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Rudolf Bultmann on Myth, History, and the Resurrection

RUDOLF BULTMANN (1884–1976) WAS one of the most significant and controversial New Testament theologians of the twentieth century. Praised as a genius who opens a new future for theology or vilified as a heretic who threatens to destroy the Christian faith, Bultmann cannot be ignored.¹ His contributions to New Testament exegesis (especially form criticism), theological hermeneutics,² the relationship between theology and history, theological engagement with philosophy, and, most significantly for our purposes, his program of demythologizing the New Testament, have provided generations of theologians and biblical scholars with invaluable tools for interpretation. Bultmann is also perhaps one of the most consistently misunderstood and misinterpreted theologians of the twentieth century.³ Critics vehemently decry his work without always understanding it, and even those sympathetic to his project vary widely in their interpretations.

Bultmann was primarily a New Testament scholar. His texts *Jesus*⁴ and *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*⁵ are considered classics in New Testament

1. Indeed, there has been something of a resurgence of interest in Bultmann in the last decade, thanks in part to the appearance of recently unpublished letters and other documents from Bultmann's *Nachlass* as well as a new biography of Bultmann: Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann*. For a new introduction in English, see Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann*. For a collection of essays on the lingering legacy of Bultmann in contemporary New Testament studies, see Longnecker and Parsons, *Beyond Bultmann*.

2. For an especially cogent discussion of Bultmann's program of demythologizing as it relates to theological hermeneutics, see Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann."

3. David Congdon is particularly concerned to rehabilitate Bultmann after generations of criticisms and frequent misunderstandings.

4. Bultmann, *Jesus*. ET: *Jesus and the Word*.

5. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. ET: *Theology of the New Testament*.

studies. More specifically, he was especially interested in the Johannine corpus and the letters of Paul. His treatments of the gospel of John and Paul's letters to the Corinthians reveal a masterful understanding of these traditions. As a New Testament scholar, however, Bultmann's work extended into other fields, such as theological hermeneutics, systematic and philosophical theology, and the philosophy of history.⁶ His work is influenced by Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy⁷ and this influence finds its most powerful manifestation in Bultmann's program of demythologizing.⁸

Bultmann on Myth

The question of myth in the New Testament pervades Bultmann's work. For Bultmann the world-picture of the New Testament is fundamentally a mythical world-picture. The universe is perceived as a three-tiered structure, with God in heaven "above," hell "below," and this world as the battlefield of good and evil supernatural forces. History does not proceed according to immutable laws, but is constantly manipulated by supernatural intervention. For Bultmann the fundamental question concerning myth in the New Testament is whether the New Testament kerygma contains a truth that is in some way independent of the mythical world-picture of the New Testament.⁹ If the New Testament kerygma is inseparable from the mythical world-picture of the New Testament, then its truth is lost to modern generations who can no longer accept this mythical world-picture. If the truth of the New Testament kerygma *can* be discerned apart from the mythical world-picture in which it is expressed, then it is the task of the theologian to demythologize the New Testament to understand the kerygma in its significance for faith.

6. Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 4. ET: "Rudolf Bultmann: An Attempt to Understand Him." Barth understands the boundary between New Testament exegesis and systematic theology to have been abolished in Bultmann's own work.

7. In discussion with Kuhlmann (see Kuhlmann, "Zum theologischen Problem der Existenz") Bultmann elaborates on the relationship between his theological interpretation of existence and human being, on the one hand, and Heidegger's philosophical interpretation of existence and human being, on the other. See Bultmann, "Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube."

8. For a contemporaneous summary of Bultmann's program of demythologizing and its impact on continental theology, see Tillich, "European Discussion of the Problem."

9. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," 16. ET: "New Testament and Mythology."

Bultmann recognizes the impossibility of simply repristinating the mythical world-picture of the New Testament because the modern scientific age has no room within it for recourse to the spirit world of the New Testament. To accept this world-picture blindly is to perform a *sacrificium intellectus* and to make acceptance of it a demand of faith is to reduce faith to a work.¹⁰ Modern women and men are pervasively informed and influenced by modern science, and, for Bultmann,

People cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the case of illness, take advantage of modern medical and clinical means, and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament. And whoever intends to do so must be aware that they can profess this as the attitude of Christian faith only by making the Christian proclamation unintelligible and impossible for the present.¹¹

If the Christian kerygma has a universal truth, then it must be possible to express it independently of its first-century mythical form, especially if the kerygma is to speak a powerful word to those who no longer inhabit such a world-picture. If this is not possible, then the power and relevance of the Christian proclamation has faded along with the cultural forms of the first century. If it is to be salvific, the kerygma must be communicable to every time and every place, without demanding that hearers accept the mythical world-picture of the New Testament in which it was originally expressed. This does not mean, however, that the kerygma is simply “accommodated” to modern culture, as many critics charge (against Bultmann and, perhaps with more justification, against his liberal forebears); rather, Bultmann’s program seeks to clarify first what the Christian kerygma is, and only then to make it relevant to modern people¹² (something akin to Paul Tillich’s method of correlation).

David Congdon has proposed the conceptual framework of “constantinianism” and “translationism” to describe Bultmann’s theological project

10. For this notion of forced acceptance of an alien world-picture as a *sacrificium intellectus* and a reduction of faith to a work Bultmann is drawing on the work of Herrmann in *Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott im Anschluss an Luther dargestellt*. ET: *Communion of the Christian*.

11. Bultmann, “Neues Testament und Mythologie,” 18.

12. Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, xxvi. Congdon goes on to suggest that Bultmann’s theological program is best understood as “missionary” theology, insofar as “clarifying the faith for people in a particular cultural situation is the very definition of the missionary enterprise.” *Ibid.*

of demythologizing. Specifically, Congdon describes “constantinianism” as a “nondialectical-nonmissionary theology that confuses the kerygma with a cultural worldview” and “translationism” as a “dialectical-missionary theology that differentiates the kerygma from every culture on the basis of God’s transcendent extraneity.” He goes on to give a more precise synopsis of Bultmann’s project:

[Bultmann’s] missionary hermeneutic therefore entails (a) the criticism of constantinianism and (b) the recontextualization [i.e. translation] of the kerygma. Specifically, the latter involves (1) the appropriating work of situating the kerygma within the present cultural-historical situation and (2) the transpropriating work of freeing the kerygma for new cultural-historical situations in the future . . . A missionary theology must therefore take intercultural and crosscultural translation as its starting point and mode of operation . . . If a hermeneutic is going to be unreservedly missionary, it cannot shrink from recognizing that the very conceptualities with which both past biblical writers and present interpreters articulate the kerygma are themselves elements of particular cultures that the kerygma crosses in its missionary movement through history. This is one of the key insights provided by Bultmann’s theology.¹³

In terms of Bultmann’s method, this raises three important questions: What is the New Testament kerygma? What is myth? And what is demythologizing?

First, it is necessary to understand what the New Testament kerygma is before asking about the possibility and promise of demythologizing it.¹⁴ The New Testament kerygma, simply put, is the proclamation of God’s saving act in Jesus the Christ. This is proclaimed in the word of address, but the proclamation itself is paradoxical: God’s eschatological act takes place in human history, in a historical person, but precisely because it is historical it cannot be proved to be eschatological. The proclamation presents itself as a scandal and faith in this proclamation is a risk precisely because the act of God cannot be verified by historical research.¹⁵ The kerygma as presented in the New Testament assumes mythological forms (e.g., the pre-existent Son of God emptying himself and becoming flesh), but the essence of the

13. *Ibid.*, 572–73.

14. Bultmann finds attempts at demythologizing already at work in the New Testament itself (e.g., the Gospel of John in relation to the Synoptic gospels).

15. Bultmann, “Neues Testament und Mythologie,” 48.

kerygma, that God has acted in Jesus the Christ *pro me*, if this is to make a claim on modern people, must be demythologized.

