

1. Can the Word “God” Still Have Meaning?

The biblical scholar and theologian Rudolf Bultmann, living in the mid-20th Century, wrote an essay entitled “The Crisis of Faith.”¹ He understood that we needed a means of personally understanding how we experience or can experience whatever it was that the biblical writers were pointing to with “faith in God.” Following is a summary of his way of introducing us to the meaning of the word “God,” when that word is taken seriously – that is, when it means something in our experience.

Bultmann begins by pointing out that we all have deep cares given with our existence. We care about our security. We care about having true and beautiful “up” experiences and wanting them to last. We care about having persons who love us and whom we love. We care about finding knowledge. We care about accomplishing something that lasts. And we care about having a good image of ourselves. We care. We just do care. We can’t help but care. Yet all these cares meet disappointments, limits, and stone walls of termination. Bultmann examines these cares one by one and in the process shows us how the word “God” can point to real experiences that we have every day.

First of all, we all care about being secure. We store food for meals today, tomorrow, and the next day. We want to keep clothes on our bodies, a roof over our head, and a good bath ever so often. We put away money for our impending retirement and old age. We make friends who may help us in our times of need. We conduct good health practices to secure a longer, healthier life. We care about all of this. If it were up to us, we would be secure in these and other ways forever.

Yet we know that we cannot make our lives absolutely secure. No matter how much money we have, we could die next week. Tomorrow we could step on an unexpected ice slick on our back porch, hit our head on a stone, and die. Then what benefit to our security would all that money be. Or we might come down with a dread disease. A stock market crash might wipe out our hard-earned-retirement. The electricity might go off and spoil tomorrow’s dinner. We are not secure. The course of history, the cosmos, our real life is not set up in such a way that we can be as secure as we would be if it were entirely up to us. Some mysterious ongoingness, some “power,” some way Reality is constructed interrupts our quest for security with the insecurity that is always part of our lives. That mysterious power that we all experience or can experience is, according to Bultmann, the God of biblical faith. This God is not a supernatural being, a big person, a being of any sort. This God is the Source of our being, the sustainer of our being, the limiter of our being, and the tomb of our non-being. However unconscious we may like to be about this mysterious Power, we are zero distance from this “God” in every moment of our personal history.

¹ Bultmann, Rudolf; *Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (edited by Roger A. Johnson, Fortress Press: 1991) “The Crisis of Faith” page 240

Bultmann continues showing us other ways that we confront this God. We care for pleasant times. We are in constant quest for true and beautiful “up” moments, and we hold on to such moments for as long as we can. Perhaps we recall moments with a lover in some beautiful place. Perhaps we recall great times with our children before they morphed into teenagers. Perhaps we recall great times with our teenagers. Perhaps we recall times when the work we were doing was intensely satisfying. Whatever the “up” moments that we have, here again we meet a grim truth: we cannot control time. Time is controlled by some other Power than our will. Time is unstoppable by us. Our “up” moments end, perhaps turn “down” into moments we want to end sooner than they do. We confront a power that is in charge, not us, of the flow of time. That power is or can be personally experienced at any time in our lives. That power, Bultmann says, is an experience of “God.”

We also care about being loved by others and feeling loving toward others. We want acknowledgment and acceptance from others. But our lives turn out to be more than living like two lovebirds that can never separate. We experience being catapulted into solitude. As Martin Luther put it, we all do our own dying as well as our own trust in God. Indeed, we are alone in all the big decisions—whom shall I marry or not, what shall I do with my one life or not. We may even like solitude sometimes, but we also find that we desire to be in some nest of love. And in relation to this desire for love, we often resist times of absolute solitude: we rush to find friends to be with us. We find that it is some Mysterious Almighty Power, not us, that is forcing solitude upon us. This power is an experience of God. We cannot escape it. This power is not a supernatural being, not a being of any sort. This power is the Ground of all Being. Paul Tillich called this power the mystery, depth, and greatness of our existence. Solitude is part of that greatness, but as Søren Kierkegaard noted about solitude:

In the constant sociability of our age people shudder at solitude to such a degree that they know no other use to put it to but (oh, admirable epigram!) as a punishment for criminals. But after all it is a fact that in our age it is a crime to have spirit, so it is natural that such people, the lovers of solitude, are included in the same class with criminals.²

