expectation that the Son of Man will conquer the forces of evil and re-establish the unity between God and man. In the third step, as Tillich has it, the symbol 'Son of Man' is recorded as Jesus applying the term to himself, as, for instance, in the trial scene before the High Priest (Matt. 26:64). The original idea of the function of the Son of Man is decisively transformed in this account. This is so much the case that the accusation of blasphemy for calling himself the Son of Man who will appear as the judge of this world on the clouds is understandable. Literalism takes the fourth step by imagining a transcendent being who, once upon a time, was sent down from his heavenly place and became a man. In this way a true and powerful symbol becomes an absurd story, and the Christ becomes a half-god, a particular being between God and man.

Finally, Tillich draws the conclusion that an evaluation of the historical approach to the Biblical records leads to a negative and a positive assertion. The negative assertion is that historical research can neither give nor take away the foundation of the Christian faith. The positive assertion is that historical research has influenced and must influence Christian theology, first, by giving an analysis of the three different semantic levels of Biblical literature; second, by showing in several steps the

development of the Christological and other theologically important symbols ; and, finally, by providing a precise philological and historical understanding of the Biblical literature by means of the best methods developed in all historical work.

However, it is necessary to raise a question which is constantly being asked with considerable religious anxiety. Does not the acceptance of the historical method for dealing with the source documents of the Christian faith introduce a dangerous insecurity into the life and thinking of the Church and of every individual Christian ? Could not historical research lead to a complete scepticism about the Biblical records ? Is it not imaginable that historical criticism could come to the judgement that the man Jesus of Nazareth never lived ? Is it not destructive for the Christian faith if the non-existence of Jesus can somehow be made probable, no matter how low the degree of probability ?

By way of reply, Tillich would have us reject a couple of insufficient and misleading answers. In the first place, it is totally inadequate to point out that historical research has not yet given any evidence to support such scepticism. It may not have yet, but the anxious question remains of whether it could not do so sometime in the future. Faith, Tillich would maintain, cannot rest on such unsure ground. Another possible answer, though not false, is rather misleading. This is to say that the historical foundation of Christianity is an essential element of the Christian faith itself and this faith, through its own power, can overrule sceptical possibilities within historical criticism. Faith can, it is maintained by those who support this view, guarantee the existence of Jesus of Nazareth and at least the essentials in the Biblical picture of his life and ministry. But Tillich would have us analyse this answer carefully, for it is ambiguous. The problem here is: What, exactly, can faith guarantee ? For Tillich the inevitable answer is that faith can guarantee only its own foundations, that is, the reality which has created the faith. 'This reality is the New Being, who conquers existential estrangement and thereby makes faith possible. This alone faith is able to guarantee—and that because its own existence is identical with the presence of the New Being. Faith itself is the immediate (not mediated by conclusions) evidence of the New Being within and under the conditions of existence.'⁵ This is guaranteed by the very nature of the Christian faith, for no historical criticism can question the immediate awareness of those who find themselves in 'the state of faith'. Participation, not historical argument, guarantees the reality of the event on which Christianity is based. Faith guarantees a personal life in which the 'New Being has conquered the old being'. But it does not guarantee his name to be Jesus of Nazareth. Historical doubt concerning the existence and the life of someone cannot be overruled. He might have had another name.

⁵ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, p. 114.

But whatever his name, 'the New Being was and is actual in this man'.

But here a very important question arises. How can the 'New Being' who is called 'the Christ' transform reality if no concrete trait of his nature is left? Tillich suggests that Kierkegaard exaggerates when he says that it is sufficient for the Christian faith nakedly to assert that in the years 1-30 God sent his son. Without the concreteness of the 'New Being', its newness would be empty, for Tillich. 'Only if existence is conquered concretely and in its manifold aspects, is it actually conquered.' The power which has created and preserved the Church, 'the community of the New Being', is not an abstract statement about her appearance on the scene but, rather, it is the picture of him who is the 'Head' of the 'Body'. Though no special trait of this picture can be verified with certainty, it can be definitely stated that through this picture the 'New Being' has power to transform. The picture has this creative, transforming power because the power of the 'New Being' is expressed in and through it. This consideration leads to the distinction between an imaginary picture and a real picture. A picture imagined by the same contemporaries of Jesus would have expressed their untransformed existence and their search for a 'New Being'. But it would not have been the 'New Being' itself. That is tested by its transforming power.

