

2. Redemption from What to What?

Here is quote from one of the great Christian theologians of the last century:

“Freedom from the past, openness for the future—that is the essence of human existence. But it is the conviction of the New Testament that man (each human) needs first to be restored to his (or her) true nature through the event of redemption accomplished in Christ. Until this event has taken place, until man (each human) has appropriated the grace of God manifested in that event, he (or she) is alienated from his (or her) own true nature, alienated from life, enslaved under hostile powers and in bondage to death.”

That quote was taken from page 189 of Rudolf Bultmann’s *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*.

In our 21st century contemporary setting we need some clarification about what Bultmann is pointing to with “the event of redemption,” “the grace of God,” true nature,” and “alienated.” Such clarification is a big order for one brief spin, but here goes my “theologizing” for this century about this *redemptive event*:

First of all, we need to be clear about the Old and New Testament emphasis on time, on events, and on history. In biblical writings the word “God,” whatever else it means, has to do with time, with events in time, with the creation of the world, with the events of our birth and our death, with events of our prospering and events of our demise. Time is something that humans have no ability to stop and no ability to speed up. In our experience of time, we humans, all of us, experience the activity pointed to in Biblical texts with the word “God.”

The word “God” also means an attitude of devotion. In our personal march of time, we do not have to assume that we are meeting an impersonal fate. In the march of time we do not need to see a battle between natural forces that affirm us and natural forces that oppose us. In the march of time, we can trust that we are meeting a Final Reality that can be the object of our ultimate personal devotion. In biblical writings a trust of Final Reality means “freedom from the past and openness for the future.” These are the words with which Bultmann begins the above quotation. In the rest of that opening sentence he claims that such freedom and openness are “the essence of human existence.” In other words, Bultmann is saying that our authenticity is a trust of the Final Reality met in the flow of time, and this trust means embracing: “freedom from the past and openness for the future.”

Freedom from the past means a relationship to the past, not the end of the past or the end of the consequences that past developments and deeds have set in motion. If we are a member of the oppressing class of a Western culture, that conditioning does not disappear with our “freedom” from the past. Rather freedom from the past is understood as being forgiven. The past is approved as that which has brought us to this moment of our real existence. Accepting our forgiveness means accepting the freedom

from the past to repent of the past and thereby to begin practically operating beyond the karma of our past conditioning. This same dynamic characterizes our repentance, no matter what our past is. But our particular past also shapes the character of our repentance. If we have been a severely oppressed person, repentance may mean accepting forgiveness for our compliance with our oppressors and for perhaps for our fury to kill them. Our repentance means operating in the freedom of choosing step-by-step a creative resistance to being oppressed. Our repentance will also include allying our actions with the deliverance of all oppression for all people. Whether our past has been being the oppressed or being the oppressor or being both, that past is forgiven, and if we accept that forgiveness, gone is some of our have-to karma in the living of our future.

So let us hear once again what Bultmann is pointing to with “freedom from the past and openness for the future.” *Trusting God (that is, trusting in the POWER present in the march of time) means embracing our “God-given” essence in relation to time: “freedom from the past and openness for the future.”*

In our biblical interpretation and contemporary theologizing, we need to keep in mind that “trust in God” does not mean believing in the literal existence of a supernatural being—such language is just poetry used for many thousands of years to speak of experiencing a trust in that Ultimate Source of the “march of time,” which means being free from the past and open for the future. With these clues we can see with our own 21st century eyes what in our own existence the word “God” points to in the biblical texts.

*If you are indeed free from your past and open for your future,
you are thereby trusting in the Ultimate Source
that we are all meeting in the march of time.*

So why don't we just automatically trust this Ultimate Source as our God, as our ultimate concern, as our primary devotion. If such trust is indeed the essence of our existence, why don't we just be that essence? Bultmann goes on to say that we are “alienated from our true nature—”alienated from life, enslaved under hostile powers and in bondage to death.” We have *fallen* from our essence into this grim condition. We are in need of being restored to our essence, our true nature, our created goodness, our freedom from the past and our openness for the future. Bultmann calls this restoration to our essence “redemption.”

This *sad state of our estranged lives* is the first thing we learn from “the event of redemption” accomplished in the Jesus Christ event. The second thing we learn from this revelatory event is that *we can be restored* to our *essential being*. In fact, it is only in being restored to our *goodness* that we learn what a grim state of *badness* we were in. Before our restoration we may never have noticed that we had such a grim state to be restored from.

On the other hand, before a restoration we may be somewhat conscious of the hopelessness or outright *despair* that attends our attempts to fight or flee the march of time. Devotion to the Ultimate Source of the march of time may never have occurred to us as the solution to ending our despair. Stopping our fight with the God of time is what the Bible calls “repentance.” And “repentance” simply means giving up our clinging to the past, whatever that past may be, and opening for our future, whatever that future may be.

