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Canadian Journal of Theology

A QUARTERLY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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EDWARD WING

Has Bultmann a Doctrine of Salvation?

The study of Bultmann has been predominantly concerned with areas of his thought other than soteriology. To be sure, his New Testament analysis always implies a doctrine of salvation, which is the correlate of his doctrine of the person of Christ. But, in the course of events so far, themes such as the demythologizing of the biblical perspective, Bultmann's existentialism, or the paradoxical relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of Easter faith, have received more attention than soteriology as such.

This situation is to be expected. The traditional understanding of soteriology has for several decades been in a state of eclipse. The once-compelling thought structures which interpreted the work of Christ are today viewed largely as antiquarian specimens of grand but irrelevant speculation.

The Copernican revolution in New Testament research, in which attention is directed to the church's relationship with its Lord in its resurrection experience and in its recollection of his earthly life, has required a new orientation toward the faith. The problem of authority, for example, becomes particularly significant, since the critical approach to the New Testament requires us to be silent about Jesus' self-understanding and intentions, except insofar as these are expressions of the church's post-Easter faith. Soteriology has been deeply affected by this reorientation.

The church has always claimed that the great soteriologies of Christian history are rooted in the New Testament itself, and can be found either explicitly or implicitly in the sayings and attitudes attributed to Jesus, as well as those found in Paul and elsewhere. The 'classic' or dualistic view supported by Gustav Aulén interprets the work of Christ as an inner-transcendent battle within Christ's own spirit, which results in his victory over the principalities and powers of evil. The Anselmic view places Christ within both the human and the divine contexts of the problem of sin and salvation, and claims that he fulfilled the necessity relevant to each: taking on himself man's guilt, undergoing his punishment, and atoning for his sin; but doing this as the perfect and obedient sacrifice adequate to the requirement of the divine righteousness. The 'moral influence' or 'exemplary' view maintains that Christ's example of, and participation in, unconditional sacrificial love so moves the sinful heart of man that he is led by this moral suasion to repentance, faith, and love.

But critical research rejects the legitimacy of attributing such speculations to Jesus, thus forcing upon us a soteriology in which the mind and intention of Jesus play little or no part. Is such a state of affairs fatal to the Christian doctrine of redemption? Or does it represent a hitherto unrecognized opportunity to revitalize this dimension of the faith? To put the question in our present context: does Bultmann have an effective doctrine of salvation, which

witnesses to the power of God and the indispensability of Christ for human destiny? And who is this Christ? – that is, what is his nature, his function in God's redemptive purpose, his self-understanding, his accomplishment? If it be true, as Bultmann maintains, that the redemptive message of the faith arose out of the early church's resurrection relationship with Jesus, rather than from Jesus himself, how authentic can such a soteriology be? Do the 'person' and 'work' of Christ, which are indissolubly intertwined throughout the New Testament, carry this same relation in Bultmann's analysis? Can the self-identification which Bultmann attributes to Jesus, together with the broad range of theological description which the early church applied to him, bear the weight of the Christian message of redemption? Can the scandal of Bultmann's rejection of ecclesiastical soteriology as attributable to Jesus himself be sublimated into an effective doctrine of salvation, which reproduces the inner drives and resources of the faith?

I believe that it can be maintained that Bultmann has a dynamic and meaningful soteriology; that, far from driving Jesus to the periphery of faith, this soteriology places him at its centre; that it offers the full resources of God's saving action; and that in Bultmann's hands the faith receives a purification not always provided by traditional soteriology.

