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# Rudolf Bultmann and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism

By JOHN H. ELLIOTT

**I**N the fullness of time God sent forth His Son, a pre-existent divine Being, who appears on earth as a man. He dies the death of a sinner on the cross and makes atonement for the sins of men. His resurrection marks the beginning of the cosmic catastrophe . . . all who belong to Christ's Church and are joined to the Lord by Baptism and the Eucharist are certain of resurrection to salvation. . . ."

In these terms Rudolf Bultmann reconstructs the credo of the Christian church and documents it with no fewer than 16 Biblical references, only to pronounce the condemning verdict: the language of mythology, a perpetuation of Jewish apocalyptic and Gnostic redemption myths which make the Christian kerygma incomprehensible, incredible, and untenable for the modern man.<sup>1</sup>

We do not want to ignore Bultmann's concern to make the Gospel relevant to the people of our day. On the other hand we must question any approach, despite its awesome erudition, which would divest the church of those confessions which are such an essential expression of her faith and life.

To this end we shall examine the Baptismal theology of this contemporary interpreter of Christianity. After reviewing the fruits of his investigation of the New

Testament concept of Holy Baptism, we shall consider his own statement of the contemporary problem regarding the Christian kerygma and the sacrament. Finally we shall note four primary principles which summarize the bulk of criticism directed against Bultmann's method and conclusions.

## HOLY BAPTISM AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Rudolf Bultmann's investigation of the significance and development of Holy Baptism within the New Testament period includes five main areas: the Palestinian congregation, the Hellenistic church in extra-Pauline material, the Hellenistic church in Pauline literature, the Hellenistic church in Johannine literature, and the ancient church.

Basic to an understanding of any sacramental theology are the connotations of the words "church" and "sacrament." Accordingly, Bultmann defines "church" as the eschatological community:

When the salvation-occurrence [the life and death of Jesus] is proclaimed, it becomes present reality to all who hear. . . . This preached word calls and gathers men into the ecclesia, the Church, the Congregation of those who are called and (who are) saints. As the eschatological congregation its existence belongs to the eschatological-salvation occurrence. . . . It appears as no new phenomenon of the world but as belonging to a new aeon. . . . This eschatological congregation separates

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1957), tr. Reginald H. Fuller, pp. 2 ff.

itself from the rest of the world to confess its faith in Christ as Lord in cultic gathering.<sup>2</sup>

Defining the term "sacrament" Bultmann states (p. 112):

(It is) an act which by natural means puts supranatural powers into effect, usually by the use of spoken words which accompany the act and release those powers by the mere utterance of their prescribed wording. . . . The concept "sacrament" rests upon the assumption that under certain conditions supranatural powers can be bound to natural objects of the world and to spoken words as their vehicles and mediators.

1. Bultmann's first observation is that very early these two phenomena became mutually dependent. Initiation into this eschatological community was accomplished through the rite of Baptism. This was the first purpose of the act.

2. Nor was this Baptism different from John the Baptizer's. Both were "baths of purification (closely connected with repentance for the coming reign of God)."

3. Though both were similar to Jewish proselyte baptism, their difference lay in the fact that whereas proselyte baptism freed man from ritual defilement, Christian Baptism, like that of John, promised purity from sin and made a person a member of the eschatological community.

4. The phrase "for forgiveness of sin" was likely true of Christian Baptism from the very beginning, as was its sacramental character.

5. The belief in the exorcistic effect of Baptism is probably of very early origin.

6. Baptism provided the church with a point of departure for the development of a cult of her own. (Pp. 37—57)

In discussing the development from primitive to Hellenistic Christianity, Bultmann notes that whereas the former ceased to be dominated by the eschatological expectation and the philosophy of life which that implied, in the latter there developed a new pattern of culture and piety centered in the cultus. Gnostic categories begin to be used to describe the church, the sacraments, and our Lord.

1. Extra-Pauline literature states that through Baptism an individual enters the congregation and thus enters into a relationship with Christ. Here the original bath of purification and rite of initiation becomes a means for participation in salvation.

