

RUDOLF BULTMANN: REMOVING THE FALSE OFFENSE

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Rudolf Bultmann published an essay in 1941 on the demythologization of the New Testament.¹ The term dymythologization means the decoding of myth or the reinterpretation of ancient mythical patterns of thought in the Bible into contemporary thought patterns. Bultmann believes that contemporary thought demands a modern scientific view of the universe which interprets reality in terms of a closed cause and effect natural order. Such a view excludes the possibility of miracles defined as supranaturally caused events; every event has a natural cause.²

Yet, while Bultmann does not accept the historic, orthodox interpretation of biblical Christianity, which includes miracles such as the incarnation, to cite one example of what he calls myth, Bultmann does accept myth as a true statement of the way men may understand what it means to experience an authentic life (salvation). According to Bultmann, the myth is important, but in order for modern man to grasp its truth, such ancient thought-forms must be dymythologized or reinterpreted.

It should now be clear that Bultmann does not use "mythical" in the sense of not true. Myth expresses truth, but the truth is clothed in the symbolic language of ancient thought-patterns. He defines myth as "the use of imagery to express the other-worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side."³ Bultmann believes that the meaning of myth lies not in its description about an objectively real, supranatural, other-world; the meaning of myth is to be found in what it is trying to express about human existence in this world. Myth is like an artist's creative projection upon a cosmic screen of how man, in a certain historical period, under the influence of certain cultural circumstances, interprets his existence. Myth, for Bultmann, supplies us with knowledge of the way in which man understands himself in this world. It is not to be interpreted as having a significance beyond this human-natural world. It is wholly existential or about life here and now.⁴

Therefore, Bultmann asserts that the biblical myths, such as the three-

1. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. by H. W. Bartsch, trans. by R. H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), pp. 1-44.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 5; and Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond* (New York: Scribner's, 1960), p. 158.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 10, fn. 2.
4. Except for the cross of Christ, which Bultmann believes has more than an existential-natural meaning. See Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 124 ff; otherwise, see: Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben and Verstehen*, III (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1960), p. 90.

level universe, with heaven above, the flat earth with hell below, angels, Satan, incarnation, resurrection, ascension, second coming, judgment, and all miracles, require an existential interpretation to be meaningful for modern man.⁵ We shall have more to say about the "how" and "what" of Bultmann's *existential* interpretation of myth; for now, think of it as a reinterpretation of myth in terms of its meaning for man's life here and now, not after death nor in another supranatural realm. For example, according to Bultmann, "eternal life" is not a life after death; rather it is to be interpreted existentially as a *quality* of life here and now.⁶

Since writing his 1941 essay on demythologizing the New Testament, Bultmann has been sharply criticized for his imprecise definition of myth. It is too general, covering just about all symbolic and analogical language in the Bible.⁷ This writer prefers, instead of myth, the expression metaphorical language in relation to ancient biblical thought forms. True, metaphor is also quite general, yet it is free from the misleading connotations of "myth." Since many of God's actions are historical occurrences, the term "myth" as used by Bultmann does not fit such biblical events.

The question may now be asked, "What motivated Bultmann to develop his method of biblical reinterpretation called demythologizing?" Bultmann believes that the mythical view of reality, as presented in the Bible, is obsolete. He then asks the important question, "Must we expect modern man to accept the outmoded world-view in which the Gospel is embodied in the New Testament?" He rightly concludes that the Church is faced with a crisis in communication. Bultmann is concerned that men today not reject the Bible *for the wrong reasons*. It would be wrong to reject spiritual truth because of the mythical framework in which the truth of Scripture is embodied. Bultmann feels that people in our day do not reject the Gospel with any intelligent understanding of what it is they are rejecting. They are falsely offended by the mythological framework in which much of the New Testament is cast. Therefore, Bultmann's concern in demythologizing the Bible is an apologetic concern.

It must be understood that Bultmann does not want to "get rid of" myth. He does not make the same mistake as many nineteenth-century liberals who simply expurgated the Bible of all myth. To the contrary, Bultmann clearly perceives that the truth of revelation is inseparably bound up with the so-called mythical framework.

