

Rudolf Bultmann as Theologian of Radical Trust in the Gospel

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Why read Rudolf Bultmann today?

The Lutheran exegete and theologian Rudolf Bultmann is one of the foremost religious thinkers of the twentieth century. Bultmann is a nuanced and complicated figure who remains rooted in Christ as present in the Gospel kerygma, while reinterpreting the kerygma existentially for Christians in the modern world who are influenced by a scientific and empiricist worldview.¹

Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of the Gospel kerygma centers on trusting God rather than the false stumbling block of biblical literalism. This has important implications for Christian faith today. This essay reads Bultmann's hermeneutic in relation to Martin Luther's theology of the cross to argue that the Marburg professor's work continues to be an asset within the Lutheran tradition with his demythologizing method serving as a hermeneutic of radical trust in the Gospel of Jesus Christ for an anxious and ambiguous world. We will explore the Lutheran underpinnings of Bultmann's thought and test Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic in relation to two classic Lutheran theological foci: the crucified Christ's resurrection from the dead and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, both in relation to Luther's emphasis on the preached Word.

Bultmann as biblical demythologizer par excellence

Bultmann is perhaps best known in theological circles for his classic essay, *New Testament and Mythology* (1941). This essay, written to the Confessing Church when Adolf Hitler's regime of terror and genocide was in full force, argues that it is impossible for the modern person to accept the biblical worldview. Therefore, Bultmann proposes a way to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ for a world far removed the worldview of the biblical writers. The biblical worldview consists of a three-story universe, with heaven above and hell below. This worldview presupposes God's super-

1. The simplest definition of kerygma based on Bultmann is "proclamation!" To say that Bultmann is a kerygmatic theologian means that he is focused, first and foremost, on proclaiming Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Bultmann's work focused on proclaiming the Gospel to an age he believed could no longer accept the mythical worldview of the Bible. Therefore, he sought to proclaim the kernel of the Gospel message, while stripping away the mythical wrappings that surround the Christ event in the New Testament.

natural intervention in creation and the occurrences of miracles that is markedly different from the modern Western industrial worldview dominated by scientific discovery and empiricism.

Since the scientific worldview does not accept supernaturalism in any fashion, Bultmann writes: "We can only completely accept the mythical world picture or completely reject it."² This observation may make it seem like the Gospel message is doomed to fail from the outset if the Gospel message is tied to an ancient worldview and the modern industrialized world has moved on. Conversely, Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic argues that it is unnecessary to accept the worldview of the biblical writers in order to proclaim the Gospel.

Bultmann focused on the centrality of Jesus Christ and him crucified. He argued that forcing oneself to assent to the ancient biblical worldview in order to accept the Gospel message was a form of works righteousness.

We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and

2. Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 9.

wonder world of the New Testament. And if we suppose that we can do so ourselves, we must be clear that we can represent this as the attitude of Christian faith only by making the Christian proclamation unintelligible and impossible for our contemporaries.³

Bultmann's demythologizing method is deeply pastoral at its core because he seeks to speak the Gospel's liberating power to people formed in the scientific worldview, yet without making the scientific worldview one's god.

The worldview of the Western world inherited from the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment should not be absolutized (as Richard Dawkins would do today), because the scientific worldview is ultimately a human construct. If justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone has any application to the modern, industrialized world, then justification as God's act in Christ must be total: no amount of works righteousness, no matter how subtle, can be allowed to obscure the sheer gift of the Gospel. Bultmann retrieves and proclaims the gift of the Gospel message in his teaching, preaching, and writing.

[F]aith itself demands to be free from any world-view produced by man's thought, whether mythological or scientific. For all world-views objectivize the world and ignore or eliminate the significance of the encounters in our personal existence.⁴

When freed from all objectifying worldviews, the person of faith can hear the radical gift of the Gospel message.