Before the New Testament kerygma can be demythologized, it is first necessary to define myth. In Bultmann's estimation myth accomplishes two goals. First, myth expresses the transcendent in worldly, objectifying terms.¹⁶ Early cultures used mythical expressions to communicate their understanding of the strange, the surprising, or the mysterious.¹⁷ Myth expresses the basic understanding that the human is not master of the universe but exists in a world full of mystery that is beyond human control.¹⁸ Second, the true intention of myth is not to provide an objective picture of the world, but rather to express how human beings understand themselves in relation to their world. This is the difficulty of myth: the form of myth attempts to give worldly objectivity to the unworldly,¹⁹ but the substance of myth must be interpreted, not in cosmological but rather in anthropological (i.e. existential) terms.²⁰

For example, Christian mythology speaks of the transcendence of God in spatial terms. Rather than speak philosophically about the nature of transcendence, the New Testament prefers to imagine this transcendence in terms of spatial distance: God reigns "above" in heaven. Evil is likewise described in spatial terms and is personified in the form of demons who dwell "below" in hell. In order to overcome evil, a battle must ensue in which the champion of good defeats the forces of evil. What is expressed in these myths is the understanding that the world (and humanity's place within it) does not find its end in itself, but depends upon powers at work beyond human control. Thus mythology should not be interrogated in terms of the content of its objectifying representations, but in terms of the understanding of human existence expressed by these myths.²¹ For Bultmann the issue at hand is the truth expressed by the myth, and faith in this truth—if it is to be meaningful today—cannot be bound to or limited by the mythical world-picture of the New Testament.

16. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1952), 182. ET: "On the Problem of Demythologizing" (1952).

17. *Ibid.*, 180–81.

18. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 19.

19. As Bultmann himself puts it, "*Der Mythos objektiviert das Jenseitige zum Diesseitigen.*" "Neues Testament und Mythologie," 48.

20. *Ibid.*, 22.

21. *Ibid.*, 23.

An additional question regarding myth in the New Testament concerns the method of demythologizing the New Testament witness in order to make it relevant to modern people. The term “demythologizing” (*Entmythologisierung*)²² is, by Bultmann’s own admission, problematic.²³ This term implies the elimination of myth, as if myth were a disposable husk containing a kernel of truth, which is how myth was often understood in the nineteenth century. For Bultmann myths are to be interpreted but not eliminated, because the form cannot be eliminated without also endangering the content. Instead, the kerygma is always contained and expressed in a particular cultural form, but the kerygma itself can and must be translated into the cultural forms of those to whom it is addressed.²⁴ For the New Testament writers, that cultural form was the mythical world-picture of the first century. For modern people a very different cultural form is operative, which is why the New Testament kerygma must be demythologized, or translated, from an alien cultural form into a familiar cultural form.

It is vitally important to understand Bultmann on this point because this is a frequent cause of misunderstanding. Bultmann is not suggesting that there is a linear progression from myth, through demythologizing, to a “pure kerygma” stripped of any mythical form. That would presume that myth is something belonging solely to the past, while we more enlightened contemporary people have transcended myth.²⁵ This is by no means the

22. With Congdon, I have chosen to translate the term *Entmythologisierung* with the gerund “demythologizing” rather than the more common “demythologization” to accent Bultmann’s insistence that this is a continual process and not one step in a method that is finished before moving on to the next step.

23. Despite the near-universal identification of demythologizing with Bultmann and his theology, Bultmann did not coin the term. It was first used in a 1914 review of Herrmann’s *Ethik* by Hermann Strathmann, but Bultmann most likely borrowed it from Hans Jonas’s study of Augustine published in 1930. For more on the history of the term, see Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 693.

24. It would be a mistake to assume that Bultmann believes it possible to eliminate the mythical husk of the kerygma by translating it into “nonmythical” scientific language because, for Bultmann, the modern scientific world-picture is just as mythical in its own way as the New Testament mythical world-picture; it just happens to be “our” myth. As Congdon points out, “Science has not replaced myth because science is itself mythical, in that both myth and science perpetuate a false understanding of God, the world, and ourselves—myth unreflectively and science reflectively.” *Ibid.*, 608.

25. This is precisely how earlier historians and theologians (such as Strauss) understood myth. Ingolf Ulrich Dalferth (see below) turns this conception on its head and critiques the myth of logos in order to move beyond a facile opposition between these two concepts.

case, however, because every age has its myths precisely because every age has its unique cultural form and world-picture. Demythologizing, therefore, is not one stage in a progression from a mythologized kerygma to a demythologized, naked, "pure" kerygma. The kerygma will always be expressed in a particular cultural form, with its particular myths. The purpose is to translate the kerygma from an alien world-picture into a familiar one, which means that the task of demythologizing must continue as long as the Christian faith endures. The point is not to eliminate myth; rather, the point is to recognize myth as myth so to create space for the kerygma to make its claim on our lives here and now.²⁶ Demythologizing, then, is always a task in hermeneutics: it is an act of interpretation.²⁷

In order to understand Bultmann's method of demythologizing, it is first necessary to understand his conception of history and existential interpretation. Bultmann understands history as the "field of human decisions."²⁸ Even the interpretation of history (perceiving a historical process) is itself a historical act. What separates human beings from other creatures is that human beings are aware of themselves standing at least partially outside the causal nexus of natural and historical processes; they have been given the freedom of choice.²⁹ The human being is given the opportunity to choose between authentic and inauthentic existence.³⁰ Authentic human existence is existence in which individuals become responsible for their own life, and this includes opening themselves to the future. Thus human historical life is never complete, but stretches into the future of limitless opportunities for choice.³¹

For Bultmann this reality is understood in light of the dual possibility of authentic and inauthentic existence. In inauthentic existence, individuals regard themselves solely in terms of the past and present, whereas in authentic existence, individuals understand themselves primarily in terms

26. See Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 825n329.

27. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 18.

28. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1961), 130. ET: "On the Problem of Demythologizing" (1961).

29. This is reminiscent of Schleiermacher's discussion of relative freedom, relative dependence, and absolute dependence in the *Glaubenslehre*, where he proposes that the human being is relatively free and relatively dependent within the causal nexus of human and natural relations and processes, but is absolutely dependent on God.

30. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1961), 130. For more on this aspect of Bultmann's thought, see Harrisville, "Bultmann's Concept."

31. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1961), 130.

of the future.³² Myth, according to Bultmann, intends to speak of human existence, and thus he sees the need for an existential interpretation of myth, or what Congdon calls a “missionary translationism” in which “a participatory mode of God-talk takes the hermeneutical form of intercultural translation.”³³ Demythologizing seeks to determine the intention of myth to address authentic human existence here and now, not its theoretical description of the world.³⁴

The task of demythologizing cannot begin without first justifying its use. Is demythologizing a necessary theological endeavor? In other words, can Christian faith dispense with the mythical world-picture in which it was first expressed? Bultmann insists that this task is both possible and necessary, because the “mythological” in the New Testament transmits a meaning and an understanding of human existence itself. The key, for Bultmann, is to translate this meaning from its original expression in a first-century mythical world-picture.³⁵ To do otherwise is simply to remythologize the kerygma in such a way that it says nothing to modern people in their own situation.³⁶

The concept of “world-picture” (*Weltbild*) plays a central role in Bultmann’s theology and must be defined precisely in order to understand what Bultmann is proposing in his demythologizing program. According to Congdon,

The category of *Weltbild*, as Bultmann uses it, thus refers to the general cultural framework—that is, the matrix of social relations constituted by shared implicit norms, assumptions, practices, customs, and concepts—that people presuppose in their everyday lives. It is the condition for the possibility of one’s sociohistorical existence. Culture names that plastic and hybrid nexus of normative institutions and ideas that people in a particular historical situation take for granted . . . No *Weltbild*, whether mythical or scientific, ancient or modern, western or nonwestern, is ever final or secure. As Bultmann puts it, everyone “knows that all the results of science are relative and that any world-picture worked out yesterday, today, or tomorrow can never be definitive.”³⁷

32. *Ibid.*, 131.

33. Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 688.

34. *Ibid.*, 449.