In his analysis of the New Testament, Bultmann identifies six differing levels of tradition, levels which can be attributed (1) to Jesus himself; (2) to the earliest (i.e., Palestinian) church; (3) to the pre-Pauline Hellenistic church; (4) to Paul; (5) to the Fourth Gospel; and (6) to the developing Christian movement beyond these others but still within the bounds of Scripture. An examination of these traditions – even of the first two, to which we must limit ourselves in the present study – reveals clearly the process by which the redemptive activity of Jesus came to be experienced and confessed by the early church, without necessitating the claim that this activity and the church's understanding of it were within the intention of Jesus during his earthly life. Let us address ourselves, therefore, to Bultmann's analysis of the first two accumulations of New Testament evidence.¹

I JESUS' UNDERSTANDING OF HIS OWN PERSON AND MISSION

Jesus never regarded himself, according to Bultmann, as the Messiah of Jewish expectation, or as the Son of Man (9), or as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (31) – either presently in his earthly being, or in a future manifestation. He appeared neither as the Messiah-king who would crush the enemies of Israel (4), nor as the supernatural bringer of salvation (27); neither as the judge of the world (27), nor as one who would vicariously bear in his person the consequences of man's sin. Nor did he reinterpret these redemptive categories to produce a more acceptable synthesis in the form of a suffering,

1. Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner's, 1951).

dying, rising Messiah or Son of Man (31). This understanding was created by the early church. To be sure, Jesus appeared in the role of a 'messianic prophet' (20), declaring God's judgment and salvation in the immediate future; but this was not done in his (supposed) capacity as the Messiah. Even Paul did not understand Jesus' *earthly* life and mission as messianic in the traditional sense (27). Indeed, even if it could be proven beyond all doubt that Jesus had known himself to be the Messiah during his earthly life, this fact would be simply an historical datum in our knowledge of Jesus, and would be irrelevant to faith in him as Messiah (26).

Jesus did not see himself as God's eschatological act of salvation (3), or as the inaugurator of the Kingdom; rather, in his person and deeds he *announced* the eschatological act as the coming itself of the Kingdom, the inaugurator of which is God, not Jesus (4). He did not see the presence of God's reign in his own person or in the followers who gathered about him. Such a supposition contradicts the meaning of God's reign (22). Nor did he, like the Johannine Jesus, summon men to acknowledge or 'believe in' his person (9). At the same time, he believed men's attitude toward himself, as the one *announcing* the Kingdom, to be crucial for salvation (9, 26).

He did not claim authority to forgive sin, as was later maintained (61). The attribution of this authority to Jesus served rather as the early church's justification for its own right to forgive sins. Again, while he made critical distinctions among the demands of the Old Testament (15), he did not polemically contest its authority, implying the 'end' of the Law in Paul's sense (16).

There are no predictions of his passion made by Jesus himself, no interpretation by him of his execution as divinely foreordained, no reference by him to his resurrection or parousia (29). Thus, while the idea of death as an expiatory sacrifice for sins was not foreign to the Jewish thinking of his time (47), there is nevertheless no vicarious suffering or substitutionary atonement in Jesus' self-understanding.

There is no battle with evil personified by the Devil, in his experience, as indicated in the Temptation story, which is legendary (27); no final victory of Jesus over either evil or death in his understanding of his mission. There is no satisfaction of God's righteousness or of the general moral law by Jesus (34f.). There was no understanding in Jesus' own thinking, or in that of the early church, that his death was a heroic sacrifice for a cause; that his significance lay in his being an example to be imitated; that he should be honoured for being the living embodiment of his teaching or obedience; or that his followers had been drawn to him because of the numinous mystery of his nature (35).

Contrary to the views of his person and work attributed to Jesus by either the New Testament or traditional theology, Bultmann believes that he understood his mission and message in a different light. The setting for his appearance was the Jewish expectation of the end of the world and the coming of the Kingdom – not, however, the nationalistic hope of a restored Davidic king-

dom, entailing the destruction of Israel's enemies and the lordship of Israel over the earth, but rather the apocalyptic hope of a cosmic catastrophe which would bring to an end the old aeon, which is under the sway of Satanic powers, and initiate the new aeon of blessedness and peace through the agency of the Son of Man (4f.).