2. Indicative of the theological development of Baptism within the Hellenistic church, Bultmann observes, are numerous items concerning the rite and performance of the sacrament.

A. Baptism is normally consummated as a bath in which the one receiving Baptism is completely submerged, in "living" (running) water, if possible.

B. In case of emergency, water is poured on the head three times.

C. The one baptizing names over the one being baptized the name of "the Lord Jesus Christ," later expanded into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

D. The one being baptized, on his part, either just before or just after the bath of Baptism, speaks the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord." Thereby he belongs to "those who call upon the name of the Lord." Bultmann (pp. 153 ff.) is favorably disposed toward Oscar Cullmann's con-

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, tr. Kendrick Grobel, I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 307 ff.

struction of the questioning and answering previous to Baptism as practiced in the primitive rites: "What is to prevent (this one from being baptized)?" . . . "It is permitted" (nothing prohibits).

E. Though in the earliest period Baptism immediately followed conversion, in this later time some instruction preceded the rite.

F. The act of the laying on of hands is a moot question. It was probably a regular component of the bath from the very beginning.

G. Only adults were baptized.

H. The agents of the sacrament had no priestly quality.

Considering the Hellenistic church in Pauline literature, Bultmann (p. 144) sees the apostle introducing, from Gnostic sources, two additional and extremely significant concepts to the church's understanding of Holy Baptism.

1. Baptism is not only the means by which an individual enters the church and the realm of salvation, but it actually effects an involvement in the very body of Christ.

2. This sacrament is an act whereby the baptized is involved in the very death and resurrection of Christ. Bultmann sees in this tendency of St. Paul both a danger and a benefit. Negatively, Christian existence might be understood to "rest upon Hellenistic sacramental magic entirely instead of being understood as eschatological existence." Positively, Paul also presents the possibility of interpreting Christianity as an "existence determined by Christ's death and resurrection, and hence of understanding the sacrament as an actualization, here and now, of the occurrence of salvation."

Including St. Paul's additions to Hellenistic Christianity's doctrine of Holy Baptism, we note the further development (pp. 135—140):

1. The first effect of Baptism is the purification from one's sins.

2. From the "naming of the name" comes the result that "by it the candidate is stamped as the property of the *Kyrios* and placed under His protection. This *sphragis* or seal has two effects. Negatively, it drives out the evil spirits (regarded as the cause of sin) by its exorcistic power. Positively, it puts the baptized under the protection of the *Kyrios* for the future and secures them against demonic influences.

3. Through the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit is bestowed. Any Baptism which does not bestow the Spirit is not considered a proper sacrament.

4. Through Baptism the recipient participates in the death and resurrection of Christ.

5. This mystery interpretation of Baptism can thus have as its result a "rebirth."

6. Through this sacrament the baptized is brought into the body of Christ, into eschatological existence.

Interpreting the evidence at this point, Bultmann (p. 312) draws the conclusion that

Baptism is an objective occurrence which happens to the baptized, not simply a symbol for a subjective process within him. As an objective event, baptism certifies to him participation in the salvation-occurrence present for him just as the proclaiming word does . . . only this time with special reference to *him*, the one being baptized, as valid *for him*.

Though Bultmann makes an unhappy equation of the proclaimed Word with Holy Baptism as *the* God-given means for entrance into the eschatological community, nevertheless, Baptism is given *some* significance. As Bultmann (p.312) explains the act, however, the reader realizes that this significance is less than minimal.

Baptism obviously plays a subordinate role to the word. . . . The appropriation on his part [the baptized] is the same as the appropriation of the salvation-occurrence when it comes through the preached word. . . . Baptism is an act of faith confessing itself.

In Professor Bultmann's opinion, in place of a means of grace, we now have in Baptism nothing more than human response!

