

# Rudolf Bultmann's Existentialist Interpretation Of The New Testament

William M. Arnett

The problem of communicating effectively the message of the Gospel to modern man forms the basis for a lively discussion in our time. The "storm center" of this spirited debate is Rudolf Bultmann, formerly professor of New Testament at the University of Marburg, Germany, from 1921 to 1950. Though now retired, he is probably the most influential theologian in Germany today, and, at the same time, his influence is being manifest increasingly in America. While his most monumental work is *The Theology of the New Testament* in two volumes, it was a revolutionary essay in 1941 on "The Problem of Demythologizing" that was to propel Bultmann to the center of a vigorous debate in theological circles.<sup>1</sup>

## BULTMANN'S BASIC THESIS

The thesis propounded in Bultmann's famous essay is that the New Testament message is mythological in character and as such is not intelligible to modern minds. It is held to present a world view that is no longer tenable. Several features of this outmoded cosmology are, first, a three-storied universe, including heaven, the abode of God and angels; hell, the underworld, a place of torment; and earth at the center, which is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and His angels as well as Satan; secondly, the intervention and control of history by these supernatural powers; and thirdly, the eschatological element, which views the end of the world as imminent, culminating in cosmic catastrophe, after which the Judge will come from heaven, the final judgment will take place, and men will enter into eternal salvation or damnation.<sup>2</sup> Bultmann

- 
1. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth--A Theological Debate* (English trans.), ed. H. W. Bartsch (London: S P C K, 1953).
  2. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

says these various mythological features are traceable to Jewish apocalyptic and Gnostic redemption myths which are no longer believable or meaningful today.

An important reason that intelligent men cannot accept these views is found in the fact of modern science as it shapes our thinking today for good or ill. A blind acceptance of the New Testament would, within this context, be irrational. Furthermore, to insist upon its acceptance as an article of faith would reduce the Christian faith to the level of human achievement. On this premise, he insists that we can no longer hold to the New Testament conception of the world, neither can we believe in spirits, whether good or evil. Furthermore, the miracles of the New Testament have ceased to be miraculous, and the mythological eschatology is untenable. Equally strange and incomprehensible is what the New Testament says about the "Spirit" as a supernatural entity that can penetrate man and work within him. Biblical doctrines such as death as the punishment of sin, of atonement whereby man's guilt is expiated by the death of another who is sinless, and the resurrection of Jesus as an event whereby a supernatural power is released, are held to be meaningless today. Even Christology, considered to be the core of the Gospel in classical orthodoxy, must be thoroughly revamped, including such aspects as His pre-existence, virgin birth, deity, sinlessness, His substitutionary death on the cross, His resurrection and ascension, and His future return in glory.<sup>3</sup>

### BULTMANN'S PROPOSED SOLUTION

What has been said appears to result in a very serious reduction of the content of the Gospel, but Bultmann insists that this is precisely what he seeks to avoid. The task, he says, is not one of selection and elimination. He decisively rejects the view of liberal scholars and preachers that the mythological passages of the Bible are to be understood as figures of speech with only a relative and temporary significance, and therefore should be eliminated. Elimination can only lead toward limitation. Instead of elimination Bultmann demands the "interpretation" of all mythological elements in order to

---

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-8.

lay bare the deeper truth which is independent of the picture language and mythological thinking of earlier ages. Whether or not Bultmann is faithful in consistently rejecting the notion of elimination is still another question.

Bultmann's proposed solution involves two aspects which are closely related and interdependent: (1) the necessity of demythologizing the New Testament, and (2) the importance of an existentialist interpretation of the Gospel message.

What is demythologizing for Bultmann? Or, even more basic at the moment, What is myth? Myth, or mythology, "is the use of imagery to express the other-worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side."<sup>4</sup> As such, it reflects a primitive stage in Christianity. Myth is "reflective imagination, naive or speculative," which "turns to the idea of God"<sup>5</sup> and pictures the relation of the transcendent God to the world. Again, myth expresses man's belief in the real other-worldly origin and purpose of life. As we have already observed, the belief in a three-storied universe, consisting of heaven, earth, and hell, is pure myth. The intervention in human affairs of natural and supernatural powers which man cannot control is mythological too. Traditional Christian eschatology with an emphasis on apocalyptic events is also of the character of myth. But this New Testament mythological container, so to speak, holds spiritual truths about man's existence; and Bultmann's avowed purpose in attempting to distinguish between the mythological and spiritual truths is to make understandable for modern thought the many expressions about God and God's action in the Bible which have a mythological character. The process necessarily involves interpretation rather than excision, and it is at this point that Bultmann differs from liberal form-criticism in biblical study. Theoretically, at least, this is Bultmann's claim.

