Tillich and the New Being

Wilber T. Dayton

Paul Tillich is called both the foremost Protestant thinker in America and the most dangerous theological leader alive (*Time*, LXXIII, No. 11, p. 46). Grounds for both views can be seen in his little book of sermons entitled *The New Being*. There is no doubt that the writer hits his reader in new places and forces him to think. His work is rich in insights that should stimulate any honest inquirer to a more adequate grasp of truth. On the other hand, one does read with the constant question whether Tillich should be characterized more as fleeing from nihilism than as joyfully discovering the fountain of life. Or, to change the figure, one wonders if the scrapheap of widely forgotten traditional Christian concepts does not contain many jewels of purer ray than his synthetic productions.

The book cannot be understood apart from the man. Having served as a German chaplain in the First World War, having been a close observer and participant in the great struggles of displaced Twentieth Century humanity, and being a refugee from Nazi Germany, he knows the tragedy and frustration of a world cut loose from its moorings. To him, tragedy has been the rule in human affairs. The exception has been the comparatively secure century prior to the great World Wars. Accordingly, his central theme is a search for an answer to the anxiety, the estrangement, and the sense of tragic predicament that constantly overshadows life.

It was in the night attack at the Battle of Champagne in 1915, while he walked along the rows of dying men, that he lost much of his classical philosophy—the belief that man could master cognitively the essence of his being, the belief in the identity of essence and existence. Nietzsche held great fascination for Tillich in the war years. The effect was an emancipation from tradition. In the postwar years, he and a group of fellow intellectuals studied the positive possibilities back of Nietzsche's assaults on traditional concepts and turned to
Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist, to discover new meanings for religion. These intellectuals prescribed "Religious Socialism" for the ills of Germany. Though they were not taken seriously, Paul Tillich used his concern and insights to further his goal as a philosopher and, somewhat as a means to that end, as a minister.

Exposition

The New Being does not attempt an orderly theological arrangement as found in his Systematic Theology. However, the twenty-three sermons do constitute a sequel to The Shaking of the Foundations, and seek to answer in large part the questions developed in that volume. These answers are grouped under three topics which treat the New Being as love, freedom, and fulfillment.

Part I: The New Being As Love

Before introducing the crucial sermon on "The New Being" the author treats love in terms of forgiveness. It is "the answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence" (p. 9). Forgiveness is described as participation, reunion overcoming the powers of estrangement. It is love overcoming the feeling of rejection. We cannot love unless we have accepted the forgiveness. But then, like a fiery stream His healing power enters into us, and we can affirm Him, and with Him our own being and that of others from whom we were estranged, and life as a whole.

Much is said that is Scripturally and psychologically sound about forgiveness and love. Some things, however, seem to contradict not only traditional orthodoxy but also the plain statement of Scripture. Considerable point is made of the view that "forgiveness is unconditional or it is not forgiveness at all" (p. 8). Compare the "if" in I John 1:9. Furthermore, the forgiveness seems not to be a final and permanent thing as in the Christian system. It is called "reconciliation in spite of estrangement" and "reunion in spite of hostility" (p. 7) as if both the old and new survive together except for those moments, infrequent though they be (p. 13), which transform everything. Tillich also denies that Jesus does the forgiving. Rather He is designated as simply declaring that the woman is forgiven.

In this introductory sermon the paradox is already upon us. After the barren years of unbelief in high places, Tillich refreshes us with his sense of the reality of God and of a trans-
forming experience. However, he couches it in words that can hardly carry the full Christian message of a complete and abiding remedy for man's greatest ill—sin.

The great declaration is in the second sermon. He says, "If I were to sum up the Christian message for our time in two words, I would say with Paul: It is the message of a 'New Creation'" (p. 15). Christianity is the message of the New Creation, the New Being, the New Reality which has appeared with the appearance of Jesus, who is for this reason called the Christ.