The critic, in discussing Bultmann's conclusions drawn from his investigation of Johannine material, could cover everything well with one statement: there is little, if any, sacramental theology explicated in this corpus. All traditionally accepted sacramental allusions he dismisses as "later ecclesiastical redactions and interpolations." He concludes:

1. The only reference to rebirth is not through Holy Baptism but through Jesus' Word. The sacraments are superfluous.<sup>3</sup>

2. The only avenue for the Holy Spirit is the avenue of proclamation.<sup>4</sup>

Treating the ancient church, Bultmann states (p.112):

In consequence of the delay of the expected parousia, the transcendent character of the Church gradually comes to be seen

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes: Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952), p. 357.

<sup>4</sup> Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, II, 90.

not so much in its reference to the future as in its present possession of institutions which are already mediating transcendent powers in the present: sacramental cultus and finally a priestly office.

In the church, after St. Paul and St. John, Bultmann holds (pp.112 ff.), the meaning of the sacraments, as the meaning of the Christian's new way of life, came to be understood as involving not so much the new eschatological existence as rather a present guarantee of future salvation. In this emergent institutionalism the church is seen as the dispenser of salvation and the guarantor of the efficacy of the sacraments.

1. The emphasis upon legalism reduced the significance of Christ's activity to merely being present in the sacraments. (P.202)

2. The emphasis upon moralism and ethical perfection resulted in a corruption of the understanding of grace and, with it, a loss of the sense of the lasting efficacy of Holy Baptism. (P.236)

3. Accordingly, penance as an act is raised by the church to sacramental level to complete the character of Holy Baptism. (Pp.218,236)

#### HOLY BAPTISM AND THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

As soon as one leaves the pages of Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* with its extensive survey of the early church's theology of Baptism, one locates further references to Baptism by Bultmann only with great difficulty. In his other works and periodical articles his references to Holy Baptism are limited explanations of his material in *Theology of the New Testament*. These appear to be quite re-

dundant and in no way applied to contemporary Christianity.<sup>5</sup> His attitude toward the sacraments might well be summarized in his classic statement of the task of demythology:

Modern man is confronted by a curious dilemma. He may regard himself as pure nature or as pure spirit. . . . In either case, however, man is essentially a unity. He bears the sole responsibility for his own feeling, thinking, and willing. He is not, as the NT regards him, the victim of a strange dichotomy which exposes him to the interference of powers outside himself. . . . Thus he finds what the NT has to say about "Spirit" and the sacraments utterly strange and incomprehensible. Biological man cannot see how a supernatural entity like the *pneuma* can penetrate within the close texture of his natural powers and set to work within him. . . . Conscious as he is of his own moral responsibility, he cannot conceive how baptism in water can convey a mysterious something which is henceforth the agent of all his decisions and actions. . . . He cannot conceive how anyone can be baptized for the dead.<sup>6</sup>

Criticism, however, is no substitute for explication. And in Bultmann's writings explanations of his position on the sacrament of Baptism are lacking. Conclusions regarding Bultmann's position over against Holy Baptism can only be drawn, therefore, from a combination of a few clear sources and a number of vague allusions.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, tr. James C. G. Greig (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 144.

— "Humanism and Christianity," *The Journal of Religion*, 32 (April 1952), 77—86, p. 85.

— *The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), pp. 51—55.

<sup>6</sup> Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 6.

A Christian approach toward the sacrament of Holy Baptism would begin with this act's relation to the life and death of our Blessed Lord. To this concern Bultmann certainly speaks (p. 36):

The cross becomes present reality in the sacraments. In baptism men and women are baptized into Christ's death and crucified with him. . . .

An apparent agreement, however, is quickly dissolved into a wide gulf when Bultmann (pp. 36 ff.) proceeds to explain the historical character of the cross and the resurrection:

By giving up Jesus to be crucified, God has set up the cross for us. To believe in the cross of Christ does not mean to concern ourselves with a mythical process wrought outside of us and our world, or with an objective event turned by God to our advantage, but rather to make the cross of Christ our own, to undergo crucifixion with him. . . . In its redemptive aspect the cross of Christ is no mere mythical event, but a permanent historical fact originating in the past historical event which is the crucifixion of Jesus. The abiding significance of the cross is that it is the judgement of the world, the judgement and the deliverance of man. . . .