Bultmann was attempting to free the Gospel from any form of legalism. Calling this bold attempt "demythologizing" can sound negative if his hermeneutic is misunderstood. Bultmann might seem to be saying that the biblical "myth" is something negative that needs to be discarded. In actuality, Bultmann sought to remove false stumbling blocks for modern people, so that the kernel of the biblical narrative, Jesus Christ and him crucified, could be proclaimed for a context radically removed from the biblical worldview. Bultmann's strong rootedness in Paul and Luther becomes evident. The Marburg professor writes:

Indeed, de-mythologizing is a task parallel to that performed by Paul and Luther in their doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of the law. More precisely, de-mythologizing is the radical application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge and thought. Like the doctrine of justification, de-mythologizing destroys every longing for security. There is no difference between security based on good works and security built on objectifying knowledge.⁵

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Longing for security through one's own effort and failing to trust in God and God's future for creation is part and parcel to being existentially estranged from God as the grounds of being and meaning because of original sin.

Finite human beings cannot avoid existential estrangement because we continually violate the First Commandment of having no other gods than the LORD (Exod 20:3). Thus, Bultmann's demythologizing method is a return to the First Commandment, admonishing and comforting believers to trust God rather than the false existential security found in works righteousness of any kind. Bultmann challenges Christians to trust that we are freed in Christ as proclaimed in the church community to live into God's future. Put simply, we can get over ourselves and live for our neighbors! Bultmann demythologizes as an exegete, theologian, and preacher solely for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel.

Bultmann's demythologizing and Luther's theology of the cross

The positive nature of Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic becomes clear as we explore this hermeneutic in relation to Martin Luther's theology of the cross. Luther was, first and foremost, preacher of the cross of Jesus Christ. The Gospel-centered theology of the cross took precedence over everything else, and led to his own form of demythologizing in the church of his day. Luther called the church to return to the proclamation of Jesus Christ and him crucified, rather than exploiting faithful Christians through the selling of indulgences. He understood the point of the Scriptures to "bear forth" the crucified Christ, so the Scriptures were not a means unto themselves. Rather, they were a means to an end, and that end is the Word on the cross, Jesus Christ.⁶

Bultmann's demythologizing project radicalizes Luther's cross-centered reading of the Scriptures. The Scriptures, for both Luther and Bultmann, are faith testimonies. God's revelation in history is crucial in the sense that God is decisively seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, making the charge of Docetism by Bultmann's

3. Ibid., 4–5.

4. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 83.

5. Ibid., 84.

6. See especially Martin Luther, "Prefaces to St. James and St. Jude" in *Luther's Works 35: Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 35: 396.

critics unwarranted.⁷ Historical findings can neither prove nor disprove faith, and modern people should not be expected to accept the notion of a supernatural interventionist God to be faithful Christians today. Instead, proclaiming Jesus Christ and him crucified is the key to God's revelation and action in history, in order that the sinner is led through the preached Word in the church community to the mystery of God's gracious and forgiving Gospel in Christ.

The Christ event, meaning the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, is of decisive importance for Christians, and is the basis for living boldly into God's future amid an ambiguous and often disheartening world. Proclaiming Jesus Christ and him crucified is the central task of the Christian church, and this story grasps believers at the deepest level of their being. The worldview of the biblical writers is secondary; the Christ event is primary! Just as Luther boldly preached the crucified Christ in the sixteenth century, Bultmann boldly preaches the crucified Christ for the modern world.

Proclaiming the Christ event makes the Bible the Word of God for Christians, because the kerygma is an urgent existential address to the one who hears the Word. Luther's notion of *pro me* accords with his theology of the cross and is firmly embedded in Bultmann's theology as well. Jesus Christ strikes the hearer through the preached Word, causing the hearer to experience life and existence anew and to serve neighbors near and far. Wholeness in Christ and service for Christ's kingdom stand at the heart of the kingdom of God. The hearer confronted and changed by the preached Word is challenged by Jesus Christ to continual decision either for or against the kingdom of God. Bultmann writes,

The call to the Kingdom of God is accordingly...an invitation which is at the same time a demand. Those who are invited must put the Kingdom of God above all other things. It makes its claim not on man's frivolous desire for pleasure but on his will. The word of invitation is at the same time a word of warning...A man therefore should think seriously before he decides to have anything to do with this invitation. A ready acceptance in words has no value; an act of will is required.⁸

To be confronted by the preached Word to decision for or against the kingdom of God is a question of ultimacy, to use a term favored by Paul Tillich. Where does one place one's ultimate trust? In finite, transient things or in God as decisively known in Jesus Christ? The Christ kerygma is a call of repentance and hope: repentance from placing ultimate trust in the finite things of this world and hope in God's redeeming future for all creation.

Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic is in the tradition of Luther's theology of the cross and is intrinsic to the existential

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urgency flowing throughout Bultmann's thought. The kingdom of God is too important to be bogged down with a worldview that people steeped in scientific discovery and empirical reason find outdated. It is as if Bultmann is saying "get over yourselves and your longings for security! The kingdom of God is here and is now, present in the church community gathered around the preached Word. Re-orient your life toward God and follow Jesus Christ." If these sentences are in line with Bultmann's thinking, then he is an indispensable prophet for the church. We next test Bultmann's demythologizing method, first in relation to the symbol and event of the crucified Christ's resurrection and second with the Lord's Supper, two classical loci of Lutheran theology.

Bultmann's kerygmatic theology of resurrection

Bultmann focuses on Christ's resurrection as a matter of proclamation rather than an event that can be proven by historical investigation. Modern people cannot assent to any kind of literal resurrection, according to Bultmann. If Christ's resurrection is "over-literalized," it becomes an absurd stumbling block to hearing the proclamation that God is *pro me* in Jesus Christ. The question becomes how one is to proclaim the centrality of the crucified Christ's resurrection from the dead for the modern world dominated by the scientific worldview of the Enlightenment. Bultmann's answer to this question is to center theological exegesis on the kerygma "Jesus is risen." He rejects the resurrection as an objective, historical event. Rather, Christ's resurrection is a matter of faith alone that strikes the conscience of the believer and causes believers to understand themselves anew.

The resurrection becomes meaningful only in so far as one's innermost self is transformed by the kerygma. Bultmann observes:

7. For a recent argument about Bultmann's supposed docetic leanings, see Paul R. Hinlicky, "Dogmatics as Paradigm," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56 (2017): 224.

8. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 33.

Nothing preceding the faith which acknowledges the risen Christ can give insight into the reality of *Christ's resurrection*. The resurrection cannot—in spite of 1 Cor 15:3–8—be demonstrated or made plausible as an objectively ascertainable fact on the basis of which one could believe. But insofar as it or the risen Christ is present in the proclaiming word, it can be believed—and only so can it be believed. Belief in the resurrection and the faith that Christ himself, yes God Himself, speaks in the proclaimed word (2 Cor 5:20) are identical. For in the proclamation Christ is not in the same way present as a great historical person is present in his work and its historical after-effects. For what is here involved is not an influence that takes effect in the history of the human mind; what does take place is that a historical person and his faith are raised to the rank of eschatological event. The word which makes this proclamation is itself part of this event; and this word, in contrast to all other historical tradition, accosts the hearer as a personal challenge. If he heeds it as the word spoken to him, adjudicating to him death and thereby life, then he believes in the risen Christ.⁹

The kerygma Bultmann emphasizes is an existential event free from any self-justification through the work of intellectual assent. Even if one is convinced by critical reading of the Gospels and Pauline letters of the literal nature of Christ's resurrection, one's faith is not thereby proved or disproved. Faith instead becomes real through encountering Christ in the preached Word: "The risen Christ himself encounters the hearer in the apostle."¹⁰ Bultmann rejects the historicism that has dominated academic discourse since the Enlightenment when addressing Christ's resurrection; the eschatological nature of the resurrection is brought to the forefront through proclamation. "Christ, the crucified and risen one encounters us in the word of proclamation, and nowhere else. And faith in this word is the true faith of Easter."¹¹

The preached Word is an event of death and life addressed to the hearer. The hearer is then faced with a choice of deepest existential consequence: accept the kerygma as an address directed to oneself and find life or reject the kerygma and remain in existential death. The Gospel becomes real through proclamation because it is an existential event with both individual and corporate components. Individually, the hearer is confronted. This confrontation takes place in the assembly where the Word is proclaimed, thus emphasizing that encounter with the risen Christ transforms individuals and communities alike. Bultmann's position is liberating for questioning and questing people of faith in the modern world. Trusting in the proclamation, which one is enabled to hear by the

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power of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12), leads to new life in the risen Christ.

