

THE NEW CREATION AND DOING THE TRUTH

Christianity as More than a Religion

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IN THE PREFACE to Volume One of his *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich tells us that the purpose of his work is essentially apologetic (1953, ix-x). An apologetic theology is one that moves back and forth between two poles, namely, 'the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received' (1953, 3). A formal criterion that Tillich applies to his system is that only those statements are theological that deal with 'what concerns us ultimately' (1953, 15), and a second formal criterion is that only those propositions are theological which deal with their object insofar as 'it can become a matter of being or not-being for us' (1953, 17). Only that which has the power of threatening or saving our being is of ultimate concern to human existence. These two criteria express Tillich's existentialist approach to theology, and the character of this approach determines his understanding of the method of theology, which is the 'method of correlation'. That is to say, the starting-point of his theology is the existential analysis of the temporal situation which raises fundamental questions to which the Christian message provides answers. The method of correlation is an attempt to unite the Christian message and the temporal situation in such a way that 'neither of them is obliterated' (1953, 8).

The purpose of this essay is not to discuss the merits and/or weaknesses in Tillich's method of correlation, but to review his understanding of Jesus Christ as the One in whom has appeared the New Being, and to examine Tillich's conception of Christian truth as 'sav-

ing truth,' from which it will become apparent in what manner it can be said that Christianity is to be regarded as more than a religion. The first part of this essay will examine Tillich's understanding of Christ as the New Being, the second part will discuss the meaning of *doing* the truth, and the conclusion will highlight two fundamental pitfalls to be avoided in respect of Christianity's relation to contemporary culture. In particular, the intention will be to caution against an overly 'integralist' portrayal of Christian faith, which is a perennial tendency in Roman Catholicism. In the presentation of Tillich's thought the essay will draw from his two works *The Shaking of the Foundations* and *The New Being*, which belong together as one piece.

Christ, The New Being

Tillich, following the writings of Paul, sums up the Christian message in two words: it is the message of a 'New Creation' (1956, 15). The Messiah is the one who brings the new state of things to humans who all live in the old state of ontological estrangement from self, from others, and from God. What is ultimately important, what should be our ultimate concern, is to be 'in union with Him in whom the New Reality is present' (Tillich, 1956, 16). While we all live in the old state of things because we are all fallen and corrupted creatures, 'we *also* participate in the new state of things' (Tillich, 1956, 15). The New Being is not, as often thought by many who have examined Tillich's theology, simply a replacement of the

Old Being, for Tillich explicitly talks about a renewal of the Old. 'Salvation does not destroy creation; but it transforms the Old Creation into a New one. Therefore we can speak of the New in terms of a *re*-newal: the threefold '*re*,' namely, *re*-conciliation, *re*-union, *re*-resurrection' (Tillich, 1956, 20). Salvation in Christ has this threefold character in the work of Tillich.

The first mark of the New Reality is being reconciled to God. Paul makes clear in his writings that we sinners are reconciled to God, not *vice versa* (God does not need to be reconciled because God is not hostile towards us). To be reconciled to God in Christ is to cease to be hostile to God (Tillich, 1956, 20). If we seek to reconcile God by showing our good deeds (*i.e.* by rites and sacraments, prayers and services, moral behaviour and works of charity), we will fail and our hostility toward God will grow. 'Everybody carries a hostility toward the existence into which he has been thrown, toward the hidden powers which determine his life and that of the universe, toward that which makes him guilty and that threatens him with destruction because he has become guilty' (Tillich, 1956, 20-21). We all feel hostile, says Tillich, toward that which we feel has rejected us, and by trying to appease it and in failing, we become even more hostile. This hostility manifests itself on two levels: hostility toward ourselves (divided-self, self-rejection, disgust) and hostility toward others (as we try to make ourselves more acceptable to our own judgment, and fail, we grow more hostile toward others). To be reconciled to God, then, entails at one and the same time being reconciled to ourselves and to others. 'A new reality has appeared in which you *are* reconciled. To enter the New Being we do not need to show anything. We must only be open to be grasped by it, although we have nothing to show' (Tillich, 1956, 22). God's act of reconciling us to the Ground of Being is a purely gratuitous act that reveals God's unbounded love for us sinners.