What Bultmann calls "demythologizing" is the process, using form-criticism, by which one may arrive at the true teaching of Jesus, the Word from God, lying beneath the layers of myth in the Gospels. The purpose of demythologizing is, as we have seen, to make understandable to modern man the Word, and thus make encounter with God possible in the

---

4. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

5. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (Scribners, 1934), p. 139.

proclaimed word. This process is already begun in the New Testament, says Bultmann, especially in the writings of John, who carries the process of demythologizing to its logical conclusion by omitting all reference to future apocalyptic events. It is essentially non-sacramental, non-ecclesiastical, and non-mythological. In order to maintain this view consistently, Bultmann clips out sections of the Johannine writings with disturbing frequency. When contrary passages do not fit his "mold" he does not hesitate to plead "ecclesiastical redaction" and deliberately to eliminate them as later interpolations, without offering a shred of evidence that his judgment is correct. An example of this is seen in Bultmann's treatment of John 12:47 f., 6:39, 40, 44 and 6:51b-58. The inclusion of the phrases "on the last day" and "I will raise him up at the last day" is the work of "later ecclesiastical redaction," thus introducing the traditional futuristic eschatology.<sup>6</sup> Obviously these elements must be eliminated since they clash with Bultmann's realized eschatology.

The second aspect of Bultmann's solution in interpreting the Gospel is his existential approach to the Christian faith. The methodological key for the interpreting of mythology in the Bible is existentialism. In brief, demythologizing the New Testament is existentialist interpretation. He uses the term "existential" to describe what he regards as the predominating truth of the New Testament, the fact of a crisis "Either-Or" encounter with God in which the individual is called upon to decide for or against obedience in faith. This encounter, says Bultmann, comes through Jesus, who is the bearer of the Word of God. An existentialist interpretation is necessary since the real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. "Myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially."<sup>7</sup>

In line with this radically new approach, Bultmann insists that the theological propositions of the New Testament can never be the object of faith. Rather "they can only be the explication of the understanding which is inherent in faith

---

6. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Scribners, 1955), II, 39.

7. *Op. cit.*, "New Testament and Mythology," p. 10.

itself."<sup>8</sup> But there is always an incompleteness in these theological affirmations for they are determined by the believer's situation. It is not to be inferred, however, that such "incompleteness" is to be supplied by future generations. On the contrary, since "the incompleteness has its cause in the inexhaustibility of believing comprehension, which must ever actualize itself anew," the most important thing for Bultmann is "that basic insight that the theological thoughts of the New Testament are the unfolding of faith itself growing...out of one's new self-understanding."<sup>9</sup> By this Bultmann means "an existential understanding of myself which is at one with and inseparable from my understanding of God and the world." Inasmuch as this is a primary axiom for Bultmann, it is obvious that man is both the starting point and center of his theological thought.

#### IMPORTANT EMPHASES IN BULTMANN'S INTERPRETATION

There are some areas of Bultmann's thought that are vitally important for an understanding of his conception of the Christian faith, and in which his existential interpretation is emphasized. We will observe seven of these areas: history, revelation, God, Jesus Christ, faith, decision, and eschatology.

1. History. Bultmann states that his philosophy of history is a fundamental presupposition of all his thinking.<sup>10</sup> There are two types of history: (1) *Historie*, or past history, denoting events in the past which are capable of scientific and critical investigation. (2) *Geschichte* is personal history, arising from personal encounter and dealing with events of present meaning. It is the latter which has real significance for Bultmann. "The meaning of history is always in the present, and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian Faith the meaning of history is realized."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in a study of Jesus one must actually see Jesus "as part of the

---

8. *Op. cit.*, *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 237, 238.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

10. *Op. cit.*, *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 3, 4.

11. Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity* (Scribners, 1958), p. 155.

history in which we have our being."<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that history is a closed system for Bultmann. He states very frankly that "the historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect."<sup>13</sup> This "closedness" precludes any possibility of interference of supernatural, transcendent powers, or miracles.<sup>14</sup>

2. Revelation. In accord with a strong and current understanding of revelation, Bultmann holds that it does not involve any sort of communication of knowledge, but rather it is an occurrence that happens to the individual.<sup>15</sup> This revelation-occurrence is not some cosmic process, but something which takes place in us ourselves in the present moment, "in my particular present."<sup>16</sup> Bultmann is also careful to point out that it is not an occurrence within human life, but rather "one that breaks in upon it from outside and therefore cannot be demonstrated within life itself."<sup>17</sup> Christ is revelation and that revelation is the word, says Bultmann, and it is in preaching that he encounters us.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the strong stress of Bultmann upon the Kerygma--the proclamation of the Gospel, not in the historical Jesus.