35. Bultmann, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung” (1952), 184.

36. Bultmann, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung” (1961), 134–35.

37. Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 654–55. Quoting Bultmann, “Zum

Demythologizing essentially is recognition of the objectifying nature of the mythical world-picture of the New Testament, which, Congdon suggests, “uncritically confuses its divine subject matter (revelation) with a particular sociocultural matrix of presuppositions, precisely because the lack of differentiation between divine and human was an implicit norm of the ancient *Weltbild*.”³⁸ Just such a critical distance is needed to avoid conflating the kerygma with its particular cultural form, which Congdon describes as “a constantinian distortion of the gospel kerygma into a piece of cultural propaganda.”³⁹ Based on this awareness, demythologizing interprets this mythical presentation in order to translate the New Testament kerygma in terms of our own cultural forms and our own world-picture. The critic does not make a modern scientific world-picture the standard for interpreting the biblical texts, because this is simply to impose a foreign world-picture onto the New Testament. Rather, the critic seeks to determine the deeper intention of the biblical writings within their own mythical form and then to translate that deeper intention into other cultural frameworks.⁴⁰

Bultmann is not the first theologian to apply the method of demythologizing to the New Testament. But these earlier attempts (Strauss,⁴¹ Schleiermacher, von Harnack, etc.) failed in Bultmann’s estimation because these theologians did not fully comprehend the task and intent of demythologizing. They sought only to eliminate the myth, but more often than not they eliminated the kerygma along with it. In the case of von Harnack and other liberal theologians, they thought they could eliminate myth in order to uncover the essential kernel of a supposedly timeless religious and moral truth. The kerygma was reduced to a moral idea or a religious ethic, and the kerygma *qua* kerygma (the message of God’s eschatological act of salvation in Jesus the Christ) was lost.⁴² What remained was a supposedly “timeless” religious and ethical truth that was in fact fully synonymous with the culturally-conditioned world-picture of liberal Protestantism. The goal of demythologizing in Bultmann’s estimation is not to eliminate the myth

Problem der Entmythologisierung” (1951), 181.

38. Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 659.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Bultmann, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung” (1952), 184. This is the process Congdon describes as the critique of “constantinianism.”

41. See Backhaus, *Kerygma und Mythos*.

42. Bultmann, “Neues Testament und Mythologie,” 24–25.

but to disclose the truth of the kerygma *qua* kerygma for people who do not inhabit a first-century mythological world-picture.⁴³

Bultmann on History

The formal study of history was firmly established in university curricula after the First World War, at which point historical criticism became an invaluable tool for theologians and biblical scholars who availed themselves of this methodology to facilitate the development of form, redaction, and source criticism in the interwar period. Theology developed an enduring relationship to history and the full weight of historical criticism was brought to bear on the biblical texts and the traditions of the early church. This generation of historical critics distinguished itself from the nineteenth-century theologians interested in the historical Jesus by applying their method not only to the life of Jesus and the early church, but to the sources that contain these traditions as well. This hermeneutical move allowed the interwar theologians to critique the texts themselves to determine what traditions within the texts are authentic accounts, and to interpret those texts in light of the present situation. Most significant for Bultmann's project, the continuing development of existential philosophy led theology in new and potentially fruitful directions.⁴⁴ Bultmann, one of the leading advocates of an existential interpretation of biblical texts, also developed a philosophy of history, which he first presented in his text *Jesus* in 1926 and later outlined in his Gifford Lectures of 1955 on the topic of history and eschatology.⁴⁵

Bultmann understands the primitive philosophy of history in ancient cultures as proceeding from pre-critical mythical thinking. Before ancient cultures wrote history, they referred to the past in terms of myths.⁴⁶ He locates the origin of historiography proper in peoples who became a nation. Only when a self-conscious political identity is achieved can a culture produce genuine history. These historical narratives may be infused

43. *Ibid.*, 26.

44. Theological engagements (especially by Bultmann) with existential philosophy are based largely on the early work of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), particularly his landmark text *Sein und Zeit* (1927), ET: *Being and Time*. Bultmann was also in correspondence and debate with another German existential philosopher, Karl Jaspers, whose thought is well summarized in his 1937 lectures in English as *Philosophy of Existence*.

45. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*.

46. *Ibid.*, 12.

with remnants of pre-critical mythology, but the shared experience of a political society creates the opportunity and luxury of historical reflection on the past. At this stage of historical reflection, as in ancient Greece, history is concerned exclusively with the past and does not intend to make judgments on the present or the future in light of historical knowledge. In other words, historiography has not yet concerned itself with determining meaning in history.

Historiography in ancient Israel developed in different directions. Here the experiences and deeds of the people of Israel, not the politics of a state, were the center of historical reflection. The community and its history developed in terms of their relationship to God, and thus supernatural intervention was accepted as part of history. God's intervention in the life of the people and the conduct of the people in light of their relation to God served as examples for the present, and thus ancient Israel developed an understanding of historiography as serving to inform the present life of the community.⁴⁷

By the time of the writing of the New Testament, historical understanding among the Greeks had developed into a specific learned discipline. The development in Judaism of an eschatological view of history and the more "secular" Greek understanding of history clashed in the New Testament. By the time of the New Testament, according to Bultmann, history had been "swallowed up" by eschatology.⁴⁸ The early Christians understood themselves and the church not as historical, but eschatological phenomena. The Christian community believed that it lived not in the present world, but in the new age that is already breaking into the world but is not yet fully realized. This eschatological radicalizing of history created new problems for the early church. The delay of the Parousia forced a reevaluation of previous assumptions and expectations, resulting in a "re-historicizing" of eschatology in Pauline and Johannine literature.⁴⁹ The Christian movement became an institution; the eschatological community became a historical phenomenon. As the early twentieth-century French Roman Catholic theologian Alfred Loisy quipped, "Jesus came preaching the kingdom, but what arrived was the church."⁵⁰

47. Ibid., 19.

48. Ibid., 37.

49. Ibid., 38.

50. Loisy, *L'Évangile et l'Église*. ET: *Gospel and the Church*.

Bultmann interprets Paul in light of his eschatology and anthropology.⁵¹ For Paul, according to Bultmann, history is understood in light of eschatology; Paul's apocalyptic understanding of history is grounded firmly in his anthropology.⁵² Paul recognizes meaning in history, but this meaning is not fully known and realized in history itself. Meaning in history is given by God, who gives grace to sinners. Thus history for Paul becomes the history of the individual *coram deo* and not primarily the history of the nation or community. Each human being has a personal history, and each person's history is determined by a series of decisions in every new situation. Each new decision is informed by prior decisions, or by each person's past. In order to enter into each new moment freely, each person must become free from the past. The problem, for Paul, is that the human being does not wish or will to be free from the past. This is the essence of sin. The Christian, however, lives in freedom—the freedom to decide—such that each situation is a call to decision and a call to freedom. This freedom is given by the grace of God, which appeared most fully in Jesus the Christ.

To be justified by faith, in Bultmann's reading of Paul, is to be set free from the past, to enter into a historical life of free decisions.⁵³ Thus faith, for Bultmann, is characterized by a radical openness to the future. This faith is a risk because the future remains unknown to us. Faith involves free openness to the future and grants freedom from anxiety in the face of nothingness. This freedom is not a decision of the will, but is given in faith itself through grace.⁵⁴ Thus, for Bultmann, eschatology, faith, and history are inexorably linked. Only by understanding and thereby being separated from the past can one be open to the future, but the fact that one will always remain uncertain about the future is the risk of faith.

In terms of historical method, there are two primary issues for Bultmann: the problem of hermeneutics and the question of the objectivity of

51. Bultmann treats the concept of history, anthropology, and eschatology of Paul in several essays, most notably "Geschichte und Eschatologie im Neuen Testament," ET: "History and Eschatology in the New Testament"; "Römer 7 und die Anthropologie des Paulus," ET: "Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul"; and in *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, the first sub-section, "Die anthropologischen Begriffe," of the first section, "Die Theologie des Paulus," of the second part, "Die Theologie des Paulus und des Johannes," 193–226.

52. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 41. For an excellent discussion of Paul's anthropology and the "inner human being," see Betz, "Concept of the 'Inner Human Being'"

53. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 41–47.

54. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 77–78.

historical knowledge.⁵⁵ First, there is always a problem of hermeneutics in doing history. Because history is based on sources and tradition, every work of historical investigation is also a work of interpretation. Historical documents must be understood if they are to be used to reconstruct the historical past. As the discipline of history developed, historians gained a deeper appreciation of the problem of hermeneutics in relation to historical knowledge. First, philology was used to interpret the literary structures of texts, and later psychology was employed to understand the personal situation of the author of a text. For Bultmann there is a third means to historical knowledge, and that is the “pre-understanding” of the historians themselves.⁵⁶ There are several questions a historian must pose before working with a text: What is my interest in interpreting these sources? Which questions direct me to approach these texts? For what purpose will I deploy my interpretation?⁵⁷ These questions aid the historian in discovering the motives for historical investigation. And so for the historian there must first be a relation in life (*Lebensverhältnis*) to the material if there is to be a genuine understanding of it.⁵⁸ This is possible because interpreter and subject live in the same historical world. These motives for historical inquiry and this “relation in life” to the subject matter inevitably lead to Bultmann’s second question, namely whether it is possible to have objective knowledge of history.

Here the distinction between the facts and the meaning of history becomes crucial and it is important to mention here the distinction the German language can make between two senses of history. There are two words in German for what we in English simply call “history”: *Geschichte* and *Historie*. In everyday usage these terms can be and often are used interchangeably, but in technical usage their meanings are strictly distinguished. *Geschichte* (related to the verb *geschehen*, meaning “to occur”) can be used to refer to what has happened in the past, but in its more technical use it refers to the effects and the significance of the past, the past as it continues to exert its influence in and on history. *Historie* (ultimately

55. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 110ff.

56. *Ibid.*, 113.

57. Bultmann insists not only that historians approach history as historical beings with specific questions and demands of history, but also that history itself makes demands on historians. Only when historians are prepared to hear the demands of history, to listen to history as an authority, are they prepared to understand history. See Bultmann, *Jesus*, 7–8.

58. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 113.

derived from the Latin word *historia*, which is cognate with the English word “history” but in later Latin takes on the more precise meaning of knowledge of the past gained through investigation), when distinguished from *Geschichte*, means the past as it actually happened, specifically as it is accessible to historical research; *Historie* also refers to the results of historical research. *Historie*, when used as a technical term, by its very nature is always accessible to historical research and can be described as “facts”; *Geschichte* might be accessible to historical research or it might not, just as it might be a fact or it might not.

A few examples will help to clarify this distinction in its various permutations. It is possible for the historian to have objective knowledge of certain historical (*historisch*) facts, e.g., my order of an Indiana IPA at my local bar last evening, which is a historical (*historisch*) fact but *not* a historic (*geschichtlich*) event because it will in all likelihood have no deeper meaning or enduring significance for anyone. It is also possible for the historian to have objective knowledge of certain historical (*historisch*) facts, e.g., the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14th, 1865, or the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, both of which are, at the same time, historic (*geschichtlich*) events because of their deeper meaning and enduring significance. Here, though, it is impossible for the historian to have truly *objective* knowledge of the historic (*geschichtlich*) significance of these events for at least two reasons: first, the meaning and significance of these events is still unfolding in complex and unforeseen ways and will very likely continue to do so long into the future; and second, historians are themselves caught up in the effects of the events they are investigating and their involvement will necessarily color their interpretation of those events. Finally, it is also possible for something to have profound historic (*geschichtlich*) meaning and significance but remain unverifiable as a historical (*historisch*) fact: e.g., the resurrection of Jesus. The distinction becomes especially critical in terms of the death and resurrection of Jesus, because the two terms overlap in this case. The crucifixion and death of Jesus are both historical (*historisch*)—they actually happened in history and can be verified by historical research—and historic (*geschichtlich*)—they have lasting significance and meaning for history. The resurrection of Jesus, however, is not a historical (*historisch*) event—it cannot be verified by historical research, and thus cannot be proven to have actually

occurred in history—but it is a historic (*geschichtlich*) event—it has lasting effects and significance for history.⁵⁹

History is a process that is more than single, isolated events, because these events are connected by the chain of cause and effect. How these events relate to one another and influence one another is not within the realm of purely objective knowledge. The meaning of history is only gained by subjective interpretation of history, and because there are a multitude of possible perspectives in historical inquiry, there will also be a multitude of interpretations of history. This subjective character of historical inquiry is inevitable in the interpretation of history, because the historian is always also a historical being with a historical life and with concrete concerns, which means the interpretation of history will not be complete until the end of history itself.

For Bultmann, the inherent subjectivity of the historian's perspective involves an existential encounter with history.⁶⁰ History is meaningful to the historian only when the historian stands within history, and historical experiences are only objectively known because the historian also lives these experiences as a subject. Thus historical phenomena only have significance "in relation to the future for which they have importance."⁶¹

59. For an analysis of the importance of this distinction specifically in Bultmann's theology, see Perrin, *The Promise of Bultmann*, 33–56. For a detailed analysis of the history of these terms and their use in theological discussions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Hege, *Faith at the Intersection of History and Experience: The Theology of Georg Wobbermin*, chap. 2, "Geschichte und Historie: The Problem of Faith and History," 15–77. Making even finer distinctions than is possible with *Historie* and *Geschichte*, Herberg suggests that in the theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there are in fact five meanings of the word "history": 1. History as past facts; 2. History in opposition to the timeless or the eternal; 3. History as it influences the future course of events (i.e. *Geschichte*); 4. History as constitutive of the essence of the human being (its key sense in Reinhold Niebuhr's work); and 5. History as existentially self-constituting the human being in face of an open future (its key sense in Bultmann's work). Herberg, "Five Meanings of the Word 'Historical.'" Despite some hesitation to insist on a strict distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* when translating Bultmann's work (especially in the translations of Roy Harrisville and Schubert Ogden), a practice also affirmed by David Congdon, I believe that the distinction is worth retaining because of the greater opportunity for clarity and nuance. Thus for the remainder of these chapters I will use the English "historic" to translate *geschichtlich* and "historical" to translate *historisch*. Because English does not distinguish between the two terms in their nominal or adverbial forms, I will indicate the German in parentheses if the meaning would otherwise be unclear.

60. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 7–8.

61. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 120.

Now that we have inquired into Bultmann's conceptions of myth and history, a further question presents itself: what is the relationship between myth, history, and faith in the theological analysis of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth?

Bultmann on the Resurrection

As we have already noted, use of the term "demythologizing" is, by Bultmann's own admission, problematic. The term inaccurately implies the elimination of myth, though Bultmann's own intention is not to eliminate but rather to interpret the myths of the New Testament. Bultmann operates with a precise definition of myth, so that an accurate understanding of this definition is essential if one is to understand Bultmann.⁶² He understands "myth" to be a specific historical phenomenon and "mythology" to be a specific mode of thinking. "Myth" is a report of an event in which superhuman, supernatural forces or persons are at work. "Mythology" as a worldview refers certain events or phenomena to supernatural powers. Thus mythical thinking, in which the world and events in the world are "open" to the intervention of otherworldly powers, is directly opposed to scientific thinking, in which the world and events within the world are "closed" within the causal nexus, i.e., the law of cause and effect.⁶³

This opposition can be expressed in terms of the individual human being as well. In mythical thinking, human beings are open to supernatural intervention, whereas in scientific thinking human beings understand their existence to be a closed unity of decisions in terms of feeling, thinking, willing, responding, and acting.⁶⁴ Myth objectifies the transcendent in an

62. The crucial problem in mythology is that mythology seeks to objectify that which is either otherworldly or non-objectifiable. This tendency in mythology obscures the deeper intention of the myths, which is to express something meaningful about human existence. When these myths speak about God in objectifying terms, a new problem arises, because for Bultmann any attempt to speak *about* God inevitably leads to sin because to speak *about* God requires both the objectification of God and also my detachment or distance from the claim of God on me and my life, as the reality determining my existence. Thus, to speak *about* God is atheism and sin; faith, rather, speaks *of* God as the reality that determines my life, as that reality in which I live, move, and have my being (Acts 17:28). See Bultmann, "Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?" ET: "What Does It Mean to Speak of God?"

63. See Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 666ff, for a helpful excursus on the significance of Bultmann's views on science and demythologizing.

64. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1952), 180–82.

attempt to express the conviction that human beings are grounded in a reality that is beyond their control.⁶⁵ But at the same time, myth intends to talk about a reality that lies beyond the limits of objectification. The question is whether myths intend simply to talk about the observable world or whether myths intend to say something about our reality as human beings, and thus of our existence.⁶⁶

Bultmann asserts that the true intention of myths is to say something fundamental about human existence, and because this is so they cannot simply be eliminated. There is a tension inherent in myths, for myths simultaneously objectify the transcendent and express an understanding of human existence. The problem posed by myth is that modern people no longer think within the framework of a first-century mythical world-picture. Scientific thinking has rendered the mythology of the New Testament completely unintelligible to us. Christians, however, are presented with the word of God in the New Testament kerygma. Because the mythical world-picture of the New Testament is meaningless to modern people, it must be demythologized and interpreted for the present.⁶⁷

Bultmann is often criticized for forcing a modern scientific world-picture onto the New Testament, thus elevating science over scripture. This is a misunderstanding of Bultmann's position, however, because for Bultmann the kerygma is above all an *eschatological* event, not a historical relic. If the kerygma truly is God's address to human beings in their own situation and not just to first-century people in the Mediterranean basin, then it should, in theory, be possible to demythologize the New Testament mythology and translate it into the world-picture of any time and any culture, not just our own. As Congdon suggests, "As long as an existential encounter with the eschatological event of Christ remains an ongoing possibility, any cultural context may be the occasion for the genuine proclamation of the kerygma."⁶⁸

65. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 19.

66. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1961), 134.

67. Bultmann here does not take into account the persistence of fundamentalism and biblical literalism among substantial portions of modern Christianity; instead, he simply assumes that all modern Christians have been shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and disenchantment. Presumably, fundamentalist Christians and biblical literalists would have no problem whatsoever inhabiting a first-century mythical world-picture while still using electricity, computers, and modern medicine. One suspects Bultmann would accuse them of inconsistency, but the fact remains that there are many Christians who do inhabit both worlds simultaneously. My thanks to Robert Saler for raising this issue.

68. Congdon, *Mission of Demythologizing*, 669.

But what, specifically, is the New Testament kerygma?⁶⁹ According to Bultmann, it is the proclamation of God's liberating act in the cross of Jesus the Christ; it is the proclamation of salvation to a fallen humanity in terms of the possibility for authentic human existence. Above all, the kerygma is the event of God's personal address to sinners. Because the kerygma is above all an event of address here and now, it cannot simply be equated with any concrete instantiation of it in any one theology, creed, or world-picture, not even in that of the New Testament itself. Bultmann expresses this insight in a letter to Martin Heidegger from 1932:

It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that the central problem of New Testament theology is to say what the Christian kerygma actually is. It is never present simply as something given, but is always formulated out of a particular believing understanding. Moreover, the New Testament, almost without exception, does not directly contain the kerygma, but rather certain statements (such as the Pauline doctrine of justification), in which the believing understanding of Christian being is developed, are based on the kerygma and refer back to it. What the kerygma is can never be said conclusively, but must constantly be found anew, because it is only actually the kerygma in the carrying out of the proclamation.⁷⁰

This kerygma, the proclamation of the eschatological liberating act of God, is presented mythologically in the New Testament, and so it must be interpreted. In the New Testament expression of the kerygma, the pre-existent Son of God takes on human flesh, dies on the cross as a vicarious sacrifice for sin, and is raised on the third day, destroying the power of death. This is the essence of the salvific Christ-event. But what can this mean for modern people who no longer think in terms of this mythology? What is the meaning for us of the Christ-event and of the kerygma that proclaims it? Because this event constitutes the kerygma, it is most important that it be carefully interpreted.

69. The word "kerygma" (κηρυγμα) in Greek originally referred to the proclamation of a herald. For a helpful study of the use of the term "kerygma" in modern theology, see the section "Zum Gebrauch des Wortes 'Kerygma' in der neueren Theologie," in Ebeling, *Theologie und Verkündigung*, 109–14. Also see the chapter "Kerygma und historischer Jesus," 19–82. ET: *Theology and Proclamation*.

70. Bultmann and Heidegger, *Briefwechsel*, 186, quoted in Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 71. Here Bultmann's line of thinking is consistent with Luther's own insistence on a distinction between the Word (Jesus Christ) and the Bible, which contains and points to the Word. As Luther puts it in a memorable image, the Bible is "the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies." Luther, "Prefaces to the Old Testament," 236.

The New Testament represents the Christ-event as a mythical event, and as such it must be demythologized. It is indeed a unique myth, because the object of the myth (Jesus the Christ) is simultaneously a historical person and a mythical representation, and his destiny is at once historically and mythically represented. Throughout the history of modern New Testament interpretation there have been continuous attempts to uncover the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth that lies behind the gospel narratives. The nineteenth-century Lives of Jesus hoped to discover eternal truth and moral significance in the life of the man and to uncover what is authentic and historically (*historisch*) true about the accounts of Jesus' life in order to establish a secure foundation for faith.

Bultmann, however, insists that the quest for the historical Jesus is theologically unnecessary and ultimately impossible.⁷¹ What is most important for faith is not the "how" or the "what" of Jesus' life, but only the "that." Faith should not be interested primarily in the historical details of Jesus' life and ministry, whether he really said a particular word or performed a particular deed. Rather, what is most important is the simple fact of Jesus' existence. It is "the *that*, the here and now, the facticity of the person [of the earthly Jesus] that constitutes the revelation."⁷² Here Bultmann counts both Paul and John as forefathers, as neither New Testament author was nearly as concerned with the life of Jesus as they were with the *event* of Jesus the Christ.⁷³ And so the kerygma is grounded in the historical Jesus only insofar as the historical Jesus is the site of God's revelation as an event. The emphasis here, for Bultmann, should be on the event of God's revelation in

71. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 12ff. Some of Bultmann's own students criticized their teacher for creating a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. See especially Käsemann, "Das Problem des historischen Jesus." ET: "Problem of the Historical Jesus."

72. Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung des geschichtlichen Jesus für die Theologie des Paulus," 208. ET: "Significance of the Historical Jesus." See also Bultmann, "Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament" for his discussion of the concept of revelation in the New Testament. ET: "Concept of Revelation in the New Testament." For a discussion of Bultmann's concentration on the "that" of Jesus' life, see Ebeling's essay "Das bloße 'Daß' und die Lehre von der Anhypostasie," in Ebeling, *Theologie und Verkündigung*, 115–16.

73. Despite the fact that Bultmann himself questioned the theological usefulness of the historic creeds, in this instance the creeds do corroborate Bultmann's suggestion that the "how" and "what" of Jesus' life are insignificant for faith, as the creeds move directly from Jesus' birth to his passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming, glossing over the entirety of his teachings and deeds.

the person of Jesus the Christ, not on the historical-biographical details of Jesus of Nazareth.⁷⁴

Bultmann was, of course, aware of the controversy such a dismissive attitude toward the significance of the historical Jesus would generate, but he was unfazed. His response to his critics in a 1927 essay on Christology captures something important about Bultmann the theologian:

They want to know how I rescue myself from the situation created by my critical radicalism, how much I can save from the fire . . . I have never yet felt uncomfortable with my critical radicalism; on the contrary, I have been entirely comfortable. But I often have the impression that my conservative New Testament colleagues feel very uncomfortable, for I see them perpetually engaged in salvage operations. I calmly let the fire burn, for I see that what is consumed is only the fantasies of Life-of-Jesus theology, and that means nothing other than Χριστος κατα σαρξα [Christ after the flesh].⁷⁵

The salvation event that occurred in Jesus the Christ has meaning only insofar as it can be comprehended in its significance, and the kerygma is only valid if it is addressed to individuals in their own situation. If this is to be meaningful today, it must be comprehensible and meaningful beyond mere *Historie*; otherwise genuine faith would be impossible without a personal relationship with the earthly, historical (*historisch*) Jesus, which we do not have. The salvation event, if it is truly salvific, must be available as a present

74. This does raise some significant questions about the possibility of having any accessibility to God's revelation apart from *some* knowledge of the historical Jesus, which is a thread taken up in earnest by Bultmann's students, especially Ernst Käsemann.