The second mark of the New Reality is re-



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union. Reconciliation makes reunion possible. To be in union with the New Being means that we are reunited with the ground and meaning of our existence so that we experience being reunited with our self in a deep self-acceptance. We accept our self as something which is eternally accepted and eternally important because eternally loved (Tillich, 1956, 22). This real healing, as participation in the New Creation, involves being reunited with the whole: our whole being, our whole personality, is united with itself, and creates reunion with others. The separation that characterized the Old Being now gives way to the reunion of the New Being, so that the Church of Christ is the place where the reunion of human to human is confessed and realized. The Church of Christ, however, is continuously betrayed by the Christian churches where only fragments of this New Reality are discernible and visible. The Church of Christ, like its members, relapses from the New into the Old Being, hence the New state of things is not fully visible in the Church but remains hidden.

The third mark of the New Reality is resurrection. Tillich does not conceive of resurrection in terms of a future raising of the body out of the grave, but rather stresses that resurrection happens *now* as 'the power of the New Being to create life out of death...out of disintegration and death is born something of eternal significance' (Tillich, 1956, 24). Resurrection and New Being are interchangeable terms, so that wherever there is New Being, there is resurrection; that is, the entering into eternity out of time. The valid point that Tillich makes

here, against those who place too much emphasis on resurrection as a future event reserved for the righteous, is that the Christian lives from the ultimate power of the New Being already present in the here-and-now, in the Spirit, so that to participate in the New Being is already to participate in eternal life. To be reconciled to God and to enjoy blessed reunion with God is to participate in the power of resurrection life that is much greater than the powers of death (non-being) in the present world. Of course to conceive of resurrection life purely in terms of the Eternal Now does raise critical questions, but these need not concern us because they will take us too far afield from the stated aim and intention of this essay.

On the basis of the appearance of the New Being in history, faith in God's providence means for Tillich that 'nothing can prevent us from fulfilling the ultimate meaning of our existence...the daemonic and destructive forces within ourselves and our world can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us, and that the bond which connects us with the fulfilling love can never be disrupted' (Tillich, 1949, 111). Providence should not be conceived as a divine plan in which everything is predetermined, but the courage to say yes to one's life in spite of everything, the courage to accept life in the power of God's love for us made manifest in Christ. Tillich's view of divine providence is informed by Paul's utterance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39), and he goes on to highlight what is peculiar about the Christian view of truth as embodied in the person of Christ who brings salvation to the Old Creation.

The Meaning of 'Doing the Truth'

One of the key biblical passages upon which Tillich reflects is John 3:16-21 where the evangelist says that 'he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God' (v. 21). At

first sight this statement may seem strange insofar as truth is generally something that is known, not done, although it could be interpreted as meaning that one acts on the basis of some knowledge of truth. The latter interpretation, however, is not compatible with other statements in the Fourth Gospel, such as 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (14:6), '...the truth will make you free' (8:32), and the description of the Word become flesh as 'full of grace and truth' (1:14, 17). What these utterances make clear is that Jesus Christ should not be seen as a teacher of truth among other teachers of truth, for the truth is inseparable from his person and mission as the Word of God become flesh (Tillich, 1949, 121). By saying 'I am the truth,' Jesus indicates that the ultimate reality, God, is present in his person. 'Jesus is not the truth because His teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is. He is more than his words, and he is more than any word said about him' (Tillich, 1956, 69-70).

Once this is fully appreciated, we will be quick to acknowledge that no teaching of Jesus, or Church doctrine about him, is 'the truth' that makes us free. Tillich points out that most people like to be told what to think, thus they are prepared to live by the teachings of Jesus (the giver of a new law) and the doctrines of the Church, which are taken as infallible prescriptions for life. The problem with this is that both the teachings of Jesus and the doctrines of the Church are verbal and therefore temporal expressions of the truth that Jesus himself is, which is to say that they *point* to the truth but are not the truth that liberates (Tillich, 1956, 70). In the Christian perspective, then, truth can be done only by following the person of Christ who brings the new state of things in history; truth is always truth that is done because it is 'saving truth' that sets estranged humanity free by virtue of participation in the New Being (the threefold divine action of reconciling, reuniting, and resurrecting).