Bultmann wants to set the Gospel free from the offensive mythical thought-forms of the ancient world in order that modern man might be offended for the right reasons. He wants modern man to be confronted with the genuine stumblingblock of the *content* of truth in the biblical myths centered in the claims of Jesus Christ as the Lord of life. It is not a question of eliminating the genuine offense of the Gospel. It is a matter

5. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 2; also cf. 12 with 15, 16.

6. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *op. cit.*, p. 20.

7. John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1960), pp. 200-202.

of "demything," in the sense of decoding, the Bible in order that the relevant truth will be made clear to modern man; so that, if he chooses to reject the message, it will be for the right reason—the genuine offense—and not the wrong reasons—ancient patterns of thought no longer relevant today.

Consider the offense of the Gospel as Paul writes about it in I Corinthians 1:18-29. If it is by the foolishness of preaching that men are redeemed (v. 21), then it is necessary for us to bear the genuine offense of the Gospel to our contemporaries. If men are to be converted to Christ we must expect that some will be offended by the preaching of the cross, just as Jesus offended some of his contemporaries. It is our responsibility as Christians to be bearers of the genuine offense of the Gospel. In speaking of being offensive, Paul is not talking about breaches of etiquette. He means a quality of life and a message that offends, stuns, and unsettles non-Christians with whom we live and work. Why is the Gospel offensive to a non-Christian? Paul writes in verse twenty-three, "But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." The Gospel was a scandal to the Jew. It was scandalous that God's Chosen One should end his life by dying on a cross. Jesus was not the right kind of Messiah. He was not a spectacular warrior-king like David, but meek and lowly, ending life like a common criminal.

Likewise, the Greek thought the Gospel foolish. The very idea of incarnation, God becoming man, was foolishness to the Greek mind. God was beyond human limitations. With their love of philosophical erudition, the cross was logically absurd to the Greek. Also, the cross was contrary to the Greek love of beauty, health, and culture. The cross was associated in their minds with guilt and shame. The Gospel emphasis on blood atonement would offend their aesthetic sensitivities. Is modern man much different than the ancient Jew and Greek?

Then is Christianity offensive *primarily* because man cannot *understand* the Gospel? No, the offense goes deeper. The Gospel is offensive primarily because man is proud, and pride is the essence of sin. To trust in Christ one must admit that his own resources are inadequate and that he cannot help himself. This is humiliating to man. Man is too proud to admit that he is a sinner and not self-sufficient. Naaman (II Kings 5) is a paragon of all men in this regard. He was a man who at first was too proud to humble himself to repent and be cleansed. So "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing."

Christians need to allow the genuine offense of the Gospel to strike into the heart of sinful man to bring him to repentance and faith in Christ. Paul wrote, "It pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe." Man needs a rock of offense to stumble on—something to dash his pride to pieces and pierce his self-sufficiency. That rock of offense is Jesus Christ (Romans 9:33). This is where we come in. To the world we are representatives of Christ. It is necessary for us to bear the genuine offense of the Gospel in our relationships with others. However, we must never falsely offend.

Consider the use of Gospel tracts as an example of this distinction. A cheap, shoddy, poorly written tract may falsely offend a non-Christian. On the other hand, attractive, well-written literature, carefully presented, need not be a false offense. Should the non-believer then be offended by the content, the Holy Spirit pricking man's pride, will hopefully be the cause of this offense. The offended man, may, as a result, be convicted of his need for Christ. At least the offense is not a false offense of our own making whereby we put unnecessary obstacles in the way of the Spirit of God. While Bultmann concentrates on liberating the content of Scripture from false mythical forms, this lesson in communicating Christian truth can be greatly expanded. It is this apologetical insight that is worthy of serious consideration by every Christian.