3. God. God is the absolutely transcendent One, the Eternal One, says Bultmann, and His eternity is qualitatively different from everything of this world, to which the world of mind also belongs.<sup>19</sup> God is the remote God, as well as the God who is near. He is remote in the sense that He is not a part of that world which the thought and activity of man can control. He is near in that He is the Creator of this world of men which He

12. Op. cit., *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 3, 4.

13. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" *Existence and Faith* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), p. 291.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

15. Op. cit., "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," *Existence and Faith*, p. 78.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

19. Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (Macmillan, 1955), 153.

governs by His providence.<sup>20</sup> However we cannot say what God is like in Himself; we can only speak of what He does to us.<sup>21</sup> Thus, as we have already noted, our understanding of God is bound up with self-understanding, resulting from "man's response to God's word which encounters him in the proclamation of Jesus Christ. It is faith in the Kerygma, which tells of God's dealing in the man Jesus of Nazareth."<sup>22</sup>

4. Jesus Christ. Bultmann does not believe that Jesus was, or claimed even remotely to be, divine. He insists that neither in His sayings nor in the records of the primitive church is there any mention of His metaphysical nature.<sup>23</sup> It is Bultmann's personal opinion that Jesus did not believe Himself to be the Messiah.<sup>24</sup> He says very frankly that "I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist."<sup>25</sup> The chief significance of Jesus is that He is the bearer of the word, and in the word He assures man of the forgiveness of God.<sup>26</sup> The concepts of sacrifice, atonement, and the pre-existence of Christ are all myths intended to show the eschatological power of the crucifixion. The miraculous in Christ's life and ministry is passed off as largely legend. As to Christ's resurrection, there is question as to its historicity, and no significance is attached to it theologically. Christ's death and resurrection are to be seen simply as one event.<sup>27</sup> In regard to Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice, Bultmann repeatedly pleads "redactional gloss." "The blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin" in 1 John 1:7 is "under suspicion of being redactional gloss." The two sentences which refer to Jesus as "the expiation for our sin" in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 are probably likewise redactional glosses. The reference to Jesus' blood in John 6:53-56 is inserted by an ecclesiastical editor. The same

---

20. Op. cit., *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 194, 195.

21. Op. cit., *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 202.

22. Op. cit., *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 239.

23. Op. cit., *Jesus and the Word*, p. 215.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

27. Op. cit., *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 38.

is true of John 19:34b. The thought of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin has no place in John.<sup>28</sup>

5. Faith. Faith is the recognition of the activity of God in one's own life.<sup>29</sup> Faith can only be attained existentially by submitting to the power of God exercising pressure upon me here and now.<sup>30</sup> Faith means radical self-commitment to God in the expectation that everything will come from Him and nothing from ourselves. However, this kind of faith is not a knowledge possessed once and for all. It can only be an event occurring on specific occasions, says Bultmann, and it can remain alive only when the believer is constantly asking himself what God is saying to him here and now. Even for the believer, God is generally just as hidden as He is for everyone else.<sup>31</sup> Faith also involves obedience, because faith means turning our backs on self and abandoning all security.<sup>32</sup> Utilizing the existential thought of Martin Heidegger, Bultmann says the life of faith is itself the life of "authentic being." Life apart from faith is "non-being" or inauthentic existence.

6. Decision. Decision, as we have already noted in the discussion of revelation and faith, has a place of great prominence in Bultmann's thought. Again and again he comes back to the theme of the necessity of decision in the salvation-event or events. God is transcendent and sovereign and demands, in an Either-Or situation, that a man decide against the world and self-rule, and for God's will alone.<sup>33</sup> Bultmann sees Jesus' teaching as pointing entirely to the necessity of radical obedience begun and sustained by decision in the crisis of salvation-events.