Tillich explains that the Fourth Gospel accepts the Greek understanding of truth as making manifest the hidden, so that truth is not naturally possessed by humans but must be discovered in the depth, beneath the surface. At the same time, however, the concept of truth is transformed in the light of the Christ-event: truth is ‘something which is *done* by God in history,’ it is ‘something which *happens*,’ it is the ‘new creation realizing itself in history’ (Tillich, 1949, 120). To be in a state of sin is to be in a state of estrangement from oneself, from others, and from the Ground of Being, and this three-fold separation is the ‘fate’ of every human life. We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and we experience ourselves as powerless to transform our existential predicament, yet it is precisely in the midst of this concrete human predicament that grace makes its definitive appearance. ‘Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage’ (Tillich, 1949, 158). Truth and God’s grace manifested in Christ are two sides of the same theological coin in Tillich’s theology.

Those who submit to the teachings of Jesus and Church doctrines as the truth of Christianity, believing their lives are ‘safe’ by doing so, will probably never experience the spiritual freedom of which the Fourth Gospel speaks. For according to John, spiritual freedom comes by way of *participating* in the being of the Christ—when we participate in the New Being we are in the truth that matters ultimately. To reach the truth, then, we must do the truth, which is identical with true discipleship. Doing the truth must not be interpreted as obedience to divine commandments and authoritative Church doctrines, but ‘living out of the reality which is *He* who is the truth, making His being the being of ourselves and of our world’ (Tillich, 1956, 71). True discipleship is participation in the being of Christ

who is ‘full of grace and truth,’ who is one with the Ground of Being and the New Creation in person.

In spite of the abounding of sin, guilt, and anxiety in our lives, Tillich is keen to emphasize that grace abounds ‘much more’ (Rom 5:15, 17), which is to say that we are accepted by that which is beyond and greater than us. To simply accept the truth that we humans are unconditionally accepted by God in Christ means that the burden of religion is taken from us (Tillich, 1949, 101). That is, the yoke of the religious law, imposed by the Scribes and Pharisees, is removed from us and Jesus promises that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (cf. Mt 11:30). Those who are joined to Christ and belong to him no longer sigh under the yoke of the religious law (i.e. the attempt of the human to overcome its anxiety and restlessness, to close the gap within itself, and to reach immortality and perfection) because the Messiah gives them a ‘new being’ that is above religion (Tillich, 1949, 102). The yoke of Jesus is *not a new demand or new morals*, but rather ‘a new power of transforming life. He calls it a yoke, He means that it comes from above and grasps us with saving force; if He calls it easy, He means that it is not a matter of our acting and striving, but rather that it is given before anything we can do’ (Tillich, 1949, 105). To participate in the New Being is to overcome the anxiety and despair, the fear and restlessness of our existence, because we now abide in the truth (in spite of our ignorance about ourselves and our world) and in the good (in spite of our weakness and evil), so that our souls have rest by virtue of being in touch with eternity (Ground of Being).

A final point that Tillich has to say about truth is that the truth which liberates is the *power of love*, for God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16). God and love are not two realities but one, for ‘God’s infinite power of Being is the infinite power of love’ (Tillich, 1956, 26). Wherever God is freely present, abiding in the human soul, there is manifested the power of love as the power of New Being. Love liberates us from our false

and guilty self, and unveils our original self as grounded in true reality. Only when love has taken hold of us and has started to liberate us from our false self can we say with certainty that we are in the truth. Any claim to truth that is not united with love is therefore to be distrusted and viewed with suspicion. The thought of John carries through the thought of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 where he claims that only love is eternal, thus we should make love the aim of the Christian life. In this scriptural passage, Paul compares the fragmentary knowledge of the present human situation ('we see in a mirror dimly') with the fullness of knowledge to come ('face to face'). Did Paul forget that he had just spoken of love alone as eternal? No, says Tillich, he did not forget (1949, 114). There is only one way to know a personality, namely, to become united with that personality through love, to participate and abide in the other. 'Because the love which is perfect and lasting lies not within us, perfect knowledge is denied us' (Tillich, 1949, 115). The standard of knowledge in the New Testament is the standard of love, and since we do not love perfectly in this life our knowledge is always fragmentary—things appear to us as 'enigmas and riddles' (Tillich, 1949, 115).