Since Bultmann's method of interpreting the Bible marks a turning point in theology, let us spend a few minutes explaining what is involved in the task of hermeneutics—the interpretation of the meaning of Scripture for today—which is indeed the central concern in the communication of the Gospel. Scholars now speak of an older and a newer meaning of hermeneutics. The older meaning dealt with the traditional rules of sound biblical exegesis, the “literal-cultural-critical” method of interpretation based on specific principles, such as the priority of the original languages.⁸ The new meaning of hermeneutics is defined as “the science of reflecting on how a word or event in past time and culture may be understood and become existentially meaningful in our present situation.”⁹ In *The Interpretation of Scripture*, James Smart defines hermeneutics in the newer sense:

[Hermeneutics] is not just a repetition of Biblical words but is a ministry in which a modern man attempts to speak in a modern situation in modern language and thought-forms the same essential word from God that was spoken in an ancient time and in ancient languages and thought-forms by prophets and apostles.¹⁰

Thus, the task of hermeneutics today refers to *both* the traditional rules to be applied in interpretation as well as the *re*interpretation of biblical truth into a contemporary framework of thought.

Truth does not change; but we do. The historical situation in which we apprehend truth changes. Carl Braaten has succinctly summarized the ways in which our knowledge of truth become relative to man.¹¹ Man is a historical being subject to socio-cultural change. The relativity of truth arises from this generation gap; only it is not between those under and over thirty, but a “generation” gap of nearly two thousand years and more

8. See for example, Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, revsd. ed. (Boston: W. A. Wilde Co., 1956), espec. pp. 89ff.; and Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950).

9. Carl E. Braaten, *New Directions in Theology Today: Vol. II, History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 131.

10. James D. Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 41.

11. Braaten, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

—between first and twentieth-century ways of perceiving truth. Here is the crux of the hermeneutical problem. The eternal truth of God was inscripturated in first-century thought-forms which, while normative for all subsequent generations, must still be reinterpreted in contemporary thought-forms for each new generation.

Let us illustrate the necessity of the hermeneutical task—the interpretation of Scripture for each successive generation due to the historical relativity of our knowledge. It is important to understand that the men who wrote the Bible under divine inspiration wrote from the standpoint of how they understood truth in terms of their culture. Paul understood spiritual truth through a first-century pair of “colored glasses.” For example, in First Corinthians, chapter eight, Paul deals with the problem of “meat offered to idols.” We live in a different culture in America. And yet, while our culture differs, in that we no longer “offer meat to idols,” the ethical principle set forth in this passage of Scripture is valid for every generation: knowledge is to be guided by love in whatever we do in relation to less mature Christians. All that we understand is colored by the time in which we live. We see and understand truth through our twentieth-century colored glasses. We are conditioned by our philosophy, politics, science, sociology, psychology, along with many other cultural influences.

Consider the quest for the historical Jesus. Biographies of Jesus widely differ. Reimarus came up with a very German, eighteenth-century Jesus in his biography of Jesus Christ. Likewise, Renan’s Jesus was a French, nineteenth-century man; and Barton’s biography reveals an American, twentieth-century Jesus. How we understand Jesus is influenced by our particular colored glasses or historically conditioned way of understanding. Theologians call this a “pre-understanding” or “presupposition of thought.” No one is completely objective, not even in his knowledge of the Bible. We all understand differently, depending upon our colored glasses through which truth is filtered. This is why we must set forth criteria for hermeneutics or the task of properly reinterpreting the Bible for our generation. As a start, the reader may consider the following four criteria to be essential in the task of hermeneutics:

1. The illumination of the Holy Spirit is an absolute precondition for the interpretation of Scripture.¹² In order to understand the importance of the Holy Spirit’s influence upon our knowing the truth of Scripture, consider the analogy of knowing persons. You will never really know another person if you instinctively take an immediate disliking for that person. Your bias against that person, for whatever reason, acts as a block impeding your ability to get to know him. Your bias of the will not to know “colors” your knowledge distorting reason in the acquisition of personality characteristics. This is often true in education. If you decide from the start you do not like a particular teacher, it is unlikely that you will learn much from that teacher.

12. I Corinthians 2:11-16, espec. vs. 14; and see also Charles Hodge, “The Importance of Piety in the Interpretation of Scripture,” Inaugural Address, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1822.