In this passage it becomes clear that the death with which Baptism involves an individual is not the once-for-all death of Christ on Calvary but "his cross." Logically this means that Baptism incorporates a man into his own death. There is no irruption of the transcendent into his world and life. There is no bestowal of forgiveness, of grace and power, from the God above and beyond and within him but merely a further motion on the part of man to manifest his "making the decision."

Ian Henderson, in evaluating Bultmann's thesis, points out that Bultmann can arrive at these conclusions because he has postulated certain differentiations among the words "mythological" (expressions explaining the otherworldly in terms of this world), "historical" (*historisch*, a past event), and "eschatological" (*geschichtlich*, a reality present and decisive for all history). In the terminology of Bultmann, he explains, "the mythological is there to show that the historical is also eschatological."<sup>7</sup> When the mythological is no longer effective in doing this, it can be omitted.

Bultmann follows this process in treating the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus. The resurrection was never *historisch* but has been contained as a part of the Christian kerygma to point to the eschatological character of the cross. Thus the resurrection is a mythological element. Hence, where for the church Holy Baptism joins man with the very death and resurrection of the Son of God, with an event by which he, no matter how many millennia removed from the Palestinian occurrence, was infused with the very power of the forgiving and rising God, Bultmann would now dismiss such a mythology in favor of a more rational explanation of the God-sinner relationship. In place of Holy Baptism as the means by which sinful man is initially incorporated into the "grace-event" Bultmann would insert the act of preaching. There is only one way that man comes to believe in the saving efficacy of the cross: Christ "meets us in the preaching as one crucified and risen.

He meets us in the Word of preaching and nowhere else."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in a comparison of Bultmann's system with traditional Christian formulation, Baptism is relegated to a position as inferior to the preached Word, an act merely confirming a decision previously made as a reaction to this preached Word. Secondly, Baptism cannot be understood in the catholic sense as a channel of divine power. Thirdly, the existential moment is encountered only when man consciously responds to God's call with an obedience, a decision. Hence infant Baptism is pointless, for there can be no conscious decision. Fourthly, all other attempts to describe this sacrament in traditional terminology involve an employment of mythological elements which the modern mind cannot possibly accept.

#### BULTMANN AND HIS CRITICS

Any critique of Rudolf Bultmann, it would seem, should acknowledge his contributions to exegetical and historical theology, his insights into New Testament language and thought, and his sincere desire to share the event of salvation with a hostile and unattentive generation. On the other hand, it is evident that he has approached the portals of the Holy with a different key. The question for the critic to ask is not: "Do we dare use the key?" but "Does the key work?"

Those who would question the effectiveness of the Bultmann key are many. Their criticisms might be summarized under four presuppositions with which Bultmann operates:

1. The harmful and dispensable character of myth.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 41.

2. The requirement of an existential exegesis.
3. The insignificance of history.
4. The sovereign transcendency of God.

Geraint Vaughan Jones feels that Bultmann has failed to draw "a clear distinction between myth, symbol, and metaphor."<sup>9</sup> Julius Schniewind, Ernst Lohmeyer, and Helmut Thielicke, however, would contend that, when referring to the divine-human encounter, these are the only categories in which one can speak.<sup>10</sup>

Considering Bultmann's employment of "existential" exegesis, John Carroll Futrell refers to Barth's criticism that "with existential categories he is confined with *a priori* limits as an exegete,"<sup>11</sup> "Decision," observes Gustaf Wingren, is the word which best summarizes Bultmann's eschatology. This existentialist keyword, he feels, preconditions many of Bultmann's conclusions.<sup>12</sup> It is this emphasis upon faith as "decision" which Oscar Cullmann points out as the basis of his interpretation of the New Testament picture of Baptism, limiting it to adults and thus disregarding the significance of *gratia praeveniens* inherent in the sacred act.

