

Jesus, Bultmann and a different Theology

26/6/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Studying theology at an academic level is not to be taken lightly by any means. It is challenging, life changing and immensely unsettling if not handled supportively by the student's spiritual director and academic supervisors alike.

Why do I say this?

Well, I speak from personal experience. I arrived at Rhodes University back in the year 1985, fresh faced, wide-eyed and idealistic. The problem is that most candidates for the ministry arrive at the academic institution they are sent to by the denomination who validates their calling, with a very basic "Sunday School" level of Biblical and Theological training. This is inevitable, as the kind folk who assist in the Sunday school are often lay people with no formal training, and so the wheel inevitably turns as they now teach the Sunday school level of Theology they were once taught at church many years ago...

This is all fine and well until an academic level of Theology is taught at university and suddenly Divinity Students are introduced to the Historico Critical Method (a subject for another sermon), various theologies and philosophies that radically challenge their simplistic level of Christian Faith. This is traumatic for many ordinands as they struggle with a changing paradigm in terms of their faith and understanding of the Gospel. I watched many candidates for the ministry go through this personal struggle... many actually resigned from their ministerial training as they finally realised that they rejected these new ideas of the Gospel and Theology... the paradigm shift was just too big for them to make. I do not stand in judgment of these colleagues at all. In fact, my best friend, who was a Methodist Student for the Ministry went through this exact crisis a year ahead of me. Eventually he resigned from the ministry and changed his studies in order to be able to teach. Today he is an outstanding Facilitator for Scripture Union in New Zealand. I love him dearly.

I was lucky. I enjoyed the academic challenge and the rewriting of my faith. However, I need to note, this does not mean that I did not struggle during my

formation. There were many other areas of my life that I struggled with during this time that were eventually to lead to my resignation from the ministry, but the academic faith challenge was not one of them.

One of the theologians that Professor John Suggit (Dean of the Faculty of Divinity and Professor of New Testament Studies) introduced us to was a gentleman by the name of Rudolf Bultmann... this name was to become synonymous with many a debate into the late nights in residence... Bultmann evoked very powerful emotions from ordinands who both agreed and understood what he was trying to convey, as well as those ordinands who rejected his writings and theology completely.

Bultmann still stands out in my mind as a theologian who essentially wrote before his time. He was seen as a radical by many and the fact that his name has stuck in my head for so many years would seem to indicate that he had a powerful influence on me, as he did on many others.

There is no way that I can do justice to the theology of Rudolf Bultmann in this short précis, and Professor John Suggit might be mortified at my handling of the subject, but my role here this evening is only to create an awareness, to start a conversation. Should I create a spark of inquisitiveness for you this evening, then Google is your friend when you get home!

So who is this person and what did he say and stand for that is so contentious?

Rudolf Carl Bultmann was a German Lutheran theologian and Professor of New Testament at the University of Marburg. He was one of the major figures of early 20th Century biblical studies and a prominent voice in liberal Christianity.

His theological stance is interesting. Bultmann suggested that the Christian faith is, and should be, comparatively uninterested in the historical Jesus and centred instead on the transcendent Christ. Christian faith, he asserted, is faith in the kerugma (“proclamation, spiritual truth”) of the church, into which Jesus may be said to be risen.

One of the main theological concepts that Bultmann based most of his theology on was the idea of demythologising the Bible. This is where many Divinity Students become confused and upset. Bultmann suggested that in order for us as Christians to fully understand and appreciate the Biblical texts

we need to apply the process of demythologising the same. Therefore, it follows that Bultmann saw the Bible and specifically the New Testament, as being full of myth, hence the process of interpreting/ identifying the myth in order to find the true kerygmatic vitality of the said text...

This is where some of my colleagues became very confused and upset, as they felt that by referring to the Bible as containing “myth” it somehow invalidates or renders the Biblical message as having no authority.

Bultmann saw it differently. He believed that although the Biblical texts contain myth, it does NOT mean that they are any less valuable or important. There is value and truth in myth. We merely have to apply a process of demythologisation (or taking the myth out of the Biblical texts) in order to fully identify and appreciate the spiritual message.

“To interpret New Testament mythology in cosmological terms, as a description of the universe is not plausible. This interpretation must be superseded by an anthropological interpretation that discloses the truth of the kerugma for those who do not think mythologically.”

You see, Bultmann’s aim was to describe the means by which the essential truth of the Gospel could be made acceptable to modern people.

Bultmann argues that faith is the decision to choose the new life in Christ. Myth means the description in terms of this world of alleged supernatural events, such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. These stories are not history; they are the means by which facets of the meaning of the Cross can be disclosed.

Critics of Bultmann, and you may be one of them, maintain that he has been over zealous in rejecting almost the entire world-view of the New Testament by relegating it to the mythical, and too enthusiastic in embracing the existentialist philosophy of his one-time colleague Martin Heidegger.

I do believe that there is a place for Rudolf Bultmann in our Christian formation. He has a lot to offer, and many of the highly academic Christians in our midst may indeed welcome his insights and wisdom. Bultmann may give these people an opportunity to reconcile their 21st century cognitive abilities with a new theology that “makes sense”.

I have a few comments to make upon reflection this evening:

- 1) Firstly, do not be upset or feel hurt by some of these ideas. At the end of the day, Bultmann was a deeply religious man and loved Jesus, just like you and I do. If you feel that you have the reserve or temperament, then allow yourself to feel challenged. Do some extra reading around the subject. You may find yourself moving into a new and exciting level of faith that reinvigorates your spiritual journey.
- 2) Remember, that the Gospel and the love of Jesus, is bigger than you and I, and Bultmann! There will always be new theologies and ideas around understanding the message of the Gospel. Listen to them. Think about them. If you find that they allow you to move closer to Jesus, then embrace them. If you find that the ideas alienate you from Jesus, put them on the back burner.
- 3) Lastly, remember that the deep kerugma or kerygmatic vitality of the Gospels and love of Jesus is both small and big enough to be taught in Sunday school, yet also questioned and analysed in depth in every Divinity classroom. The “myth” or truth of the Bible has withstood many thousands years of scrutiny... it is still here.

I am reminded of a funny incident at Rhodes one year during my training. We had all been introduced to Nietzsche, who suggested in some of his writings that “God was dead”

I returned to my residence one afternoon after lectures to find that someone had posted the following note on the communal notice board:

God is dead- Nietzsche

Nietzsche is dead- God

I would like to close off this evening by reading a quote from a little known author, Rilke, who said:

“Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to **live** them. And the point is, to **live** everything. **Live the questions** now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, **live** along some distant day into the answer.”

May God bless you this week ahead as you move into a deeper faith and love for Jesus and His love for the World.

Amen.