On the other hand, when you open yourself up to another person, when your bias of the will to know is freed, knowledge may be acquired. So it is in our relationship with God as a Person. It is not until our bias of the will against God, due to the rebellion of a sinful spirit, is freed from its fetters by the operation of the Holy Spirit of God, that we are able to truly know God. The bias against God is removed by the action of faith, which is primarily an orientation of the will to trust God. We are not able to grasp the truth of Scripture because we do not want to, until the re-orienting work of God's Spirit opens our understanding by the process of faith. The "block" to knowing is removed. Our minds are free and open to truth. It is in this way that the Holy Spirit is primary in the task of biblical interpretation.

2. A second criterion essential to the task of hermeneutics, is that we must make every attempt to understand ourselves, particularly our own twentieth-century colored glasses through which we view the world, and in turn, read the Bible. This will enable us to cut down on our own bias in interpretation. When we understand ourselves—the particular make-up of the colored glasses we wear—then we can be more objective in interpreting the Bible. Since no one is completely objective due to the fact that our historical-cultural subjectivity colors everything we understand, it is essential to be aware of this fact. The reader may recall the illustration of the various attempts to write biographies of the historical Jesus. Since we cannot eliminate our colored glasses or historical subjectivity, we should be aware of the danger of limiting our understanding of Jesus to a mid-twentieth-century, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant.¹³ This leads us to a third essential criterion for hermeneutics.

3. We must not only try to understand ourselves, but an attempt must be made to understand the "older generation," the culture and thought patterns of the first-century in the Near East. The inspired Scripture-writer recorded the historical revelation in specific religio-cultural thought patterns. In addition to analyzing our own eye-glass prescription, we must analyze the prescription of the biblical writer's colored glasses.¹⁴ For example, his prescription led him to perceive heaven in terms of a Ptolemaic cosmology—the earth is the center of the universe; while our view of the physical universe is informed by helio-centric, quantum-physics thinking.

13. See for example Rudolf Bultmann's, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" in Schubert M. Ogden, ed. and trans., *Existence and Faith, Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Meridian, 1960), pp. 289 ff.; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, trans. by G. T. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), pp. 728 ff.

14. Should the reader wish to read some works attempting to delineate the biblical background, see: A. H. Armstrong and R. A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960); Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (Boston: Beacon Press, paper ed. 1957); Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek*, trans. by Jules L. Moreau (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957); H. and H. A. Frankfort, J. A. Wilson, T. Jacobsen, and W. A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); and G. E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), Chapter I.

The following conversation points up the difference. I asked my daughter, age seven, "Where is heaven?" She answered, pointing "Up!" I responded, "And twelve hours from now?" She thought for a moment, then in correct post-Ptolemaic thinking answered, "Down." The earth is neither the center of the universe, nor flat, with a level above called heaven and a level below called hell. The earth revolves on its axis and every twelve hours, from a popular, non-scientific perspective, as man stands on one spot on this rotating earth, up is down and down is up. Perhaps first-century man was aware of the fact that any attempt to locate heaven spatially is a built-in limitation to man's ability to conceptualize ultimate reality; but the fact remains, that the biblical writer was influenced to express spiritual truth by thought patterns limited to a first-century outlook.

4. Finally, equipped now with some degree of objectivity by knowing ourselves and the writers of Scripture, we may proceed with the more specific, traditional principles of sound exegesis listed in traditional texts on biblical interpretation, such as the priority of the original languages and so on. It might be well for the reader to peruse such a text.¹⁵

At this point, someone might ask, "Can't the common believer learn the truth of God's Word taught by the Holy Spirit, without going through the complicated calculus of the hermeneutical task?" The answer to this question is, that while a devout believer may indeed understand most Scripture without formal theological training in these matters, all things being equal, the devout believer who is also learned in the principles of biblical interpretation should better understand and communicate biblical truth.

Likewise, someone may ask, "Why do we have to reinterpret the Bible all over again for each successive generation? Why not just read the Bible and let it speak for itself?" The answer to this question would be, "In which translation?" We already have reinterpretation at one level. Most people do not read the Hebrew and Greek originals. Again, while the truth of the Word of God does not change, *we do*. Our historical existence in which the truth is apprehended changes. Therefore, in order to make the truth of God's Word relevant and meaningful, it must be reinterpreted anew for each successive generation in an appropriate idiom or framework of thought.

