

PAUL TILLICH'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD:
A SUMMARY EVALUATION

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) was a major figure in twentieth-century theology. After holding several academic posts in Germany, he and his family moved to the United States in November 1933.¹ He subsequently held teaching positions at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Chicago Divinity School. The author of several well-known books, he is possibly best remembered for his three-volume *Systematic Theology*. The present paper is divided into two parts. Part one attempts a summary of Tillich's theological method; part two offers an evaluation.

A Summary of Tillich's Theological Method

Tillich begins by contrasting "kerygmatic" theology with "apologetic" theology. Kerygmatic theology "emphasizes the unchangeable truth of the message (kerygma) over against the changing demands of the situation."² By "situation" Tillich means the cultural context of a particular time and place. In his view, kerygmatic theology often fails to adequately address the 'situation' of modern man (7). However, he intends to avoid this problem by writing an "apologetic" theology. An apologetic theology answers the questions being asked in one's cultural context, or "situation," using "the means provided by the situation" (e.g. contemporary language, etc.) in order to answer the questions in a relevant and comprehensible manner (6). Although Tillich maintains that the statements of apologetic theology must be based on the kerygma, his real concern is using what he terms "the 'method of correlation' as a way of uniting

¹ J. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 14.

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 4. The page numbers from additional citations of this text will be given in parentheses following the citation.

message and situation” (8). When properly used, he says, this method “correlates questions and answers, situation and message, human existence and divine manifestation” (8). In Tillich’s view, kerygmatic theology must be supplemented by apologetic theology if it is to effectively answer the questions of modern man in his contemporary cultural context (6).

Having briefly examined Tillich’s general *approach* to systematic theology, let us now turn to consider his *method*. He begins with a discussion of the *sources* of systematic theology (34-40). He acknowledges that the Bible “is the original document about the events on which Christianity is based,” but he rejects the notion that “the Bible is the *only* source” of systematic theology (34). After all, we inhabit a very different historical context than the authors of the New Testament. After two thousand years of church history, Tillich argues, “Every person who encounters a biblical text is guided in his religious understanding of it by the understanding of all previous generations” (36). Thus, in addition to the Bible, the systematic theologian must also use sources from church history, as well as the history of religion and culture (37-38). Since man is unavoidably shaped and conditioned by the pervasive influence of culture (38), the careful theologian must avail himself of numerous sources past and present, even while acknowledging that some (e.g. the Bible) deserve a more prominent place than others (40).

Tillich next turns to a discussion of the role of experience in systematic theology (40-46). He distinguishes three ways in which the term “experience” is often employed in theological discussions: the ontological, the scientific, and the mystical (42). He is primarily interested in assigning a place to experience in the mystical sense. He rejects the notion that experience can be a “source” for systematic theology, preferring rather to view it as “the medium through which the sources ‘speak’ to us” (40). In Tillich’s view, “Christian theology is based on the unique event Jesus the Christ.” But this event “is given to experience and not derived from it” (46).

The third methodological issue to which Tillich directs his attention concerns the “norm” or “criterion” of systematic theology (47-52). The importance of this issue was recognized “early in the history of the church” (47). As one might expect, the norm has been differently expressed from one time and place to another. For Luther, the norm was “justification

through faith” in Christ (47), whereas “for the Roman church it was salvation from guilt . . . by the actual and sacramental sacrifice of the God-man” (48). Tillich acknowledges that his own norm, the “New Being in Jesus as the Christ,” differs in emphasis from these (50). Nevertheless, he believes it preserves “the same substance” and that it brings it out “in a form more adequate to the present situation and to the biblical source” (49).

After discussing the rational character of systematic theology (53-59), Tillich proceeds to a more detailed consideration of his previously mentioned “method of correlation” (59-66). Since we have already touched upon this “method” in our discussion of kerygmatic and apologetic theology, we will postpone the remainder of our discussion until the “evaluation” section of the paper.

For now, let us turn to Tillich’s doctrine of revelation. In his view, revelation is understood to be “a special and extraordinary manifestation which removes the veil from something which is hidden in a special and extraordinary way” (108). The content of revelation is a matter of our ultimate concern “because it is the ground of our being” (110). Indeed, in Tillich’s view, revelation cannot be thought to have taken place “if there is no one who receives it as his ultimate concern” (111).