Bultmann continues by pointing out that our care for knowledge also meets its limits. Just when we get Newtonian physics well in mind, perhaps we learn how Einstein improved things. Perhaps we resonate with the scientist who said with some astonishment, “The more we know about nature the more we know we don’t know.” I entered my first marriage thinking I knew what it meant to be married. Within months I did not know. In my second marriage, I am still learning. A similar experience is met in our life of doing. Our accomplishments are seldom as much as we want, and what we do accomplish seldom stays done. I made some great changes in that first church I pastored, but the next pastor undid them all. They say that even the great pyramids of Egypt are wearing down. One day they will just be more sand in the desert. Our

² Kierkegaard, Søren; *The Sickness Unto Death*, (Water Lowrie translation, Princeton University Press: 1953) page 198

accomplishments like our knowledge are limited. A Mysterious Power “sets a terminus to our knowing and doing.” This power, Bultmann says, is God—the object of trust and devotion recommended in the Bible for our optimal living.

And finally, Bultmann described the limitation we call “guilt.” In whatever ways we seek to think well of ourselves, we find that these very quests set the stage for still another type of limitation. Bultmann’s description of these limitations is devastating: our existence he says, “knows the call of conscience which summons to duty, and recalls from thoughtlessness and aberration to everyday things, and pronounces the verdict “Guilty” on wasted time and lost opportunity, impure thoughts, and mean actions.” We live in a cosmos in which we are constantly shown our failures to master ourselves. In spite of our “good” efforts, we also get to experience “our pettiness, incompleteness, and wretchedness.” The experiences of limits to our quest to think well of ourselves are also experiences of that mysterious Power that Bultmann insists on calling “God.”

Then, Bultmann notes that this same mysterious power that is limiting our cares is also putting us into our finite lives in which we do care for security, long for beautiful moments, desire love, seek knowledge and meaningful action, and strive to think well of ourselves. *Having all these cares* is an experience of God, as well as the limitation of these same cares. The same mysterious power *puts us* as well as *limits us*. But why, Bultmann asks, call this mysterious power “God”?

“Why give this enigma, this mystery which drives us this way and that and hedges us in any other name than simply ‘the enigma’ or ‘fate’? Does the name ‘God’ not gloss over the fact that we are in the dark and are at the mercy of fate? Or, if there must be a name, why not equally well that of the devil? Does not this power play a cruel game with us, destroying and annihilating? Is not unfulfillment the mark of every life? Is not death, nothingness, the end?”³

“God,” as this word appears in our Bibles, is a devotional word. Faith in God is the courage to designate that dark enigma, that sovereign power as my devotion, my loyalty, my cause, my God. Such faith is a “nevertheless” of trusting that such loyalty to what is fundamentally real is the best-case scenario for our lives. Trust in God is trust in the trustworthiness of Reality. It is trust in the goodness of my realistic responses within whatever moments are confronting me. In order to actually do such realistic living, is it essential that you or I understand what Jesus and Paul never tire of pointing out to us: that this enigmatic power is our friend, welcoming us home to Reality, accepting us in spite of all our shortcomings and estrangement from Reality, providing us the opportunity for a fresh start in the realistic living of our lives.

Whether or not you or I can accept this direction for understanding what it means to “trust God,” it remains true that Bultmann has provided us with a way of understanding what we are pointing to with the word “God.” He has not reverted to asking us to believe in some otherworldly myth about a Big Person hovering over us.

³ Bultmann, Rudolf; *Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (edited by Roger A. Johnson, Fortress Press: 1991) “The Crisis of Faith” page 244

He does not ask us to believe in a supernatural being. He agrees with Paul Tillich who insists over and over again that God is not *a being* alongside other beings, like humans or angels. God is the mysterious Ground of all Being. God is that power of Being that posits whatever comes to be. That same Ground is also the Grave into which all beings return. This Ground of Being is the Mysterious Void, the No-thing-ness out of which all things come and into which all things return. This Ground of Being is also the Mysterious Every-thing-ness within which all things coexist in community with each other. Clearly this understanding of God is a sort of atheism, for it refuses to believe in or trust in the “gods” (finite values) that most people claim for their devotion. At the same time this understanding of God recovers for us, in a gripping and personal way, what the biblical literature was pointing to with its “God-talk.”

Gene W. Marshall
© copyright 2016