At the simplest level, this reinterpretation may be a biblical paraphrase as exemplified by J. B. Phillips. However, further reinterpretation is necessary. No matter how you translate First Corinthians, chapter eight, and Romans, chapter fourteen, what is the relevance of "meat offered to idols" to a twentieth-century man? Reinterpreting the Bible does not mean accommodating the truth of God's Word to modern man. It means making a point of contact with modern man, where he is, on the level of his own life and thought in order to call modern man into question and confront him with the claims of Christ.

15. Ramm, *loc. cit.*

Paul Tillich has clearly stated the task of apologetical theology. He writes that theology has a two-fold task: (1) the statement of the truth of the Christian message as contained in the Bible; and, (2) the reinterpretation of this truth for every new generation.¹⁶ Why must we have preaching? Why don't we content ourselves merely with reading the Bible passages aloud? Why do we have to have long sermons about these things instead of simply reading them in the biblical sources? The answer is that task one, the statement of biblical truth, without task two, fresh reinterpretations in an appropriate idiom and framework of thought for each new generation, would result in an obscure and irrelevant Gospel.¹⁷ Perhaps now, we can better appreciate Bultmann's concern for hermeneutics as it relates to apologetics.

What can we learn from Bultmann's method of demythologization? While this writer does not agree with Bultmann's conclusions, his questions are pertinent. Much can be learned from asking the right questions. Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from Bultmann is that the Christian must carefully distinguish between the true and false offense in the communication of the Gospel. As previously indicated, this is the primary concern behind his method of demythologizing.

This matter of correctly interpreting the Bible has become a tremendously important issue in our day. Bultmann himself is a prime example. It is no longer possible to listen to a preacher use biblical content and assume a univocal meaning, that is, words mean the same thing to everyone. The speaker may say one thing using traditional biblical terms, but the listener will interpret what is said in quite a different sense than what the speaker intends. Imagine the following conversation with Bultmann:

"Professor Bultmann, do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, of course I do. I am a Christian."

"That is indeed good to hear Professor Bultmann. Many people say you are not a Christian because you do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today."

"Of course I don't believe *that*!"

"But I thought you said you believed in the resurrection?"

"Yes, I do; but the resurrection means the rise of faith in the minds of the disciples as a result of Christ's death on the cross."¹⁸

16. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 3.

17. Helmut Thielicke, *How Modern Should Theology Be?* trans. by H. C. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

18. Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *op. cit.*, pp. 8 and 41; also Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry Into the Possibility of Religion Without Myth* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), p. 60.

"Oh, then you don't believe in the resurrection!"

"Yes, of course I do!"

It is evident from this not-so-hypothetical conversation that one can use the same biblical language, yet the interpretation can differ radically.

Bultmann believes that the myth of a literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a false offense unnecessarily alienating modern man. He does not believe that Jesus is still alive on a new plane of existence which Paul attempts to describe by using analogies in First Corinthians, chapter fifteen. This writer believes the resurrection to be a genuine offense and need not be demythologized. It must of course be carefully explained so that resurrection is not misinterpreted as resuscitation or re-incarnation. It is the historical essence of the Gospel and it is offensive to modern man. This difference between what constitutes a genuine offense and a false offense is crucial to an effective witness.

On the one hand, we should never falsely offend; on the other hand, we should never lose the genuine offense of the Gospel. If we fail in our witness, it is usually something like the following true incident related by a well-known Boston minister. He told of a department store clerk who said, "I have known you for many years reverend and you are such a great minister. I am glad you have never offended me by telling me that I need Jesus as my Saviour!" It is tragic but true, that most Christians err not so much in falsely offending non-believers, but rather in never offending men at all with the genuine offense of the Gospel. This is Bultmann's main concern: that man be offended, but not for the wrong reasons. Paul Tillich expresses the same concern when he writes, "What we have to do is overcome the wrong stumblingblock in order to bring people face to face with the right stumblingblock and enable them to make a genuine decision."¹⁹ Once again, we see that the concern for apologetics, as the *proper* communication of Christian truth, is a unanimous concern among contemporary theologians.*

19. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 213.

*This chapter will appear in a forthcoming book, *The Unanimous Concern* (Apologetics and contemporary theology).