Yet we may not be able to stop our fight with the God of time. This is so because we believe that “God” is wrong about our lives; we believe that we know better. This is called “idolatry”—setting up another trust than trusting God. And horror of horrors, a human *will* that has opted to trust something other than God has lost its ability to trust God. We must be *redeemed* from this trapped condition. We must be helped by an action of Reality that shows us our estrangement. We also need to be shown that Reality accepts us home to Reality without penalty and offers us a fresh start in realism. If we accept this truth about our lives, transformation occurs.

The above happening is called “grace,” because it is a gift given by the Source of time. And this happening is called “redemption,” because it restores us to our essential humanity.

An event of redemption need not be total; some aspects of our alienation can be healed while other aspects remain in place. We can speak of a “Spirit journey” through the time of our lives—experiencing ever more redemptive events that lead us into ever fuller manifestations of our essential humanity.

It is hard to tell about these redemptive events in our lives, because they are so complicated with many confusing elements. Any attempt to tell about them becomes a sort of fiction, a partial remembrance of what happened. For example, when I was a young pastor in an East Texas Methodist church, a high-school-age son of one of the families in my congregation went hunting with a another boy his age, stumbled, discharged his rifle and killed his friend. As I was sitting with this young man in a living room with both families present, I found myself unable to know what say or how even to talk with this young man. For this to be an event of redemption for him, he needed to grasp his forgiveness, his freedom from this horrific bit of his past and open to a fresh start for his future, but rather than him, it was I who was having a redemptive experience. I was waking up to my lack of boldness, my lack of confidence about witnessing to my faith. It was I rather than him who was passing through a doorway of despair into a more liberated life that came later through this and other such humiliating experiences.

“The Grace of God” means these actions of Final Reality that kill our bondage of *will* to temporal dynamics as our primary devotion. The Grace of God also includes welcoming us home to Reality, and thereby leaving us “free from the past and open for the future.” All that the “Grace event” requires of you or me or anyone is accepting our acceptance home to our true lives. And this acceptance by us is a deed done by us—a

very deep and important deed that transforms everything else in our lives. So here is Paul Tillich's threefold description of an event of the God's grace: (1) making us aware of our bondage, (2) welcoming us home to Reality, and (3) beckoning our acceptance of this transformation in our basic relation with living.

This understanding of "The Grace of God" is different from the popular idea of grace as some sort of divine-being toleration of the estranged living that we have done. In addition, when "sin" is understood as immoral acts, we do not understand "the Grace of God." The "Grace of God" can only be understood when "sin" is understood as a state of being—as a state of estrangement of our *will* from the Final Reality that we confront and within which we are embedded.

All our "sinful states of being" face the wrath of God, the opposition of this Final Reality from which our "state of sinful will" is in estrangement. And this wrath of God against "sin" is never ending. Wrath is poured out and always will be poured out against all sin, including whatever massive or tiny estrangements characterize our past, current, or future lives.

Wrath and Grace

Bultmann is clear that a persistence of the wrath of God against our sin is the correct understanding of the teachings of Paul. For example in Romans 1-18, Paul says that "God's wrath pours out against all ungodliness and wickedness of men." That is, the Final Reality never becomes more friendly toward our estrangement from Final Reality. Paul also says in Romans 2:5 that an unrepentant person is "storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed." That is, Final Reality never changes from being totally opposed to our estrangement. In other words, redemption is not a "choice" on the part of Final Reality to be more friendly toward our delusory living. Redemption has to do with a rescue of you or me or anyone from our bondage of will, a bondage that is our estrangement from Final Reality. This rescue from an estrangement is a movement toward a "righteousness" that is not "under the wrath of God."

So, here is a summary from the writings of Paul and the biblical interpretations of Rudolf Bultmann on how the "Grace of God" relates to the "wrath of God:" "The grace of God is the grace of a Judge (symbolically speaking) who "rightwises" the guilty. In other words, Final Reality operates *like a judge* who judges we unrealistic delusion dwellers to be guilty of being inhuman. To be human is to be realistically in love with total realism—"freedom from the past and openness for the future." Final Reality cannot be mocked, resisted, fought, or fled without consequences. Those consequences include losing who we truly are to who we think we are.

When our redemption is being deeply experienced, the first stage is of that experience is some sort of "despair" over our estrangement. But instead of despairing

over this despair, we can see despairing as a gift—as a doorway to our return to realism. In the experience of *redemption*, we pass through the doorway of despair—the *doorway* of experiencing the “hell” of our willful state from which we are being rescued. Only when this doorway of despair is visible to us, can we make sense of of being welcome home to Reality, of being forgiven, of being accepted, in spite of our actual life, accepted by the whole structure of things, the POWER operating in the march of time.