The word 'picture' leads Tillich to an analogy which is perhaps helpful for our understanding. Those who try to push behind the Biblical picture to discover the 'historical Jesus' with the help of the critical method try to provide a photograph. Now, a good photograph is not without subjective elements, and no one would deny that every empirical description of a historical figure has such elements. The opposite attitude would be to interpret the New Testament picture as the painted projection of the experiences and ideals of the most religiously profound minds in the period of the Emperor Augustus. Idealistic art is analogous to this attitude. However, the third way is that of an 'expressionist' portrait. In this approach to painting, the painter would try to enter into the deepest levels of the person with whom he deals. He could do so only by a profound participation in the reality and the meaning of his subject-matter. Only then can he paint this person in such a way that his surface traits are neither reproduced as in photography, nor naturalistically imitated as in some painting, nor idealized according to the painter's ideal of beauty, but are used to express what the painter has experienced through his participation in his subject. This third way is meant when Tillich uses the term 'real picture' in referring to the Gospel records of Jesus as the Christ.

There is a sense in which it is profoundly true to say that we know nobody as well as we know Jesus. Of course, in terms of historical documentation, we know many people better than Jesus. But in terms of 'personal participation in his being' we

do not know anyone better because his being is 'the New Being which is universally valid for every human being'.

In taking this position Tillich is candid enough to mention a very interesting argument against it. This is based on the common assumption that faith, by its very nature, includes an element of risk and so why not take the risk of historical uncertainty as well. The affirmation that Jesus is the Christ is an act of faith and consequently of daring courage. It is not an arbitrary leap into darkness, but rather a decision in which elements of immediate participation and therefore certainty are mixed with elements of strangeness and therefore uncertainty and doubt. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, it is an element of faith. There is, indeed, no faith without risk. The risk of faith is that it could affirm a wrong symbol of ultimate concern, a symbol which does not really express ultimacy. But this risk lies in quite a different dimension from the risk of accepting uncertain historical facts. It is wrong, therefore, Tillich rightly points out, to consider the risk concerning uncertain historical facts as part of the risk of faith. The risk of faith is existential; it concerns the totality of our being, while the risk of historical judgements is theoretical and open to permanent scientific correction. Here are two different dimensions which should never be confused. 'A wrong faith can destroy the meaning of one's life; a wrong historical judgement cannot.'

In the context of our gathering here to consider the question of the Gospel and History in India today we must ask in what way Tillich's understanding of history and the Gospel can be of help in the dialogue with non-Christian religions which lies ahead. Does Tillich's approach to the question shed any light on the path we are to tread as we seek to interpret the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ, to non-Christian believers in India?

It is my contention that we Christians would move more readily into a dialogue with non-Christians if we would recognize consciously the two levels on which we move when we speak of the Gospel. Tillich speaks of these as 'historical fact' and 'believing reception', but for our present purposes I shall refer to them as the *confessional* and the *historical*. Confessional here refers to confession of faith, while historical is to be understood in its more ordinary usage, involving the methods of historiography and the attempt to establish the occurrence or non-occurrence of objective events. Tillich has clearly pointed out that when *heilsgeschichte* and historiography deal with the same events they deal with them in two radically different ways. *Heilsgeschichte* may make use of historical methods, but the events it seeks to establish, as Tillich would have us remember, can only be made to appear to be established by such methods. Jesus of Nazareth is an historical fact or event. The Christ of faith is an inner reality. When a Christian says, 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God', he is making a confessional statement. The confessional statement may point to 'outer events' in history as being 'bearers' of inner response, but it

cannot establish a logical or factual connection between them. A confession of faith always testifies to what has happened in *my* or *our* history, not in history as such.