75. Bultmann, "Zur Frage der Christologie," 100–101. ET: "On the Question of Christology." Berger notes with interest that Bultmann *the Christian theologian* seems perfectly content to allow Bultmann *the historian* to demolish the historical foundations of Christian faith. Berger, *Questions of Faith*, 60. However, Berger is creating a false dichotomy here between the task of the historian and that of the theologian. Bultmann is content both as a theologian and as a historian (and as a Christian) to let these fires burn; there is no inherent contradiction or conflict for him. However, this is not the case for everyone who engages in historical study of the Bible. One prominent example of historical study leading a Christian theologian to abandon their Christian faith is Gerd Lüdemann, who declared that he had lost his faith as a result of his work as a New Testament scholar and was subsequently almost fired from his position at the University of Göttingen because of pressure from some church bodies. Instead, the university changed the name of Lüdemann's position from "New Testament" to "History and Literature of Early Christianity." See Lüdemann, *Resurrection of Christ*; and Lüdemann, *Great Deception*.

reality, not just as a historical relic. But what is the salvation event, and what is its significance for contemporary people?

Before addressing the issue of the salvation event proper, it is important to understand Bultmann's understanding of sin, for which salvation is the remedy. The Bible presents the picture of a humanity that is not what it ought to be, represented as fallenness, as sin. Sin for Bultmann means inauthentic existence: human beings exist inauthentically, that is, we insist on clinging to the past, desperately working to guarantee our own existence through the false security of our own efforts. Human beings refuse to be open to the future and we refuse to submit ourselves to the God who calls to us from the future. The New Testament kerygma addresses us in our sinfulness and exposes our inauthentic existence. Sin is rebellion against God because it is ingratitude for God's gift of grace. The grace of God is the love that encounters human beings in their fallenness, a love that accepts us in spite of what Bultmann calls our "radical highhandedness" (*radikale Eigenmächtigkeit*).⁷⁶

The grace of God offers us the future: it offers us freedom from our fallen, backward-looking selves to be our authentic selves. Thus God's gracious gift of faith is the condition for the possibility of authentic human freedom. Faith is possible only in light of God's gift of freedom for the future. Faith is trust in the God who offers us authentic existence in the future, and thus faith is our decision for, our wholehearted "yes" to, this authentic existence.⁷⁷ Thus forgiveness of sin is not the forswearing of punishment, but it is the gift of freedom from self-incurred bondage to ourselves, from our past. It is freedom for obedience to the God who calls us to freedom. But this freedom, this forgiveness of sin, is possible only in light of the salvation event of the cross.

Before discussing the meaning of the Christ-event, Bultmann believes it is first necessary to demythologize the New Testament account. The question for Bultmann is whether this is possible. The Christ-event as recorded in the New Testament differs from Hellenic cultic myths, for example, in that the New Testament myth takes as its object a historical person. The divine pre-existent Logos is also the historical Jesus of Nazareth, and his destiny is not only mythical but is also a human life that ends with his death

76. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," 38.

77. Ibid. This grace is offered from God as *totaliter aliter* (totally other) because the word of God is addressed to us externally, from God the wholly other. It is because of this external character of the word that we encounter God always as God encounters us in our own situation. See Bultmann, "Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?" 29ff.

on the cross. The cross is a historical event that is at the same time presented as a mythical event, alongside the mythical event of the resurrection that is also presented as a historical event. This intertwining of the historical and mythical creates particular difficulties for the interpreter who wishes to distinguish the historical from the mythical. The question is whether these narratives intend to express something that happened to the historical Jesus or whether their true intention is to express something else. For Bultmann the significance of the historical Jesus lies not in the facts and events of his life, but in what God says to humanity through this particular person.⁷⁸ This intention becomes especially clear in the question of the significance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus' death on the cross is a historically verifiable event. Through historical research, historians can verify that a Jewish man named Jesus was crucified by the Romans in the vicinity of Jerusalem in the first third of the first century CE. But the Christian conviction that this cross is *Christ's* cross, that it is the event of God's salvific act, cannot be verified as a historical event. The meaning and significance of the cross can only be comprehended with the eyes of faith (*Glaubensaugen*).⁷⁹ In the New Testament the event of the cross is also represented as a mythical event. The Son of God is lifted up on the cross as a sacrifice of atonement, and the death of a sinless God-man placates God's wrath as a vicarious sacrifice for the sins of the world.⁸⁰ But can the cross be understood in its significance apart from the mythical representation of it in the New Testament? It is theology's task to interpret the historical event of the cross in its historic significance for faith. If this is not possible, then Christian faith has lost its foundation.

To believe in the cross of Christ is not to believe in the mythical process that takes place entirely outside of us, nor is it to believe in a historical event that occurred two thousand years ago. For Bultmann, to believe in the cross is to believe that it is *Christ's* cross, and that God has acted in the cross *pro nobis* and, more importantly, *pro me*.⁸¹ The cross as the salvation event is not only something that happened to one historical person long ago, but more significantly it is a cosmic event that happens in the eschatological here and now, through the preached word, and thus to participate

78. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," 41.

79. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1952), 196.

80. Whether this is the only way to understand the atoning power of the cross is certainly debatable. For a summary of atonement theories, see Schmiechen, *Saving Power*.

81. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," 46.

in the cross of Christ is to be willing to be crucified with Christ, to take Christ's cross as one's own cross. The cross is not merely a historical event: it is a historic event with origins in the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. It is an event with historic significance because it is the cross of *Christ*, through which God liberates the world. But is it not possible to understand the cross as *Christ's* cross only by first being convinced of the significance of Christ? Would we not have to understand it as the cross of the historical Jesus before we understand it as the cross of Christ? We know about the cross only as a historical event, but the New Testament does not proclaim the cross merely as a historical event, but as a cosmic, historic event. Jesus is proclaimed to be the crucified *and* risen Lord, and thus cross and resurrection belong together as a unity.⁸²

The resurrection is presented in the New Testament as a mythical event. The dead man Jesus is returned to bodily life and appears to his followers. After forty days of walking the earth he ascends bodily into heaven. This presentation also must be demythologized if the kerygma it proclaims is to be made intelligible to modern people. What are these mythical elements in the texts attempting to express? What is their meaning for us? The meaning of the resurrection is that death is not the end, that God has acted in the cross to free humanity from the bonds of death. The resurrection is an expression of the meaning of the cross, that the cross is *Christ's* cross. The resurrection is an object of faith for Bultmann, and as such it cannot be a self-authenticating miracle.⁸³ The believer cannot convince a doubter that the cross is an eschatological event by referring to the resurrection as proof, because the resurrection cannot be established as a historical event. Faith in the resurrection is not faith in a historical event, but it is faith in the cross as the salvation event, and because the cross is the salvation event it is the cross of Christ. Otherwise it is nothing more than the tragic end of a noble man.

But how are we to believe that the cross is the salvation event? Bultmann insists that we believe because it is proclaimed as such. The crucified and risen one encounters each of us in the kerygma, the word of proclamation, and nowhere else.⁸⁴ Faith in the resurrection is thus faith in this word of proclamation, that it is God's address and summons to us in our situation. Easter faith is the faith that this kerygma is the legitimate word

82. *Ibid.*, 41–44.

83. *Ibid.*, 45.

84. *Ibid.*, 46.

of God, and this word is itself an eschatological event. In the proclamation of the crucified and risen one, this event occurs in the present: the risen Christ is encountered here and now in the preached word. In other words, Christ has risen into the proclamation of the church.⁸⁵ This word proclaims that God's grace has already acted *pro me*. This word is grounded in the death of the historical person of Jesus as the eschatological event, but the significance of this gracious act is comprehended only in God's personal address through the word proclaimed to me here and now. This word is the event in and through which God meets us, offers us forgiveness, and opens the future for our authentic existence.⁸⁶

What does it mean to have faith in the resurrection? Bultmann has already established that faith in the resurrection is not belief in a historical event, but that faith in the resurrection is trusting that God has acted for us and for our salvation in the cross of Christ. But how does this act become available for us in our situation? In other words, what is the significance of the resurrection for faith?

Critics have charged Bultmann with inconsistently applying his method of demythologizing by not fully demythologizing God and God's act in the cross.⁸⁷ In a lecture entitled "The Meaning of God as Acting,"⁸⁸ Bultmann addresses the issue of the act of God in terms of his program

85. While not always rooted in the same theological assumptions, the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the gospel is portrayed quite vividly in many "high church" Christian traditions (e.g., Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans), many of whom stand for the proclamation of the gospel after the gospel book has been processed with attendant crucifer and torchbearers into the midst of the assembled congregation and in some traditions also censed and blessed by the gospeler.