Bultmann's stress on Christ's resurrection in relation to proclamation is controversial. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that Christ's resurrection is a matter of Christian *faith*, not objective *fact*. The Christ event is life-changing for believers because the kerygma strikes believers at the center of their selves and leads to radical trust in God's future. Hence, Bultmann is anchored in the Lutheran notion of the external Word, while stressing the importance of *encountering* Christ crucified and risen decisively in preaching and the church community.

Bultmann's theology of the external Word stresses that Christ's presence cannot be proven but must be trusted/encountered in one's conscience and in the neighbor. Here Luther's theology of justification is re-interpreted for the modern world. Christ encounters the hearer as law and Gospel, the existential decision for either life or death. The crucified Christ has been exalted to the status of Lord. This is the principal meaning of the symbol and event of "resurrection." Bultmann's kerygma-centered theology is deeply faithful to the biblical witness as is seen in Paul and John. According to the biblical witness, the resurrection is a matter of faith rather than fact. "Blessed are those who believe without seeing me" (John 20:29). Bultmann follows the biblical narrative by being anchored in the central Christian symbols, while unfolding their meaning for a worldview drastically removed from that of the Bible.

To argue for any kind of literalism surrounding Christ's resurrection, or to attempt empirically to discover exactly what happened on the first Easter morning, is to revert to the false security of intellectual works, and to unnecessarily burden believers' consciences by attempting to probe mysteries that can never be solved this side of the Last Day. Rather, the decisive importance of the Easter event is this proclamation: God is *for me, for us, and for the world* in the resurrection of the crucified Christ! When the resurrected Christ is heard and encountered in community

9. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 1: 305–306.

10. *Ibid.*, 1: 305.

11. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, 39.

through the preached Word as something more than literal, the hearer can encounter Christ addressing him or her with God's life, grace, and freedom. When hearers encounter this address as directed to them and are transformed by this address, hearers have faith and receive the gift of the Word proclaimed, the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Bultmann's understanding of the Lord's Supper as the preached Word made visible

The second Lutheran case study for testing Bultmann's demythologizing hermeneutic is found in the Lord's Supper. According to the so-called "demythologizing essay," Bultmann does not believe it is possible for modern people to believe Jesus Christ is literally and substantially present in the Lord's Supper.

One thing is certain: it [the New Testament] cannot be saved by reducing the amount of mythology through picking and choosing. We cannot, for example, reject the notions of the physical ill-effects of unworthily receiving the Lord's Supper and baptism on behalf of the dead and yet retain the idea that physical food has a pneumatic effect. For one mode of representation underlies all New Testament assumptions about baptism and the Lord's Supper; and it is precisely this mode of representation in general, not any one notion in particular, that we can no longer accept.¹²

For Bultmann, to adhere to the Lutheran position of Christ's true, bodily presence in the Lord's Supper based on the words of institution in a literal, empiricist, and positivistic fashion would succumb again to mythological, pre-scientific thinking.

Since Bultmann saw mythological thinking as a stumbling block to the contemporary proclamation of the Gospel, his goal was to completely strip away the mythological wrappings of the Christian faith, in order that the kernel of the Gospel could be heard in a secular, scientific age. However, Bultmann's powerful, robust emphasis of the proclaimed Word is most compatible with Luther's insistence on Christ's bodily presence in the Lord's Supper.

The traditional Lutheran position on the Lord's Supper maintains that Christ is truly present as bread and wine in the Supper, and that both believers and unbelievers receive the body of the Lord, believers to their salvation and unbelievers to their damnation. It is this particular aspect of Luther's understanding to which Bultmann most vocally objects. We must ask, along Bultmannian lines, if Luther's understanding can be re-interpreted existentially. The answer is "yes," if salvation is understood in terms of existential wholeness and damnation is understood in terms of existential emptiness and despair.