Tillich would have us understand that the appeal to history never establishes the validity of a confessional statement even though certain historical events may have precipitated the faith response. There is no 'objective' security for the man who lives by faith. The validity of faith is rooted in the depth of man's being, and is appropriated existentially in the living now, never in some far-off 'then'. Faith expresses itself symbolically through mythological language and sacramentally through rituals and in the 'fruits of the spirit'. Christian *faith* is 'truer' than Christian *history* for those who believe, for faith has its vitality prior to either the proof or disproof of any specific event or series of events. And the vital outward expression of a profound faith is a life lived sacramentally. Whitehead has somewhere said that expression is the only sacrament.

For the Christian, then, as Tillich asserts, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith are inextricably intertwined, just as the entire Gospel is a mixture of the confessional and the historical. Both of these poles of the Christian faith must be kept in continual tension. Neither should be ignored. When the historical has been practically denied, Christians have escaped into flights of allegory, fantastic speculations about emanations, and invidious forms of esotericism where the only canons applied have been those of personal wish or private myth. Where the confessional has been forgotten or repressed, Christians have taken refuge in sterile literalisms, legalisms, fundamentalisms and brittle dogmaticisms.

The quest for the historical Jesus can always contribute something not only to the Christian's interpretation of the historical setting of his faith but also to his own moral and ethical life. But the deeper realms of the life of faith are not dependent on the historical knowledge that these studies may reveal.

Tillich would have us understand the 'confessional' and the 'historical' elements of the Gospel in their creative inter-relatedness, linked by the act of faith. Indeed, to live by faith is not to live solely 'by the facts' but by a power that has somehow seized one and transformed him from a person living in extreme self-centredness to a person who can accept his finitude and live and work with others in compassion and understanding. Such a person does not demand final 'answers'.

Rather, God in Jesus Christ allows us to be open, open to the past as it has been given to us to experience, open to the present as it continually comes to us from the hand of God, and open to the future in the hope that through him *all things* will be reconciled to himself (cf. Colossians 1:15-20). Indeed, to be able to accept the relative as relative is one sign of the strength of the faith that is in a person. As Christians we are called to go forth seeking converse with all men, realizing that 'the security and cosiness of historic, everyday churchliness must be

sacrificed to the heroic daring of creativeness',⁶ which is the universal and eternal work of God. This calls for a conscious recognition that nowhere has God left Himself without witness and everywhere we need to walk with quiet step and sensitive ear lest we miss some new disclosure of His grace. Never must we presume to dictate to God the channel through which that disclosure may come.

History and Rudolf Bultmann

J. C. Hindley

For a conference of this kind we presumably want to assess Bultmann's contribution as a whole, for his greatness lies in his brilliant performance in dovetailing many disparate and detailed researches into one unified understanding of history, scripture and experience. Yet the whole cannot be assessed without a precise examination of each piece of the interlocking evidence and the auxiliary researches on which Bultmann's impressive structure rests, and that would take at the very least a whole book. We can do no more than offer a few impressions on the theme suggested. The task is made yet more difficult by the fact that when Bultmann leaves the field of his technical competence to talk about philosophy and historical method his language becomes impressionistic and imprecise to an alarming degree. We could indeed devote the whole of this paper in trying to elucidate what precisely Bultmann has to say to us. We shall therefore do no more than raise questions and suggest some of the major points at which (as it seems to me) Bultmann's position is less than secure.

I

There appear to be three main drives behind Bultmann's 'existential interpretation' of the Christian faith. Firstly, there is his general scepticism about the possibility of talking about God at all as He is in himself. This scepticism led him in an early essay to say, 'The object of an existential analysis of man is man; and it is likewise man that is the object of theology.'¹ It follows that all talk of God's action or God's nature which does not directly speak of man must be eliminated as 'myth'. In the second place, Bultmann's concern with man is clarified

⁶ Berdyaev, N., *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, translated, Donald A. Lowrie, Collier Books, 1962, p. 307.

¹ 'The Historicity of Man and Faith' in *E. and F.*, pp. 92 f.