Although Jesus eliminates most of the fanciful speculation in the current picture of the end, its central conviction that the time is fulfilled (5), and the reign of God is at hand, dominates his thinking. God comes now to the individual rather than to the whole people and the affairs of nations, and 'meets each man in his own little history' (25) in an immediate, existential relation. Thus, according to Bultmann, Jesus 'de-historized' or de-secularized God and man, by understanding God's activity eschatologically, and by teaching that God tears man out of all security and places him at the brink of the end, 'demanding of man decision for God against every earthly tie' (21). It might be said that *Heilsgeschichte* comes to its fulfilment and ceases to be with the coming of the reign of God.

Jesus understands himself, therefore, as the proclaimer of the imminent reign and the radical demand of God – the 'sign of the time' in his own person (7, 9). Rooted firmly in the traditional understanding of God, the world, man, law, grace, repentance, and forgiveness, Jesus 'radicalized the Old Testament-Jewish faith in God, in the direction of the great prophets' preaching' (34). Thus he appears as prophet, rabbi, and exorcist, declaring the immediacy of God's authority and the urgency of repentance, teaching the truths of the Kingdom and man's relationship to it, manifesting God's power over the Satanic world in his exorcisms and healings. The unique element in Jesus' teaching is the certainty that the Kingdom is *at hand now*. Though not yet here, it is already breaking in. The fulfilment of the prophetic predictions of salvation is already beginning in his own miracles. In him God's decisive word encounters man, in such a way that decision for or against Jesus will be confirmed by the Son of Man when he comes in glory.

Jesus opposes every attempt to qualify the relation between the divine demand and the human response. While not doubting the authority of the Old Testament, he nevertheless protests against a legalism which assumes that one can win God's favour by minutely fulfilling the Law's requirements (11). On the other hand, his ethic is not one of world-reform, a reigning of God in human affairs which issues in an ethical social order, a character-forming or society-moulding imperative (19).

Nor is it an 'interim ethic' of exceptional commands relevant only to the last short interval before the end, as Schweitzer believed. On the contrary the divine demand is a radical one independent of the temporal situation (20). The unity of eschatological assurance and ethical demand is central to Jesus' message; the irruption of God's reign into human existence and the command to love are indissolubly related (19–20).

Thus Bultmann rejects the traditional presentation of Jesus' understanding of his redemptive function. The origin of the great redemptive categories de-

veloped by the Christian church throughout history must be denied to Jesus, and attributed rather to the Christian church at one point or another of history, through various influences of its environment, and especially through its experience of the resurrection. The primary redemptive elements in Jesus' life and witness which Bultmann regards as authentically his own are few in number: his certainty that God's Kingdom is about to break in – indeed is already breaking in – on the human scene; his conviction that God's will is love, irrespective of the nature or condition of the object of love; his claim that the individual's response to Jesus himself – that is, to him as the one who proclaims the imminence of the Kingdom – is determinative for that individual's inclusion within the divine redemption which will be manifest in the coming of the Son of Man in glory. All else in the church's faith regarding God's redemptive action in Christ originated in the Easter faith of the church, not in the self-understanding of Jesus.

A critical scrutiny of the faith of the early church as it arose out of the experience of the resurrection must, therefore, reveal the actual emergence of Jesus' redemptive significance, as the church responded to him in its experiences both present and past: that is, to him who was known in his earthly life, viewed now in the light of the resurrection. This is not to say that the church created Jesus' redemptive function; but it does affirm that there *is* no redemptive function apart from the response of the church to him, in the light of the resurrection. The early church, whether Palestinian, pre-Pauline Hellenistic, Pauline, Johannine, or otherwise, found in its confrontation with the risen Christ a new dimension of life received from God – Paul's 'new creation' – such that at various stages of its development the church assigned to him who occasioned this new life the full range of doctrinal description which we find in the New Testament. The source of this redemptive activity was God. The doctrinal identification was the church's. The crucial point is that the redemptive function of Jesus, while having its source in God, arose only out of the church's Easter and post-Easter confrontation with Jesus, rather than being resident in him before or apart from this confrontation. Let us examine the process which issued in the church's theological structure.