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Christ's presence through the preached Word sees, touches, and tastes the tangible embodiment of Christ's presence in the elements of the Lord's Supper. The person who does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord and the existential wholeness coming from this confession of faith would not experience the salvation offered in this sacrament. "[I]n the Lord's Supper the death of Christ is ever and again proclaimed (1 Cor 11:26); whoever partakes of the Supper participates in the crucified body and shed blood (1 Cor 10:16). But then the cross of Christ is also present in the life of believers."¹³

If the central aspect of the celebration of the Lord's Supper is the proclamation of the death of the Lord, this proclamation is embodied when it is seen, taken, touched, and tasted in the sacramental elements. There is a *sacramental union* of Christ's presence and the bread and wine, as Luther taught. The supernatural need not be invoked, in order to hold to Luther's essential understanding of the Lord's Supper while re-interpreting it in line with Bultmann's theology. Rather, in the Sacrament, the words "this is my body, given for you," "this is my blood, shed for you" point back to a theology of the proclaimed Word, because it is Jesus Christ who is being proclaimed in the sacramental celebration. The sacrament is thus a "visible word," in the tradition of Augustine. No contradiction need exist between the sacrament as visible word and Bultmann's demythologizing program.

Modern Christians steeped in a scientific worldview can faithfully celebrate the Supper without worrying about recourse to a mythological worldview, if the Supper is understood as integrally related to the proclaimed Word. The Supper becomes an eschatological event, because it is the tangible symbol of Christ's true presence in the church community. Bultmann observes:

The eschatological event which is Jesus Christ happens here and now as the Word is being preached (2 Cor 6:2; John 5:24) regardless of whether this Word is accepted or rejected. The believer has passed from death to life, and the unbeliever is judged; the wrath of God rests upon him, says John (John 3:18, 36; 9:39). The word of the preaching spreads death and life, says Paul (2 Cor 2:15f.).¹⁴

The Lord's Supper is the tangible embodiment of the preached Word, because the eschatological event of Jesus Christ proclaimed

12. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, 8.

13. *Ibid.*, 35.

14. *Ibid.*, 81.

is seen, touched, and tasted in the bread and wine, when the words “the body of Christ, given for you; the blood of Christ, shed for you” are spoken in relation to the elements given to communicants.

Conclusion: Bultmann’s continuing theological relevance

Rudolf Bultmann’s theology of the Word, demythologizing the worldview of the Bible so that the kernel of the Gospel message can be expressed for the modern world, is his best gift to the church catholic. He strips away the stumbling block of the antiquated worldview of the biblical writers, in order that the true stumbling block of the theology of the cross—Jesus Christ and him crucified—can take center stage.

Bultmann’s powerful emphasis on proclamation is liberating because he continually directs the reader/hearer to God and God’s future rather than the false security of finite possessions, aspirations, anxieties, or possible intellectual securities. He centers on radically trusting God’s promises amid life’s uncertainties, anxieties, and the inevitable estrangement from ourselves, from one another, and from God that comes with being human.

Bultmann’s theology of radical trust is a Lutheran theology of the Word anchored in justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone apart from works of the law, and says that God is trustworthy, gracious, and life-giving. As Bultmann writes in his *Marburg Sermons*:

If God clearly cares for the life of nature so that what is necessary to sustain it is always there and it may live free from fear, how much more shall we not live without fear in the assurance that God will unfailingly supply what we need? The insecurity of our life should not tempt us to be anxious: for what is decisively necessary is not affected by this insecurity. Hence in the midst of our insecurity we should know ourselves to be secure, whatever may happen to us. We are to realize that even the hairs of our head are all numbered (Matt 10:10).¹⁵

Luther famously wrote, *crux probat omnia*, “the cross puts everything to the test.”¹⁶ Bultmann takes Luther’s words seriously and

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places the crucified Christ at the center of his demythologizing hermeneutic for proclaiming God’s trustworthiness through the crucified and risen Christ to a world far removed from the biblical worldview.

Trusting in the proclamation of God’s future through the eschatological event of Jesus Christ and him crucified frees questioning and questing Christians for service to neighbors near and far. Such proclamation, stripped from all superficial biblical literalism and false stumbling blocks, has special significance again now in an age of declining church membership and religious affiliation. Bultmann’s theology of radical trust in God provides a radical theology of Christ’s resurrection through proclamation and connects with Luther’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper. The pious professor of Marburg, Rudolf Karl Bultmann, continues to matter for the church’s ongoing task of proclamation. Bultmann’s theological writings deserve to be read, studied, and inwardly digested yet today.

15. Rudolf Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond: Marburg Sermons* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 33.

16. WA 179, 31, as cited in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 7.