What are we to make of this notion of “ultimate concern”? Is it a veiled, abstract, or philosophical way of referring to God? The answer, somewhat paradoxically, appears to be both yes—and no. If we use the term “God” to describe a particular being who is distinct from other beings, then, in Tillich’s view, God is *not* the object of our ultimate concern (14). However, if by “God” we mean “being-itself” or “the ground of being,” then it *is* appropriate to characterize “God” as the object of our ultimate concern. Thus, for Tillich, revelation *is* concerned with the manifestation of “God,” but “God” understood as “being-itself” or “the ground of our being” (110, 156, 238-39).

Since everything that exists participates in being-itself, there is nothing that cannot (at least in principle) “become a bearer of the mystery of being and enter into a revelatory correlation” (118). Thus, everything that exists is a *potential* vehicle, or medium, of revelation.

In this sense, everything that exists is *potentially* the Word of God. According to Tillich, the phrase “Word of God” can be used in six different ways (157-59). Most importantly, it refers to “the divine self-manifestation in the ground of being itself” (157). But it can also refer to the manifestation of the divine in creation, in the history of revelation, in Jesus as the Christ, in the Bible, and in the preaching and teaching of the church. Of course, Tillich is careful to point out that while divine revelation can occur through the *mediums* of the Bible and preaching, these things should not be identified with divine revelation itself (158-59). In fact, “the mediator of revelation may not be a preacher or religious teacher at all but simply someone whom we meet and whose words become the Word for us in a special constellation” (159). Tillich concludes his discussion by claiming that all these different meanings of the term “Word” are ultimately “united in one meaning, namely, ‘God manifest’ . . . the mystery of the divine abyss expressing itself through the divine Logos—this is the meaning of the symbol, the ‘Word of God’” (159).

An Evaluation of Tillich’s Theological Method

What are we to make of Tillich’s theological method? In the first place, we can certainly commend his desire to seriously engage the questions of modern man. Insofar as “kerygmatic theology” fails to consider the very different cultural context in which man finds himself today, relative to biblical times, it will undoubtedly fail to accurately communicate the full depth and richness of the biblical message to modern man. Tillich’s attempt to use an “apologetic theology” to answer the questions of his day in a form suited to the contemporary mind is something we ought to applaud.

On the other hand, we also need to raise some questions. For example, how faithfully has Tillich upheld the original Christian “kerygma” in the development of his theology? He tells us in the “Introduction” to his *Systematic Theology*: “A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation” (3). One wonders, however, whether Tillich’s theology actually accomplishes these aims. For example, at one point he writes:

The statement that God is being-itself is a nonsymbolic statement. It does not point beyond itself. It means what it says directly and properly; if we speak of the actuality of God, we first assert that he is not God if he is not being-itself. Other assertions about God can be made theologically only on this basis” (238-39).

Does this statement accurately reflect the Christian doctrine of God? Has Tillich merely “interpreted” this doctrine for a new generation—or has he rather distorted it beyond recognition? It seems to me that Kenneth Hamilton is entirely correct in arguing that Tillich’s method amounts to taking certain terms found in the *kerygma* (e.g. God) and translating them into the technical terminology of his system—after which “nothing characteristic of the *kerygma* remains.”³ So while we can commend Tillich’s desire to “interpret” the Christian message for a new generation, we must also admit that he often fails to “interpret” this message faithfully. Unfortunately, his “apologetic theology” often tends to distort, rather than clarify, the original *kerygma*.

This distortion may be partially explained by Tillich’s use of sources. While we agree with his view that the Bible is not “the *only* source” of systematic theology, nevertheless, for one who regards it as “the original document” of historic Christianity (34), it’s surprising how little he cites it. As George Thomas observed, “if the Bible is the ‘basic source’ of systematic theology, one would think that more frequent references to it would be appropriate, especially in presenting the ‘answers’ of the Christian message.”⁴ Of course, Tillich is correct in observing that the Bible must be interpreted. And we would not want to minimize the difficulty of understanding a text so far removed from our own “situation.” But Tillich seems content to merely point out the difficulty without ever really attempting a viable solution. He tips his hat to the Bible at the beginning of his work, but then largely ignores it afterward.

³ Kenneth Hamilton, *The System and the Gospel: A Critique of Paul Tillich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 26.

⁴ George F. Thomas, “The Method and Structure of Tillich’s Theology,” in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 95.