II THE FAITH OF THE EARLIEST (PALESTINIAN) CHURCH

It was the experience of the resurrection which led to the enlarging, deepening, and reorienting of the Palestinian church's understanding and proclamation of Jesus, according to Bultmann. While the church proclaimed and passed on the message of Jesus, so acknowledging him as prophet and rabbi, it also proclaimed Jesus himself as the coming Messiah-Son of Man, thus making the bearer of the message the essential content of the message, the proclaimer the proclaimed (33) – but in a clearly restricted sense. The Palestinian church did not at first take the step of reading Messiahship back into the earthly life of Jesus: 'his then past activity on earth was not yet considered messianic by the earliest church' (33). On the contrary, Jesus was first proclaimed as the

coming Messiah – that is, the Son of Man, a figure invariably associated with glory and exaltation, never with suffering and dying. Jesus' importance did not lie in what he had done in the past, but rather in what was expected of him in the future (36). Thus the earliest church, while sensing implicitly the ultimacy of the Christ-event, did not arrive at this conviction explicitly, since it still viewed the event of Christ as the future fulfilment of Jewish eschatological expectation. Even the resurrection did not immediately enable the earliest church to break through the Jewish frame of reference, since at first the resurrection was looked upon as proof of the exaltation of the crucified Jesus to the status of Son of Man, rather than the means whereby the scandal of the crucifixion itself was reinterpreted and overcome, and Jesus' earthly life and death incorporated within his eschatological activity (36f.).

The process of incorporation was quickly begun, however, when the church recalled that it was the *crucified* Jesus who had been exalted and whose return was soon expected. Thus the conviction grew that the suffering and death of the one awaited as Messiah-Son of Man were to be included positively within the total understanding of him, not simply tolerated as embarrassing incongruities. A Christology is implied in this understanding of Jesus, but it is not a Christology leading to speculation about him as a heavenly being, or about the messianic consciousness which is soon attributed to him. It is rather a Christology whose inner meaning is the demand for decision regarding him as the revelation of God's purpose (43), as the one whom by the resurrection God has made Messiah, and who is now awaited as the coming Son of Man.

The honorific titles by which the church designated Jesus as the eschatological salvation-bringer indicate a growing breadth in the church's faith. The term 'Messiah' was soon applied to him, indicating the church's growing conviction that Jesus' earthly life as well as his future manifestation were messianic in character. The term's usefulness was inevitably limited to Jewish circles, however, since its original meaning was that of an anointed king who, though guided and empowered by God's supernatural intervention (49), and conceived as the final ruler (27), was nevertheless thought of simply as a man (49). Such a designation was soon to prove inadequate when the faith entered the Hellenistic world; the implication of royal prerogative carried no redemptive significance to the Hellenistic mind; nor could the title have survived political misconception, since it means 'the anointed one.' Consequently the title Messiah or Christ soon becomes, upon the emergence of the new faith into the Hellenistic world, simply a proper name (80) – that is to say, the person designated is now known as 'Jesus Christ,' rather than 'Jesus the Christ.'

The title used predominantly by the earliest church was 'Son of Man' – a term which comes out of Jewish apocalyptic hope, and means 'a supramundane, pre-existent being who at the end of time will come down from heaven to hold judgment and bring salvation' (49). Bultmann's familiar analysis of Synoptic usage of this term into categories of 'present,' 'passion,'

and 'parousia' sayings, leaves only the 'parousia' group of sayings genuine – that is, attributable to Jesus – but Bultmann declares that in them Jesus is referring to someone other than himself who will bring God's salvation in the near future (29–31). This term also drops out of Hellenistic Christianity (80), because of its inability to express the Hellenistic mind's understanding of the eschatological expectation.