86. Bultmann, *Jesus*, 199–200. See also Bultmann's essay "Der Begriff des Wortes Gottes im Neuen Testament." ET: "Concept of the Word of God."

87. The most noteworthy of these critics, Karl Barth, outlines these inconsistencies in his essay *Rudolf Bultmann*. Schubert Ogden, in an article on "The Debate on 'Demythologizing,'" discusses these charges at some length. For a more thorough presentation of Ogden's own criticisms of Bultmann's position, see Ogden, *Christ without Myth*.

88. Bultmann delivered this lecture at Yale University in October of 1951 as one of the Schaeffer lectures, and again at Vanderbilt University in November of the same year as one of the Cole lectures. It is available in Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 60–85. He also treats this topic in a section on "Die Rede vom Handeln Gottes" in "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1952), 196–208. For Bultmann's discussion of the distinction between act (*Handeln*) and wonder or miracle (*Wunder*), see Bultmann, "Zur Frage des Wunders." ET: "Question of Wonder."

of demythologizing. The primary question in his discussion is whether all speech of God as acting necessarily must be mythological speech.⁸⁹

In mythological thinking the act of God is understood as an action that intervenes between the natural, historical, or psychological course of events, whereby “the divine causality is inserted as a link in the chain of events which follow one another according to the causal nexus.”⁹⁰ The act of God can be understood non-mythologically only if it is understood as happening not *between* worldly events, but as happening *within* them. Thus the closed connection of cause and effect remains intact to the observer.⁹¹ The act of God remains hidden and it can be perceived as God’s act only with the eyes of faith. God’s act remains hidden within the natural course of events to the believer and the non-believer alike, but insofar as believers see the event in its significance, as something happening to them here and now in light of God’s word, then they can and must accept it as God’s act.⁹² God’s acts cannot be empirically detected and observed as *God’s acts* because God’s acts cannot be objectified. They remain hidden to the observer, but the Christian believes that God is working here and now within these events. Faith “nevertheless” (*dennoch*) understands as God’s act an event that is completely intelligible in the natural and historical nexus of cause and effect, without remainder. This “nevertheless” is therefore inseparable from faith.⁹³

89. Bultmann argues that it is possible to speak non-mythologically about God. His contemporary, Paul Tillich, disagrees and insists that religious language is always necessarily symbolic and mythical language precisely because religious language speaks of the infinite, unconditioned divine reality that, by its very nature, is inexpressible by anything other than symbol and myth. The key, for Tillich, is not to eliminate the myth but to recognize the myth *as myth* (what he calls “broken myth”) so that the myth is not taken literally, thereby becoming idolatrous. See Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 47–62. This approach is taken up in different registers by Reinhold Niebuhr and Sallie McFague, among others. See Dorrien, *Word as True Myth*, chapters 3 and 5.

90. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 61.

91. While Bultmann proposes this distinction in order to keep the causal nexus intact, contemporary American philosopher of religion Richard Grigg insists that here especially theology cannot escape the scientific implications of its claims. He argues that any theological claim for God’s action in the world must in principle be accessible to scientific observation if it is to be credible, which means that any assertion of God’s action in the world must meet the standards of proof set by science. For Grigg, the only theological position that can meet these standards is pantheism. See Grigg, *Beyond the God Delusion*.

92. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 64.

93. *Ibid.*, 65. There are intriguing points of contact between Bultmann’s description

The question remains: how are we to speak of God as acting if we are to avoid mythological language? Bultmann argues that speech of God as acting *on me* is to be understood not mythologically, but rather analogically. When we speak of God as blessing, judging, addressing, etc., we speak of God's action as an analogue to interpersonal human actions.⁹⁴ There are two important consequences of this distinction. First, only such statements about God are legitimate as express the existential relationship between human beings and God. Second, images used to describe God as acting are only legitimate if they intend to speak of God analogically and not literally as a personal being acting on persons.⁹⁵

Because Bultmann argues for such an analogical understanding, the objection can be raised that God's action becomes a merely subjective, psychological experience. This implies that God exists only in the inner life of the soul and not as a transcendent reality. Bultmann argues that faith cannot defend itself against the charge that it is an illusion, but nevertheless "faith" does not denote a psychologically subjective quality. Faith is hearing and responding to the word of God addressed to me in my concrete, historical situation. The fact that this word is God's word cannot be demonstrated objectively. God's word is hidden in scripture just as God's acts are hidden everywhere. The fact that God cannot be apprehended apart from faith does not mean that God does not exist apart from faith.⁹⁶

Here Bultmann's argument is reminiscent of the classical polarity of *fides qua creditur* and *fides quae creditur*, the subjective and objective poles

of God's acts occurring *within* events and John Caputo's description of God as the name we give to that which is happening within events but which cannot be contained by them. But whereas Bultmann's God remains in some sense an ontological reality outside the event (a theology that Caputo calls "strong" and "ontotheology"), Caputo's God is the name for "we know not what" is happening in the event, leading Caputo to call his own theology "weak" and "hauntology." See Caputo, *Weakness of God*. The French post-Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou also turns to Paul's treatments of the resurrection and grace to theorize the event in *Saint Paul*.

94. See Betz, "Concept of the 'Inner Human Being.'" In a footnote, Betz quotes Bultmann's statement about the anthropology of the New Testament from Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament*: "Every assertion about God is simultaneously an assertion about man and vice versa. For this reason and in this sense Paul's theology is, at the same time, anthropology. . . . Thus, every assertion about Christ is also an assertion about man and vice versa; and Paul's Christology is simultaneously soteriology." Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1:191, quoted in Betz, "Concept of the 'Inner Human Being'" 315, n. 1.

95. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 69–70.

96. *Ibid.*, 72.

of faith, as well as Luther's exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism where Luther suggests that

To have a god is nothing other than to trust and believe in that one from the heart . . . the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one, and in turn where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For the two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your god.⁹⁷

For Bultmann, as for Luther, God's *existence* is not dependent on faith, so that it is my faith that somehow produces God's existence. Rather, God's existence is ontologically prior to my faith, but it remains purely external and indeed meaningless *for me* until I relate to God in trusting faith.

Because God's actions cannot be objectified, because the events of redemption cannot be rationally, empirically, or historically demonstrated,⁹⁸ and because it is possible to speak of such things only when individuals are ultimately concerned with their own existence, then faith must be a new understanding of personal existence.⁹⁹ In other words, God's act bestows a new understanding of myself. Bultmann addresses a common misunderstanding of this particular position: the self-understanding of personal existence is confused with philosophical analysis of the human being. The existential understanding of the significance and meaning of my own life authentically pursued (*das Existentielle*) is confused with existentialist philosophical analysis (*das Existential*).¹⁰⁰ It is existentialist analysis that clarifies that my existential self-understanding is realized

97. Luther, "Large Catechism," 386.

98. As Lessing and Kant famously put it, the historical serves only for illustration, not for demonstration.

99. This new understanding can be expressed in terms of Heidegger's phrase *Dasein-in-der-Welt* ("Being-in-the-World"). For Bultmann, true faith is a matter of the believer's understanding of this "Being-in-the-World." Bultmann maintains a distinctive relationship between *Glauben* and *Verstehen* (faith and understanding), which he discusses in his essay "Theologie als Wissenschaft." ET: "Theology as Science." For a discussion of the relationship and the distinction between *Glauben und Verstehen* in Bultmann's theology, see Jüngel, *Glauben und Verstehen*. Jüngel discusses Bultmann's conception of theology in terms of its characterization as a science (*Wissenschaft*), the proper boundaries of theology (for example, theology must have a specific object—namely, God—if it is to be called "theology": talk about God), faith as understanding of truth, and the truth of the moment, among others.

100. Bultmann borrows this distinction from Heidegger.

only in the here and now.¹⁰¹ Theologically, Bultmann argues that in faith we continuously understand ourselves anew. This new self-understanding is maintained only as a continual response to God's word, which proclaims God's act in Jesus the Christ.¹⁰²

But this raises a further question: if one speaks of God as acting on the individual in the concrete here and now, how can it be maintained that God has acted once for all in the cross? Bultmann suggests that the idea of the eternal God becomes effectively real in an individual's existence by God's word spoken in the here and now. God's word is eternal, but not timeless. This eternity is conceived as God's eternal presence always actualized in the here and now, i.e., in time.¹⁰³ God's word is not a collection of propositions and doctrines demanding intellectual assent, but an event happening in my own concrete situation here and now, addressed to me in time from outside myself. In this sense God's word is truly the *verbum externum*.