Also, let us be clear that this gift of redemption does not become a possession: it means entering into a life journey in which we are continually accepting this gift of redemption in each event of our lives. Living this redemptive life has its own consequences, for the still estranged world is intolerant of our emerging “righteousness of realism.” We never know what the consequences of living this life will mean. As Jesus himself represents, it can mean being tortured to death by the people who are offended with you for living such a life, and for your active or implied audit of their estrangement.

Being free from the past and open for the future includes a conquest of death, for death is coming in one form or another. Openness for the future includes an openness to dying, an openness to being limited with growing old and weakly (if we live long enough). Being open for the future means being alive toward all the other limitations of our particular life, being open to living with and among the others who exist with us, being willing to be our particular body, faced with our particular challenges, open to the consequences of our particular choices, responsible for our particular choices, with ongoing ignorance as to whether those choices are altogether good or altogether bad. Freedom means the acceptance of our welcome home in each and every event on an ongoing basis. This is a glorious life, when and if we get used to it, but in the first instance it may seem to be the very last thing any of us want to do with our one opportunity to be alive on this Earth.

Nevertheless, realistic living is the best case scenario for the living of our lives. Every other option becomes a tragedy of some sort; it results in despair—hell of some sort, hell right now as the quality of our lives. So if trusting in the “Jesus Christ” revelation ever comes your way as an actual opportunity, grab hold of it and be thankful. If this life leads to persecution and death, it still remains a good choice. For example, let us ask ourselves: do we want to intentionally die our deaths for something, or do we prefer backing into the tomb?

Beyond Bigotry

Finally, living our “in-the-Jesus-Christ-revelation” does not necessitate our claiming membership in a “Christian group.” If you find it more helpful to practice Buddhism or Islam or Judaism or something else to assist you to live your “in Christ” life, then you are free to do that. This non-bigoted form of Christian understanding is one of the most

amazing recent discoveries in 21st century Christian theologizing. “In Christ” is a cosmic dynamic that has nothing whatsoever to do with practicing any sort of religion. It does, however, effect the way you practice and reform whatever religion you do practice.

Yet, it is also true that practicing a transformed version of the Christian religion may work well for you in assisting you to live your life “in Christ.” If this is your choice, it requires you to remain aware that your religion is not the same as your spirit state symbolized by the phrase “in Christ.” Every religion is, at best, only a temporal practice that assists you with accessing your Eternal or essential humanity. Using the Christian vocabulary can assist you with accessing your “in-Christ-death-and-resurrection” living.

Furthermore, being “in Christ” does not mean believing in some Christian teachings or doing some Christian behaviors or some Christian rituals. Being “in Christ” means participation in a revelation about what it means to be our essential humanity. Being “in Christ” means dying to your willful bondage to your temporal clinging. Resurrection is what is left when such *clinging/bondage* is *killed*. This transformation may be happening in a portion of our life, with more transformation to come. And, this going away of our bondage is not an accomplishment by you or me or anyone: it is the reception of a gift that is given to you from an action of God—an action of that Ultimate POWER or Source of the march of time.

Finally, I need to clarify that these ten essays are *theologizing* that is written from the perspective of practicing a Christian religion. Whatever be someone’s religious practice or lack of one, he or she can read Christian theologizing and perhaps profit from it. Other-than Christians may find Christian theologizing useful for their own brand of theotics. Nevertheless, all of us, Christian or not, need to remain clear that Christian theologizing is an in-group or “cultic” communal practice written to aid Christian practitioners. Christian theologizing is about seeing in the event of the Jesus-Christ revelation the meaning of every event that has happened, is happening, or will ever happen to anyone, anywhere, forever.

This paradox of seeing in a temporal event the Eternal meaning of every event is the bottom-line content of Christian theologizing. This paradox can seem strange, but seeing the Eternal in the temporal (the Almighty Divine in the temporal human) protects Christians from being the religious bigots that most Christians still manage to be. Bigotry means seeing some temporal religious something as Devine, but Christian theotics, when fully understood, makes clear that no temporal religious something—ritual, dogma, communal body, or personage—is Devine. This includes Jesus of Nazareth who is both a meeting of the Divine and simply Jesus of Nazareth, an impoverished Jewish roof-repairman’s son in a out of the way place within a now defunct Roman Empire. If through our death/resurrection gift from Final Reality, we join the “in Christ” humanity, we also join Jesus in being fully human in every crass and

amazing way, while also joining Jesus in being the event that reveals the Second Face of Divine, The Awes Ones who witness to the Awesome Final Reality and the release of Awe/Wonder in our own lives.

Paul invited us to “be reconciled with God and thus become reconcilers with all humankind.