The term 'Son of God,' which means the messianic king, appears also in the kerygma of the earliest church, but it has not yet attained the mythological meaning which it soon acquires in Hellenistic Christianity, where it designates a supernatural being begotten by God (50). The title 'Servant of God,' meaning Messiah or Son of God in a strictly Old Testament sense, occurs also, influenced perhaps by Isaiah 42 and 49, but not by Isaiah 53, since the latter passage was interpreted by Jewish exegesis as the vicariously suffering *people* of Israel rather than as an individual, and since the Servant of the apocalyptic literature was not a suffering figure, but the messianic ruler and judge (50). Further, while the earliest church may have called Jesus by the title 'Lord,' it could hardly have done so with full Christological meaning (51). Following Bousset, Bultmann denies a cultically developed worship of Jesus earlier than that found in the Hellenistic church. '... the Kyrios-cult originated on Hellenistic soil' (51).

The Palestinian church, therefore, contributed substantially to the development of the faith. It saw the risen Christ as the Messiah-Son of Man who would soon return as God's agent in bringing about the great deed of salvation. This church was soon able to incorporate into its understanding of God's saving activity the suffering and death of Jesus, as God's means of overcoming sin and procuring salvation. And its use of the honorific titles is an indication of the breadth and depth of its faith, despite the fact that it fell short of the fuller understanding achieved by the Hellenistic church.

Analysis of the remaining levels of New Testament tradition would show the completion of this process of attributing redemptive significance to Jesus. A wide spectrum of theological interpretation emerges. From the pre-Pauline Hellenistic church alone it would be necessary to note the following examples: the broadening of the Christian community's self-understanding beyond its previous Jewish sectarianism; the disappearance (already noted) of the Jewish redemptive categories 'Messiah' and 'Son of Man,' because of their inadequacy to express the Hellenistic understanding of Jesus and his achievement; the emergence of a cultically oriented conception of Jesus as 'Lord'; the differentiation of Jesus as 'Son of God' from the human sphere, and the characterization of him as one who was of divine origin and filled with divine power; the reinterpretation of the cross as the redemptive fate of a divine personage; the Hellenization of the sacraments on the analogy of the sacramentalism of the mystery religions. And when the insights of the later New Testament strata are added to these already present, the ground work for the great epic soteriologies is laid.

III BULTMANN'S SOTERIOLOGY

But the qualification originally noted must now be recalled. How authentic and authoritative can a soteriology be which asserts that Jesus himself had no knowledge of his redemptive function, but that this function arose out of the church's confrontation with the Christ of Easter faith? To restate Bultmann's position in ecclesiastical terminology: Jesus did not believe himself to be fighting a transcendent battle against evil, or overcoming death, or satisfying either the divine righteousness or the eternal moral law. Consequently he had no concept of a divine-human arrangement, in virtue of which the results of his redemptive work might be applied to sinful man through faith. Nor did he intend to provide an example of what the sacrificial love of God is like, in its outreach to the sinful and rejected, thus challenging mankind to strive for a society closer to God's intention. Nor did his mission involve a mystical personal relationship to himself on the part of the believer, as traditionally understood in much Christian theology. On the contrary, these redemptive ideas express the church's convictions as to who Jesus was and what he had done for sinful and anxious men.

But is it conceivable that the church could or would create the complex understanding of Christ's redemptive work as it appears in the New Testament? Would not such a view imply either that the early church rose above the level of insight which its Lord had, and created the faith out of its own experiences and speculations; or else that the church developed, whether deliberately or not, a radically distorted view of the function of Christ? And would not such conclusions negate the authority attributed to the work of Christ, leaving us simply with the authority of the church's own experiences of its Lord and its speculations upon these experiences?