God's word is transmitted through human language, through the Bible and the church. This word originated in history, in the historical event of Jesus the Christ. God's act in the cross of Jesus cannot be objectified or proved, and yet the Christian believes that this is an eschatological, salvific event. Jesus the Christ is the eschatological event, and the question for demythologizing is whether this understanding is inseparable from the New Testament conceptions of cosmological eschatology.¹⁰⁴ The key for Bultmann is found in the Gospel of John's unique eschatology.¹⁰⁵ In John, cosmological eschatology is understood as a historical, realized eschatology. To live in faith is to live an eschatological existence, to pass from death to life, *right now*. This eschatological existence is already realized in a new self-understanding in response to the word, and the eschatological event of Jesus the Christ happens here and now as the word is proclaimed. The

101. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 74.

102. For a discussion of Bultmann's treatment of faith as a new self-understanding, see Jüngel, *Glauben und Verstehen*, 65–67.

103. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 79. Tillich also utilizes this distinction in a sermon entitled "The Eternal Now."

104. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 81.

105. See Bultmann's *Das Evangelium des Johannes* for his treatment of the Fourth Gospel as a whole. ET: *Gospel of John*. See also his "Die Eschatologie des Johannes-Evangelium" for his specific treatment of John's eschatology. ET: "Eschatology of the Gospel of John."

“once for all” is understood, not as a historical event, but as an eschatological event.¹⁰⁶

This event is present for me in the preaching of the word. The word does proclaim that God’s grace has already acted in the past for me, but not in a way that I can objectively understand through historical research and reconstruction. God’s grace is present here and now as the eschatological event, with its origins in the historical event of Jesus the Christ. This event is “once for all” because the word that is preached here and now is the same word that has been preached for two millennia. It is only in light of this proclaimed word that what has happened or what is happening here or there assumes the character of God’s act for those who have faith in God.¹⁰⁷

What does it mean to have faith, for Bultmann?¹⁰⁸ Christian faith in its most basic sense is trust in the promise of God given in the gospel, and this faith opens me to the future. Faith includes the recognition that as a human being I am incapable of saving myself from my own past and am therefore also incapable of existing authentically for the future. Because faith as trust in God is faith that God will make my authentic existence possible, faith is also obedience and submission to the God who judges me and who gives me grace. This faith is *justifying* faith, in that through faith the sinner is made righteous. Faith is also hope, in that it is readiness for and acceptance of the unknown future that God opens up for me.¹⁰⁹ Finally, faith is freedom, for through God’s gracious gift of faith I have the freedom to decide for authentic existence. This gift of freedom liberates me from myself and from my past, setting me free for loving openness to the world.¹¹⁰

106. Congdon goes so far as to suggest that, contrary to typical assumptions that Bultmann’s chief concerns are hermeneutics and existential analysis, Bultmann should be understood first and foremost as an eschatological theologian. In fact, the first chapter of Congdon’s introduction to Bultmann’s thought is devoted to Bultmann’s views on eschatology, not myth and demythologizing. See Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 1–13.

107. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 85.

108. For a more systematic treatment of faith, including its three “classical” components (*notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*—knowledge, assent, and trust), see Bultmann’s fifth chapter, “Der Begriff des Glaubens,” in *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, 97–170. ET: *What Is Theology?* For his discussion of God as the object of faith (*fides quae creditur*) and of the eschatological act of God as the theme of theology, see Bultmann, “Theologie als Wissenschaft.”

109. For a short discussion of the concept of hope in the context of demythologizing, see Bultmann’s essay, “Die christliche Hoffnung und das Problem der Entmythologisierung.” ET: “Christian Hope and the Problem of Demythologizing.”

110. See Bultmann’s section on “Das menschliche Sein im Glauben” in “Neues

Faith is grounded in God's revelation in a historical person.¹¹¹ But faith is also eschatological, in that God encounters me in the present through the kerygma, through what Bultmann calls the *Christus praesens*.¹¹² God offers forgiveness and authentic existence in my current situation, and thus faith requires a decision in each new moment. God's gracious act in the cross is the condition for the possibility of faith, so that faith becomes a response both to God's past act and to God's address to me in the present. Because faith is possible only in relation to God's address in the proclamation of the gospel, it follows that faith must be created in each new moment. True faith is only possible when I act, when I am confronted with a summons to respond to the word. Faith in this sense is not intellectual assent to a series of doctrinal propositions, but a free act of trusting, affirmative response to God's saving word addressed to me in my own existence.¹¹³ Faith is the obedient hearing of this word of law and gospel—the word that condemns me as a sinner and offers forgiveness in Christ—and as such faith is inseparable from the word.¹¹⁴

The Christian kerygma is the proclamation of God's eschatological act in Jesus the Christ. This is the message of the New Testament: the gospel, the good news. This is the message that meets people in the proclamation of the word, and this is the message that offers each hearer the opportunity for decision. Faith is possible only when this message is proclaimed, as Paul writes, "for faith comes through what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). To hear this word is to hear God's offer of forgiveness and of liberation: it is the "word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18–19). This word of the cross makes the cross comprehensible as the salvation event by demanding faith. This faith is not mere belief in the historical facticity of Jesus' life and death, but much more than that: it is the individual's whole-hearted "yes" to God's word of address. Because the truth of the kerygma

Testament und Mythologie," 29–31.

111. Bultmann, "Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament." ET: "Concept of Revelation." See also the ninth paragraph of his third chapter on "Die Erkennbarkeit Gottes in der Existenz durch die Offenbarung," 59–65, and the eleventh paragraph of his fourth chapter on "Die Offenbarung als geschichtliche Ereignis," 88–96, in Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*.

112. For more on this feature of Bultmann's thought, see Kay, *Christus Praesens*.

113. Bultmann, "Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?," 36.

114. This twin emphasis on faith and the word is captured in the title of a collection of essays by one of Bultmann's most famous students, Gerhard Ebeling. See Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube*. ET: *Word and Faith*.

cannot be verified by historical research, because the significance of God's eschatological act in the cross cannot be proved, and because the ground and object of faith are the same (namely, God), this faith involves a risk:

Those who want to have faith in God as their God must know that they hold nothing in hand in which they can believe; that they are, as it were, poised mid-air and can demand no proof of the truth of the word that has been spoken to them. For the ground and the object of faith are identical. Only the one who abandons all security can find security, only the one who—to speak with Luther—is prepared to enter into the inner darkness.¹¹⁵

There can be no security in faith, for in faith one abandons security for the sake of radical openness to the future. Faith is a risk precisely because the truth of the kerygma cannot be proved and because the future is unknown to us. To seek for security or proof for faith is to ask God to justify Godself, which is a refusal to let God be God. This is the scandal of the New Testament. The paradox of faith—that the revelation of God occurs in a historical figure, that God is revealed most fully in the humiliating death of a condemned criminal,¹¹⁶ that the church and its proclamation are historical and yet eschatological phenomena—cannot be overcome by means of scientific explanations or historical investigations, but only in trusting faith. As Bultmann asserts, it is precisely because these things *cannot* be proved that the Christian kerygma is secure against the charge that it is mythology. The transcendence of God is not made immanent in such a way as to negate God's transcendence, as in myth; rather, the paradox of the presence of the transcendent God in history is affirmed: "the word became flesh."¹¹⁷

115. Bultmann, "Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung" (1952), 207. Here Bultmann makes an interesting connection between his program of radical demythologizing and the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone. He understands his own program to be a consistent application of the Lutheran doctrine of justification to epistemology: just as the doctrine of justification cures us of any hope for security through our works, so radical demythologizing cures us of any hope for security through our knowledge.

116. This is the heart of the Lutheran theology of the cross. For more on this aspect of Lutheran thought, see Sailer, *Theologia Crucis*.

117. Bultmann, "Neues Testament und Mythologie," 48. David Congdon makes the intriguing argument that Bultmann, finally, should be understood as a theologian of Advent. See Congdon, *Rudolf Bultmann*, which concludes with a chapter on Advent.