What about the role of experience in systematic theology? Is Tillich correct to reject it as a “source”? Should it rather be viewed as “the medium through which the sources ‘speak’ to us” (40)? This is a difficult question, but Tillich’s position at least seems possible. What Tillich seems to be saying is something like this: If we consider the “sources” of systematic theology (e.g. creation, history, the Bible, etc.), it seems that we only have access to them via our “experience.” In this sense, “experience” is indeed the medium through which the sources “speak” to us. Tillich later says that only if the believer’s spirit were one with the divine Spirit could his experience count as a source for theology. But he rejects this by noting, “Even the saint must listen to what the Spirit says to his spirit, because the saint is also a sinner” (46). Thus, even here Tillich seems to conceive of the Spirit as a “Source,” speaking to the saint through the medium of his experience. Granted, one could quibble with Tillich about the meaning of the term “experience,” but for our purposes this does not seem necessary.

Although Tillich’s view of the role of experience *may* have merit, what are we to make of his claim that the “norm” of theology is the “New Being in Jesus as the Christ”? Tillich claims that this norm “is based on what Paul calls the ‘new creation’” (49). It is manifest most fully in Jesus the Christ, the one “who brings the new eon, the new reality” (49). According to Tillich, modern man experiences “his present situation” in terms of “meaninglessness and despair” (49). For this reason, he asserts, the question being asked “is not, as in the Reformation, the question of a merciful God and the forgiveness of sins; nor is it, as in the early Greek church, the question of finitude, of death and error; nor is it the question of the personal religious life or of the Christianization of culture and society.” Rather, Tillich claims, the question being asked in our day concerns “a reality in which the self-estrangement of our existence is overcome, a reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning, and hope” (49). And this reality, Tillich contends, corresponds to the New Being in Jesus as the Christ.

But wait a minute! Does Tillich really believe that modern man is no longer concerned about the mercy of God and the forgiveness of sins? Does he really believe that “*other* ‘norms,’ such as ‘justification by faith,’ can be *replaced* by his ‘norm’ of the ‘New Being?’”⁵ It seems that in this case Tillich’s existential diagnosis of the predicament of modern man leads him to formulate a norm for theology which isn’t any more convincing (and probably less so) than the norms he dismisses.

This observation leads us back again to Tillich’s method of correlation. This method, he says, “explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence” (60). Although the questions arise from an existential “analysis of the human situation” (62), the answers (at least in theory) “are contained in the revelatory events on which Christianity is based” (64). Perhaps the best way to evaluate this method is to cite an illustration, offered by Tillich, of how this might actually look in practice. Suppose that our analysis of the human condition reveals that man, in his finitude, is threatened by the question of nonbeing. What sort of answer does Christian theology offer us? According to Tillich, “if the notion of God appears in systematic theology in correlation with the threat of nonbeing which is implied in existence, God must be called the infinite power of being which resists the threat of nonbeing. In classical theology this is being-itself” (64).

How adequate is this answer? Can it really be said to be derived from “the revelatory events on which Christianity is based” (64)? And what are we to make of this existential analysis of the human condition? Is it really a valid procedure to use a relatively autonomous and impersonal philosophical system to formulate questions for Christian theology to answer? Isn’t there a potential for the answers to be distorted by the way in which the questions are formulated? After discussing a quotation from Tillich in which he refers to the being of God as “being-itself,” George Thomas writes:

⁵ Ibid., 97.

It seems to me that in the Christian message, ‘God’ means ‘*a* being,’ not ‘being-itself.’ . . . He is a concrete individual, though an individual without the limits of finite individuals. He is not merely ‘the ground of everything personal’; He *is* personal Himself. If this is the Christian view, I wonder whether Tillich’s statement of it has not been weakened at points by the intrusion into his thinking of an impersonal philosophy alien to the spirit of Christianity.⁶

Thomas is surely correct. For all its hype, Tillich’s “method of correlation” often fails to do the very thing he claims for it, namely, to provide truly Christian answers to the questions of modern man.

We now return once more to Tillich’s doctrine of revelation. Here we can be brief. We previously learned that, in Tillich’s view, everything that exists participates in “being-itself” (i.e. God) and is thus a potential *medium* of divine revelation. In this sense, everything that exists is potentially the Word of God. What can we say of this view?

While we would object to his unbiblical doctrine of God, nevertheless, his view that everything is a potential medium of divine revelation can be commended. On the other hand, his extension of the phrase “Word of God” to cover every type of revelation appears unwarranted. While it would seem appropriate to use this phrase of God the Son (whether in His incarnate or pre-incarnate states), and the Bible, and maybe even Christian preaching, it does not seem appropriate to use it of the revelation of God the Father—or of God’s revelation in creation.

In conclusion, although some aspects of Tillich’s theological method are genuinely helpful, the method as a whole (particularly the method of correlation) seems more likely to result in theological error, than in theological understanding. Ironically, perhaps the clearest example of this is Tillich’s own theology.

⁶ Ibid., 104.

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