7. Eschatology. The emphasis in Bultmann's thought is on "realized eschatology." It is not the past or future that is significant, but the present moment. Both John and Paul understand the believer's existence as eschatological

---

28. Op. cit., *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 54.

29. Op. cit., *Jesus and the Word*, p. 157.

30. Op. cit., *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 198. Cf. Chapter IV, "Faith," *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 70-92.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

33. Op. cit., *Jesus and the Word*, pp. 139 f. Cf. *Theology of the New Testament*, Chapter II, "Johannine Dualism," pp. 15-32.

existence.<sup>34</sup> Futuristic eschatology is unacceptable to Bultmann because his whole stress is on salvation here and now. The ideas of a second advent, the great judgment scene, and future rewards and punishments are all mythological. These myths of an apocalyptic nature come from Judaism, which in turn derives its mythology at least partly from foreign mythological sources. On the basis of his existentialist philosophy, Bultmann rejects the apocalyptic eschatology of the New Testament, insisting that the salvation-event is in itself eschatological, which not only delivers man from his own self-will, but is also a deliverance to the "wholly other worldly."<sup>35</sup>

### AN EVALUATION

This brief survey of Bultmann's thought gives ample indication of the nature of his existentialist approach to the New Testament. Regardless of the phase of teaching under consideration, it is apparent that each is interpreted from the standpoint of existentialism. It is precisely at the point of his philosophical presuppositions that we find his chief weakness. Having been greatly influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, Bultmann approaches Christianity with a preconceived existentialism, and demythologizes the New Testament to fit the pattern. When the Gospel is approached with a preconceived philosophical mold, it is always necessary for Christianity to do the accommodating. It was so with Hegel's speculative rationalism. The same is true of Bultmann's existentialism. The result is an anemic and attenuated Gospel.

It is commendable that Bultmann is motivated with a desire to make the Christian message intelligible and relevant to modern man. However, his existentialism necessitates a preoccupation with a man-centered emphasis on the Christian faith. Therefore the central truths of the Gospel are thrown out of focus, and, in many cases, are badly emasculated (e.g., the atonement of Christ). Furthermore, his constant assault on the supernatural and miraculous veers his theological emphasis toward a religious humanism. His view of the world of nature

---

34. *Op. cit.*, *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 113.

35. *Op. cit.*, "Faith as Eschatological Existence," *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 75 ff.

and history as closed systems, wherein is precluded any possibility of supernatural intervention, indicates his antipathy for these biblical categories.

Bultmann's tendency to downgrade historical factors in the Christian faith, including his skepticism about the historical Jesus, imperils the very foundation of our faith. The logical conclusion is to make these historical foundations irrelevant. That is precisely the conclusion reached by a radically critical Bultmann scholar in America. "The only final condition for sharing in authentic life that the New Testament lays down is a condition that can be formulated in complete abstraction from the event Jesus of Nazareth and all that it specifically imports."<sup>36</sup> For example, the cross simply defines God's love; it does not do anything for men that God has not been doing all along. Ogden further states that "the first conclusion to be drawn from [man's fallenness] is not that man needs Jesus Christ, but that he needs a new self-understanding in which his fallenness is overcome by laying hold of this possibility of life in God's love."<sup>37</sup> If this is the direction we are taking, then the Church of Jesus Christ is headed for the wilderness, and evangelicalism and evangelism are dead.

The arbitrariness with which Bultmann handles the Scriptures manifests both an excessive and dangerous subjectivity and an unscientific exegesis. His frequent use of "ecclesiastical redaction" and "redactional gloss" is disturbing, to say the least. He thereby forces his materials into a preconceived mold and vitiates the Gospel. Even Karl Barth predicted a violent comeback of modernism, and as early as 1952 he said "it is here in the Entmythologisierung started by Bultmann."<sup>38</sup>

\* \* \* \*

The radicalism of such an approach as we have been considering only serves to add to our appreciation of the solid New Testament interpretation of a faithful teacher as Dean W. D. Turkington. Throughout the long course of his teaching career he has strongly emphasized both the historical basis

---

36. Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (Harper, 1961), p. 143.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

38. R. A. Egon Hessel, "Is Christianity a Myth?" *The Christian Century* (Sept. 3, 1952), LXIX, 993.

and supernatural character of the Christian faith. This robust emphasis, further embellished by a remarkably consistent life that has adorned the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things, will continue to live in the life and ministry of his many grateful students.

A word of warning from John Wesley is apropos here. Concerning an individual who sought to foist some novel interpretations on the Bible, Wesley registered a strong disclaimer: "It would be excusable if these menders of the Bible would offer their hypotheses modestly. But one cannot excuse them when they not only obtrude their novel scheme with the utmost confidence, but even ridicule that scriptural one which always was, and is now, held by men of the greatest learning and piety in the world. Hereby they promote the cause of infidelity more effectually than either Hume or Voltaire."<sup>39</sup> This warning is just as fitting in the face of the novel and radical ideas of interpreting the New Testament in the twentieth century as it was in the case of those in the eighteenth century. Novel notions and interpretations will pass, "but the word of the Lord endureth forever" (1 Peter 1:25a).

---

39. John Wesley, *Journal*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Charles H. Kelly, n.d.), V, 523.