I believe Bultmann would accept these challenges, and find both the meaning and the authority of the Christian faith, not in what Jesus believed about himself, or in any functions which it was later claimed he had performed as the Son of God or Messiah or any other redemptive agent, or in a supposed unique relationship with God and man. On the contrary the nature and authority of the faith lie in what Jesus means to the believer when, through the mystery of God's presence in Jesus, the believer finds himself risen with Christ, a new creation by God's power, a sinner who is forgiven and renewed by God, one who by God's grace has attained authentic selfhood.

Bultmann rejects the implication of traditional theology, that the work of Christ is a 'package' offered to the believer – a completed act, upon acceptance of which his salvation is assured. To Bultmann salvation is not a supernatural transaction made available to the believer, but the individual's inclusion within the purpose of God, his being the recipient of the Kingdom, his receiving forgiveness and new life from God. The divinity of Christ, rather than being a metaphysical property of his person, is identical with the believer's experience of Jesus' power to relate the sinner meaningfully to God. The resurrection of Christ is likewise identical with the renewal of life which the believer finds

when, confronted with the Christian claim that God was in Christ, he dies to his old self and rises to newness of life. Whether or not Jesus was divine, or was the Messiah or the Son of God or the Suffering Servant, has nothing to do with his saving efficacy, according to Bultmann; for, while Jesus is the occasion for salvation, it is God alone who saves. Indeed, these designations inevitably lead to misunderstanding, when the saving power of Christ is rationally deduced from them as an effect is deduced from its causes. Even if Jesus had been what the church claimed him to be, and had believed this about himself, such facts would simply provide data for our knowledge of the man Jesus, and would in no way constitute the foundation of faith in him as God's agency of redemption.

Thus, while the church did not create the redemptive functions which it soon attributed to Jesus, these functions nevertheless became real and actual within the context of the church's experience of Jesus, as the one through whom its relationship with God was renewed. Divinity is not a metaphysical attribute to be applied to Jesus in order to account for his saving power; nor is his Messiahship an attribute of his nature, in virtue of which he possessed power and authority to save those who believe. This sequence of ideas, on the contrary, must be exactly reversed. He actually became saviour, in virtue of the fact that through him the church experienced God's renewal of its life; he was not saviour in virtue of some power which he already possessed and administered to those who accepted him. Divinity and Messiahship are abstract and irrelevant designations, when excised from the experiences of those who found in Jesus the call to repentance and openness, which led to God's renewal of their lives.

IV CONCLUSIONS

It would appear that Bultmann's understanding of the work of Christ mobilizes the resources of the New Testament as adequately as do the great systems of ecclesiastical soteriology – indeed, perhaps more adequately. The following conclusions arise out of the study:

- 1 To Bultmann, it is *God* alone who saves, through Christ. The act of salvation must never be expressed in any way which would jeopardize this conviction – that redemption is wholly, exhaustively, God's doing. Bultmann's view of the relation between God and Christ demonstrates this conviction clearly. Ecclesiastical theology, on the other hand, establishes a tension between God and Christ, which is resolved only by Christ's sacrifice. But to the extent that God is viewed as the object of atonement rather than as pure subject, the New Testament witness has to this extent been abrogated.
- 2 Nevertheless, *Christ* is the sole agency of God's saving act. It is only through confrontation with Christ that the radical reorientation of life toward God's will and away from self-interest takes place. Bultmann has been criticized for retaining this conviction at the heart of his theology instead of demythologizing it. But perhaps here as nowhere else is to be found the commitment of

faith in its purest sense – this truly anomalous confession that God was in *Christ* reconciling the world unto himself. No adequate rational justification can be given for this conviction. On the contrary it is the believer's witness to the freedom of God to come as he chooses to men.

- 3 All the resources of the faith as traditionally understood are operative here. For, according to Bultmann, God's saving power meets us in Christ; it is God's righteousness which pronounces judgment upon our slavery to this world's values; it is God's forgiveness which brings renovation in the life of the believer; and it is God's love which breaks through the shell of our self-protectiveness to renew us in the daily course of life.

Surely no good thing is lacking here!