At first sight, nothing could be more acceptable to evangelical Christians than an emphasis on the transforming, life-giving character of Christ. The great theme of Jesus Himself, of the apostles, and of orthodox Christianity comes to focus at this point. Tillich has used terms that have tremendous content in traditional theology. Does he mean what the words seem to convey? It is precisely here that the problem begins. Instead of a vital saving, keeping, and perfecting grace (as in John 17), Tillich's great pronouncement is that "here and there" in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ" (p. 18). Christian experience is watched for, glimpsed, and even realized in fleeting existential moments. It does not become a pattern of life. The predicament still persists. It is "in the midst of the old creation" that the New Creation appears (p. 18). And it only "appears" and "occurs." It doesn't take over. The old man is not really put off nor is the new man actually put on. High moments have made their contribution to the joy of living and the sense of fulfillment, but there is little sense of an abiding presence. Rather, he says, "Toward it [the New Creation] the right attitude is passionate and infinite longing" (p. 19), rather than full assurance of faith. Yet out of this existential and generally obscure experience, he does say that Salvation "transforms the Old Creation into a new one" and he does speak of the New in terms of a renewal, reconciliation, reunion, and resurrection (p. 20). Again, these terms seem to be used largely of a psychological dealing with inner hostilities, disgust, and hatred which one holds for himself and others. Resurrection is simply the means of dealing with the relapses into the Old Being. As Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "Paul Tillich is trying to walk a fence be-
tween man's doubts and the traditions of man's faith" (quoted in *Time*, LXXIII, No. 11, p. 52). Notwithstanding the appeal to accept the new state of things, to enter into it, and to let it grasp you (p. 24), those with an evangelical background are not likely to envy this precarious perch for man's soul.

The remaining sermons of Part I deal with the power of love, the golden rule, healing, holy waste, and principalities and powers. These seek to inject content into the concept of the New Being. Again, great biblical concepts are analyzed with many shrewd insights. Love is rightly given the primary place. The golden rule is analyzed for its lessons and for its deficiencies. The needs of the world as a whole and as individuals are discussed in the light of Jesus, the Christ, the Healer and Savior. A personal appeal is made for the reader to be grasped by the power of this picture of Jesus in order to overcome his neurotic trends, the rebellion of unconscious strivings, the split in his conscious being, and the diseases which disintegrate mind and body. Wholeheartedness is enjoined through analogy of the incident of one who anointed the feet of Jesus. And finally, there is an appeal for courage to accept life with a faith that can triumph over the forces that would separate us from the love of God.

In Tillich's free quoting of great passages of Scripture and his obvious familiarity with biblical concepts, one hopes that there may be a new emphasis on moral and spiritual certainties that have slipped from the grasp of many a modern man. One reads these chapters in the hope of discovering belated content for the concepts of forgiveness, love, and the New Being. Yet again, every Yes is coupled with its corresponding No, and no truth appears in any fulness or adequacy. Love is little more than a social concern. And this love is equated with God—in exactly what sense, one is not sure. The golden rule is little more than trading advantages, and healing is largely sociological and psychological. Yet this more or less nebulous New Being does require that one go beyond the reasonable and waste himself for it as Christ wasted Himself for us. In the victory over the disruptive principalities and powers, there still remain guilt, self-accusation, and despair about ourselves (p. 59). By traditional Christian standards, it is not strange that some do not consider Tillich a Christian at all.
Part II: The New Being As Freedom

Let us see if Part II calls for a new evaluation. On the subject of truth he wisely places Christ as the ultimate and personal truth; but aside from that, he condemns the idea that one can have legitimate assurance that he believes the truth. Neither church nor Scripture is revered for truthfulness of testimony, and that in spite of the fact that for most Christians a valid knowledge of the Christ has come through the testimony of the written Word.

Concerning faith, Tillich quotes Luther's, "What is more miserable than uncertainty," and seems to imply the answer, "Certainty is." The function of faith, to him, is not to have an object, but rather to be aware that God holds us. Contradictions, doubts, and uncertainties appear to invalidate all other knowledge. Likewise, all authority, including the authority of the Bible (p. 86), is cancelled by "splits" or contradictions in authority. The predicament of man is that in the vacuum each must decide for himself. To Tillich, there is something in both the Christian message and Christian experience which is opposed to established authority. Even Jesus is not only the ground but also the negation of all authority (p. 91). As in the whole existential system, it is difficult to find any solid rock on which to build one's house, and one is loath to build upon sand.

