

THE THEOLOGY OF RUDOLF BULTMANN

Rudolf Bultmann claimed that there is no interpretation of any document (including the New Testament) without presuppositions; and that our categories, our terms, even our questions, are always affected by philosophy. In this regard he believed Barth to be naive in thinking to develop a theology independent of any philosophy. He believed that we are more honest and more likely to obtain fruitful results if we consciously acknowledge our dependence on philosophy for the clarification of the categories of our thought. This does not mean that philosophy should predetermine the results of our inquiry, but rather that it should aid us in the formulation of questions to the New Testament.

Bultmann believed that what is needed is a philosophical anthropology adequate to our present understanding of human existence (achieved through the disciplines of philosophy and psychology), as well as to the understanding of Paul. He believed that such a framework is available to us in the phenomenological ontology of human existence developed by his one-time colleague at Marburg, Martin Heidegger, whose approach provides a better framework for grasping Paul's understanding of Christian existence than Paul's own framework. For example, Heidegger's distinction between unauthentic and authentic existence is a very clear and precise expression of the intention of Paul in his use of the ambiguous and unclear antithesis of flesh and spirit. Through this kind of exegesis Paul's own intention is given a freedom of self-expression that it can achieve in no other way. But whether or not we continue to use the language of flesh and spirit, one grasp of Paul's meaning is aided by Heidegger.

Bultmann's Basic Principles

(1) God is wholly transcendent

This world is the totality of spatiotemporal phenomena, a closed system of cause and effect, in which the causes of this-worldly phenomena are this-worldly. This is supported by the modern scientific view of the world as a closed, self-contained unity of natural causes and effects. This means that God cannot be introduced as a causal factor into the explanation of this-worldly events. Any failure to find a cause simply means that we do not yet have adequate tools at our command. From this principle there can be no exceptions.

(2) God is rationally unknowable

Since God is totally other, knowledge of God cannot be communicated by means of objective, rational assertions, predications, or propositions.

(3) God is always free, even from His own being.

By means of this principle, all determinisms are rejected.