

Reflections on
Systematic Theology
Paul Tillich

Apologetics
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I. Introduction

Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology seems based in his attempt to answer the question, "Can the Christian message be adapted to the modern mind without losing its essential and unique character" (Tillich, 7)? Such a question is based in the utilization of an apology in which Tillich attempts to logically link the message of scripture with the situation of man in a seamless "method of correlation" that will "correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message" (Tillich, 8).

This method seems to originate from a desire in Tillich to promote Christianity as a faith that is neither narrow, superstitious or considered to be lacking in the wisdom of the modern mind. From this perspective, one can assert that Tillich's Systematic Theology in many ways becomes an apologetic work that seeks to examine the nature of humanity as the modern mind perceives it and then make logical arguments as to how scriptural topics refer to and explain this evidence.

From this writer's perspective, Tillich is headed in the wrong direction in forming his apologetic statement to the world. As he attempts to prove the validity of the Christian faith to those that he deems wise, open minded and perhaps enlightened by modern wisdom; he discounts the wisdom of the original writers of scripture and those that exercise a kerygmatic apologetic that begins with the use of scripture and promotes the wisdom of the written word as a starting point for seeking true knowledge.

Through this brief work three apologetic assertions that Dr. Tillich makes in his text will be briefly reflected on by this writer. These will be "The reality of revelation," "The reality of God" and "The reality of the Christ." Following these reflections there will be a brief concluding thought.

II. The Reality of Revelation

Tillich begins this explanation through first defining the meaning of revelation. He utilizes an approach he calls "Critical phenomenology" (Tillich, 107). Through this method he seeks to connect absolute concreteness and absolute universality thus ensuring that a revelation is universally valid. Next he defines the terms revelation as 'removing the veil' and mystery as 'closing the eyes' or 'closing the mouth.' With these definitions in place, he concludes:

"Knowledge about nature and history, about individuals and their future and their past, about hidden things and happenings-all this is not a matter of revelation but of observations, intuitions and conclusions" (Tillich, 110).

These lie outside of what Tillich calls revelation because they are not of essential concern or essential mystery. In this way Tillich makes it plain that events which Christian theologians and apologists have referred to as 'general revelation' does not exist. His statement, "There is no revelation 'in general'" (Tillich, 111), leaves no doubt to this exclusion.

Tillich also seems to caution the Christian church in what he believes one of the vocations it has tried to fill as a bearer or revelation for nations and individuals. He further makes the point that "A mechanized administration of religious rites can exclude any revelatory presence of the holy reality which it claims to mediate" (Tillich 121). While on the surface this may gain some credibility among those that seek integrity of the heart, it has been this writer's experience that following spiritual disciplines can also be an avenue to seek a deeper revelatory experience or understanding.

Tillich concludes that revelation does not destroy reason (Tillich, 150), but liberates reason; he attempts to make revelation both absolute and relative by placing it in the context of "It is absolute as love and relative in every love relationship" (Tillich, 153).

III. The Reality of God

To continue this writer's endeavor of seeking the apologetic arguments that Tillich might utilize to prove the existence of God, this section of Systematic Theology was read. Tillich begins with his "phenomenological" description and states "God is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude; he is the name for which concerns men ultimately" (Tillich, 211). Tillich further describes this view as "whatever concerns man ultimately becomes God for him" (Tillich, 211).

As stated earlier, Tillich removed the possibility of general revelation as a revelatory experience that could lead someone to knowledge of God. Yet he describes "holiness as an experienced phenomenon" (Tillich, 215) and is the "quality of that which concerns man ultimately" (Tillich, 215). This description of God appears only to be centered on the internal yearnings and desires of mankind. To this end, Tillich declares "there can be no doubt that any concrete assertion about God must be symbolic, for a concrete assertion is one which uses a segment of finite experience in order to say something about him" (Tillich, 239).

So then one may ask, why should anyone be persuaded to believe in such a God? Tillich states, "Faith in the almighty God is the answer to the quest for a courage which is sufficient to conquer the anxiety of finitude" (Tillich, 273). Tillich describes other terms that we may utilize to describe God as simply symbols. Life, spirit, power, love, grace, king, judge, highest Creator, helper and Savior are all symbols that Tillich says can be utilized as human kind "contemplates the infinity of the divine life" (Tillich, 289).

IV. The Reality of Christ

Tillich criticizes the traditional understanding of the Incarnation which has been understood in contradictory terms such as: eternal and temporal, mutable and immutable, and

God and human (Tillich v2, 160). The thought that the divine unites with human nature is to him a concept brought forth by pagan philosophy. Tillich proposes "deliteralization" as an approach in dealing with these symbols and myths.

Though Tillich greatly honors scientific methods of historical criticism and form criticism to the extent that little can be left of the historical Jesus as viewed in the canon of scripture, (Tillich v2,101) the historical person of Jesus is crucial for Tillich. "If Jesus is not a historical person and if no essential humanity actually entered into existence then nothing new has happened, the New being is not actualized and the New being remains merely a hope" (Tillich v2,126). Viewed in this way, Tillich distinguishes two different implications of the historical Jesus. The first is the actual living person in Jesus who was received as the Christ. Tillich refers to this historical person witnessed by the disciples as the historical figure behind the records of the New Testament. The second is the historical Jesus reconstructed through historical criticism on the basis of the sources available to the modern mind.

Tillich distinguishes "the living person behind the text" from "the historians reconstruction out of the text" (Tillich v2,105). The living person behind the text is of paramount importance and crucial for the validity of the Christian message. Tillich argues that the historical portrayal of the modern mind is in no way essential to the message of the Christian faith. He further contends if we cannot know Jesus through historical inquiry then we can know Jesus through faith, that is the historical person Jesus who is received by faith as the Christ (Tillich v2,124).

For Tillich there can be no actual resurrection event. Instead this event becomes a symbol of the 'new being' and "the continuous sacrifice of himself as Jesus to himself as the

Christ” (Tillich, 137); this is “the ongoing work of his continuous acceptance of the cross” (Tillich, 136).

V. Concluding Thoughts

Tillich claims to make "the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation" (Tillich, 3). This writer suspected strong apologetic arguments to be formed using the scriptures and reasonable logic to answer philosophical questions of his peers. His so-called "correlation" methodology seemed to this writer to be nothing more than an existential endeavor that transcends both subjectivity and objectivity.

The denial of any physical relevance from general revelation to the nature of God as found in titles that are substantially due Him to the negation of the complete deity of Jesus as God and Man and even to the physical death and resurrection of Jesus gave this reader cause to wonder if Tillich thought that only our thoughts were worthy to take part in the spiritual journey.

The relativism expressed in his views seem to suggest that he is in fact reinterpreting the Christian message as a new generation of thinkers might suggest it should be to suit their whims. When faith in God becomes simply a solution to our lack of completeness, God no longer resides as a King, but as a pauper who seems duty bound to tie up our loose ends and relegates His Son the duty of continually denying Himself to be our constant sacrifice.

This writer saw no compelling apologetic defense of the faith in these readings from Tillich. What was evident are the pitfalls that an apologist might face when they try to stand with an intellectually liberal camp and reach back to remake the gospel into what they might accept as truth. This writer was left wondering, is this a defense of the Gospel worth making?