Among many others Wingren, Hender-son, Schniewind, Thielicke, and Cullmann all feel that Bultmann is hardly doing justice to the historical character of Chris-

tianity. Cullmann analyzes his position regarding history to be such that

Any other martyrdom could, in principle, have exactly the same effect, when there is an encounter between it and ourselves. Any historical objectified death outside of ourselves is mythological.

In reality, however,

the historical and temporal element distinguishes Judaism and Christianity from all other religions and, consequently, one may not eliminate it without attacking the very substance of either.<sup>13</sup>

Cullmann, in his useful monograph, *Baptism in the New Testament*, points out how essential a proper appreciation of history is for the understanding of Holy Baptism:

The essence of Baptism is anchored in the historical work of Christ. . . . The grace of Baptism . . . is a once-for-all event entirely dependent on Golgotha and also a new and special manifestation of the same *gratia praeveniens*. The divine act of salvation advances into the time of the Church. . . . He who sits now at God's right hand permits the person being baptized at this particular place, within His Church, to participate in what was done *ephapax* on Good Friday and Easter.<sup>14</sup>

Bultmann's excessive emphasis upon the sovereign transcendency of God possibly provides the reason for his disregard of the sacraments, according to the Roman Catholic scholar Leopold Malevez. At great length he discusses Bultmann's rejection of

<sup>9</sup> Geraint Vaughan Jones, *Christology and Myth in the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956).

<sup>10</sup> *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 45—101.

<sup>11</sup> John Carroll Futrell, "Myth and Message," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXI (1959), 283—315.

<sup>12</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, tr. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> Oscar Cullmann, "Bultmann's Concept of Myth and the New Testament," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXVII, 1 (Jan. 1956), 13—24.

<sup>14</sup> Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1956), pp. 33 f.



the idea of a possible "irruption of the divine into the human sphere." Bultmann's theory that "the divine action takes place only within the existential encounter of faith—that there is no materialization of the divine in 'things,'" manifests a high sense of transcendence and "hostility to all ideas of a 'divine condescension.'"<sup>15</sup> Malevez concludes (p. 155):

the Christianity of Bultmann suffers from this cruel poverty. It is reduced to preaching; there is no worship; no real sacrament. . . . It is confined to giving us a certain self-knowledge of our present condition without any firm prospects for the future.

Criticizing this emphasis of Bultmann upon divine transcendence in terms of a "closed world-order" and the necessary nexus of science and faith, Herman Ridderbos, professor of New Testament studies at Kampen, Netherlands, would concur that in his concern to preserve the scandal of the cross Bultmann is in great peril of denying the scandal of the Incarnation.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Leopold Malevez, *The Christian Message and Myth*, tr. Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1958), pp. 142, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Length prohibits a more extensive critique and survey. For an excellent discussion the reader is referred to Malevez, just mentioned, and Herman Ridderbos, *Bultmann*, trans. David H. Freeman, International Library of Philosophy and Theology, Modern Thinkers Series (Grand Rapids: The Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 28 ff.

## CONCLUSION

The Christian church knows only one God, the God who acts, the God who has moved within history while yet always above it. Bultmann's rejection of this historical event-symbol in favor of the idea-symbol and his exchange of a primitive cosmology for an existential anthropology result in the eventual error of extremism—docetism, deism, and the pillaging of the Holy Place of those means of grace through which the Eternal I Am continues to come to us.

Is this the only course for the theologian who would "get through" to those who have ears but hear not? Has not Bultmann thrown out the baby with the bath? Certainly the church is intent upon communicating existentially to the human situation. But is she communicating the Christian message if she would sacrifice the means of grace for the sake of a "demythologized, reasonable gospel"? Our Lord's demand for faith, decision, and obedience is not an imperative without an indicative. Through His sacred means of grace that indicative is always before us, and any attempt to relegate or eliminate the significance of any of these blessed sacraments can only be viewed as a danger to the church's catholicity, a loss in the uniqueness of the message, and a distortion of the activity of the Spirit who has preserved it.

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