It is highly significant that Paul, a staunch Pharisee who converted to 'the Way' (Acts 22:4), experienced the breakdown of a system of religious life which he believed to be a whole, a perfect truth without riddles or gaps. Yet Paul never tried again to build up a new religious system out of the pieces. Instead, Paul dwelt with the pieces, in the understanding that the unity to which they belong lies beyond them, and he was able to endure the Christian life because 'the fragments bore a new meaning to him' (Tillich, 1949, 117). The new meaning derived from the ultimate power of God's love present in Christ, the New Creation, which transformed the tormenting riddles and enigmas of life into symbols of truth, and the tragic fragments of existence into symbols of the whole. The Christian grasps the whole in the here-and-now not through perfect knowledge

of all-that-is, but rather through living *hope* that anticipates the 'face to face' encounter with God who is the ultimate power of love and Ground of Being.

Conclusion

Tillich's portrayal of the New Being as love, freedom, and fulfilment of the human existent, together with his well developed understanding of doing the truth by participating in the New Being, serves to effectively caution us against reducing Christianity to a religion (a set of dogmas, moral commandments, and ritual practices). The understanding that Christianity is above religion derives not only from the assertion that Christ himself *is* the saving truth that transforms the Old Creation into the New, but also from the perspective that Christ was crucified by the religious law, yet triumphed over it, hence he is 'the victor over religion' (Tillich, 1949, 107). The Messiah is not the creator of another religion, but the One who takes from us the burden of religion that tends to exasperate the anxiety, restlessness, and despair hidden in every human life that labours to attain self-fulfilment and to secure immortality. Piety, as a professor at the Gregorian University in Rome once exclaimed, might get us everywhere, but not necessarily closer to the truth!

The assertion that Christ takes from us the burden of religion does not, however, amount to a denial of the ethical dimension of Christian life. On the contrary, doing the truth by participating or sharing in the New Being implies that the moral life is intrinsic to the saving truth that Christ himself is. The important thing to appreciate here is that the 'new action,' the better and stronger action that characterises a disciple of Christ, is *action that follows new being* (Tillich, 1949, 108), not action prescribed by a set of moral-religious laws imposed on practicing believers. The doctrines of the Church seek to give expression to the content of Christian faith and life, but they must not be confused or identified

with the event 'Jesus as the Christ' who is 'he Alpha and the Omega' (Rev 1:8), the absolute ground of being and what concerns us ultimately. Only Christ himself can give 'rest' to our tormented and fragmented souls, so that the new action that follows the new being is *more creative* action because it arises out of the profoundest depth of our life as eternally accepted by the power of God's ineffable love for us sinners.

When Christianity is treated as an authoritatively revealed religion, it runs the risk of confusing the structures of faith (teaching-creed, life-conduct, worship-cult), which are temporal expressions of truth, for eternal truth. The result is a reductive interpretation of Christianity. 'The reduction occurs when the faith is pared down to its manifest, prominent features and then tightened up into a *closed* system' (van Beeck, 1989, 57). The Roman Catholic variant of this reduction, which usually happens in the interest of *control*, is known as 'integralism'. By asserting that Christianity is more than a religion, Tillich reminds us that the Christian faith is a fundamentally *open*

system (this is part of what 'catholic' means), for the manifest structures are associated with the hidden mystery of the living Christ who offers New Being in the midst of the Old. In this way the manifest structures 'convey their reference to the mystery of God in the very act of opening themselves to the surrounding culture' (van Beeck, 1989, 61).

Of course, the opposite error is also always with us, namely, the Christian message is translated without remainder into the convictions of the secular culture in the interest of *relevancy* to the contemporary situation. This pitfall, which is known as 'modernism,' is characteristic of Liberal Protestantism, and it too fails to effectively proclaim the Gospel of Christ. The thought of Tillich has enduring significance in highlighting that it is necessary to seek a theological method that correlates contemporary situation and Christian message in such a way that neither of them is obliterated. We must always strive for a 'synthesis' where the Christian message is presented as the answer to the questions implied in every human situation.

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Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

—2 Corinthians 5:17