Even the coming of the Messiah and of salvation fits the pattern, because He came as a child. And "a child is real and not yet real, it is in history and not yet historical. Its nature is visible and invisible, it is here and not yet here. And just this is the character of salvation" (p. 95). Yet in the Christ Tillich does find a Yes beyond the Yes and No. It belongs only to Christ, but through Him we can say the ultimate Yes beyond our Yes and our No (p. 104). However, in contrast he holds, "We resist and distort the word from the Lord not only when we hear it, but also when we say it" (p. 121). Again, we can only ask with great seriousness and great passion: Is there a word from the Lord? (p. 124). The temper is that of existential anxiety rather than Christian assurance. It is natural for Christians who have not shared his repudiation of all tradition and orthodoxy to find his views a barren bypath instead of a theology for Protestants.
Part III: The New Being As Fulfillment

In the final section of the book, the first element in fulfillment is joy. It is far deeper than pleasure or fun. "Only the fulfillment of what we really are can give joy." This is a profound truth and would fit equally well with an adequate Christology and soteriology. However, such implications are not developed. Instead, we turn to Mary and find her praised by her Lord not because of a truly satisfactory choice but because she had "an infinite concern." Though concern is certainly a part of anything worthwhile, one reacts against making an existential anxiety the *sumnum bonum* of life.

Then in quest of fulfillment, Tillich explores the vanity of life. Man, he says, is timed. He must grasp the right moment, but ultimately it doesn't matter. The outer man is perishing, but the inner nature is being renewed every day. Eternity calls. Pious and important words are these, but what content do they have in an existential order that escapes with such difficulty from an empty nihilism?

In all this, love does emerge stronger than death. It rescues man and gives real help even when external circumstances cannot be changed. Along with man, the earth participated in the agony of the Man on the cross. A new eon was born. "No longer is the universe subjected to the law of death out of birth. It is subjected...to the law of life out of death."

Conclusions

Thus the book ends in an optimistic note which is quite in harmony with a theme that runs throughout the system. Tillich has escaped the utter nihilism of the "godless" existentialists. He has risen above many of the iconoclastic factors of Nietzsche's thinking. There is a broad familiarity with the Scriptures and evidence of a great deal of constructive thought concerning them. However, in the total rejection of authority, Tillich seems to have lost the revelation from God that would bring certainty and that would overcome the anxiety of emasculating doubt.

In spite of his noble visions and keen human insights, it is hard to escape the conclusion that he also by wisdom knew not God. It is feared that his doubts have betrayed him into an essentially pagan position—one that is not devoid of an awareness of God, to be sure, but that represents God as something less than the Christian revelation indicates. Ac-
Tillich and the New Being

... accordingly, sin is not so much a curable rebellion as an anxious predicament; and an inadequate anthropology and hamartiology is met by an inadequate Christology and soteriology. As is noted elsewhere in this issue, there are strains in the thought of this thinker which are identified by some as a contemporary gnosticism. Quite possibly, much in his soteriology is esoteric in character, capable of being grasped only by the 'initiated' ones.

The book does not reveal an adequate view of what redemption does for man inwardly. It would be well-nigh impossible to conceive of a work of God like the Wesleyan Revival being kindled over such theological assumptions. Tillich's system bears the marks of learned philosophy that seeks to be a friend to religion. But where is the Gospel of Christ that is the power of God unto salvation? Where are the evangelists that could use it redemptively? In walking the fence between man's doubts and the traditions of man's faith, it is likely that he escaped not only the errors of the extremists but also the effectiveness of the Christian Gospel. If so, it is entirely possible that his very use of Scripture and of Christian concepts may add more to the bewilderment of a lost world than to its salvation.