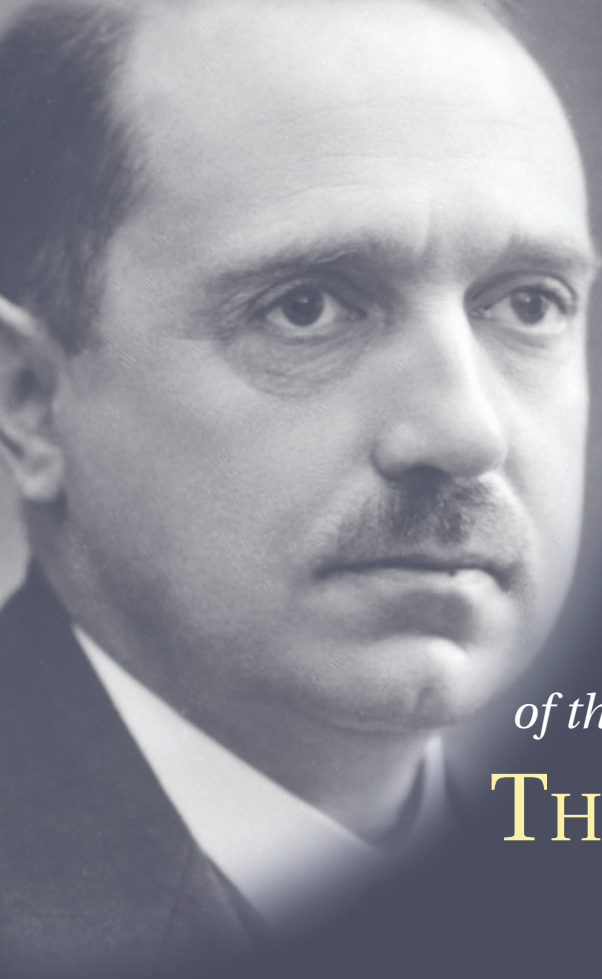




MAKERS
of the MODERN
THEOLOGICAL
MIND

RUDOLF
BULTMANN

Morris Ashcraft

Edited by Bob E. Patterson

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Makers of the Modern Theological Mind
Rudolf Bultmann

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Dedicated to the memory of my beloved
mother Ida Matthews Ashcraft

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Publisher's Preface (2016)

The *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* series was first published in the early 1970s and comprises eighteen volumes, each looking at the life and work of a highly influential modern theologian. Today's reader may wonder why we are reprinting these books after so many years, especially since much has been written in the intervening decades on most of these theologians. The answer is that Hendrickson Publishers remains committed to serving the church in theological education, and we believe the original series editor's purpose still holds true: "*These books will give a new generation the opportunity to be exposed to significant minds.*"

While readers may notice that some word choices and writing styles are dated, we chose to leave the original text intact in order to preserve the historical integrity of the books. Additionally, although the series represents a specific perspective in modern Western thought, these theologians nevertheless serve as forerunners to the many outstanding theological voices we hear in today's much broader perspective. It is for their sake and the sake of new generations that we are reprinting this series, thereby ensuring continued accessibility to these formative and important modern theologians.

Another unique feature of this series is that many of the authors studied with the particular theologian about whom they wrote. And because some of these books were written almost half a century ago—published during the political and social turmoil of the latter decades of the twentieth century—they also serve as historical accounts of how these theologians impacted the authors at the time that they themselves were writing.

We are confident that readers will continue to find these books interesting and useful, which is why we are releasing them with a new look and in paperback and also as e-books. As these theologians continue to influence the global church, this series remains a helpful overview of their historical context and their life's work.

PATRICIA ANDERS, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
HENDRICKSON PUBLISHERS

Editor's Preface (1972)

Who are the thinkers that have shaped Christian theology in our time? This series tries to answer that question by providing a reliable guide to the ideas of the men who have significantly charted the theological seas of our century. In the current revival of theology, these books will give a new generation the opportunity to be exposed to significant minds. They are not meant, however, to be a substitute for a careful study of the original works of these makers of the modern theological mind.

This series is not for the lazy. Each major theologian is examined carefully and critically—his life, his theological method, his most germinal ideas, his weaknesses as a thinker, his place in the theological spectrum, and his chief contribution to the climate of theology today. The books are written with the assumption that laymen will read them and enter into the theological dialogue that is so necessary to the church as a whole. At the same time they are carefully enough designed to give assurance to a Ph.D. student in theology preparing for his preliminary exams.

Each author in the series is a professional scholar and theologian in his own right. All are specialists on, and in some cases have studied with, the theologians about whom they write. Welcome to the series.

BOB E. PATTERSON, EDITOR
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

1 Rudolf Bultmann

Rudolf Bultmann, professor of New Testament in the University of Marburg, retired in 1951, but his is still the most frequently discussed name in theological circles. His long shadow continues not only in New Testament studies, but extends into other theological disciplines. He stands alongside Karl Barth as a man who changed the direction of theology significantly and perhaps permanently. Both men were nurtured in the liberal tradition. Barth attracted the attention of the theological world when he wrote his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. This publication marked the turning point from liberalism to a new Reformation theology—neoorthodoxy or dialectical theology—and catapulted Barth's name into prominence between the World Wars. Bultmann stood with Barth in the new dialectical theology, but proceeded with his new method of interpretation to change theological understanding even more radically. Since World War II, Bultmann has been the center of the discussion in theology.

Bultmann's prominence is related primarily to this new kind of biblical interpretation. But his writings in other areas are also worthy of recognition. He is a recognized authority in the history of religions, the philosophy of religion, and in theology, as well as in New Testament and methods of interpretation. His new method of interpretation was largely inspired by his own commitment to Christian faith, and by the difficulty of interpreting it in the modern scientifically oriented culture. Bultmann, a completely convinced modern scientific man, was sympathetic to those who found the strange religious language of the New Testament quite unintelligible. He developed his method of interpretation and applied it thoroughly and consistently during an entire generation in an effort to make Christian faith understandable to modern men. Herein is his claim to fame.

At first glance, his method appears to be somewhat vague and difficult. The terminology is strange. But beyond the difficulty there is the obvious and reassuring evangelistic fervor of a Christian scholar who believes in Christ and seeks to make his message known. He chose a method based on an understanding of human existence which, in his judgment, was in keeping with that found in the New Testament. It is called existentialist interpretation.

Although a more thorough discussion of Bultmann's distinctive terms will be presented later, a brief definition of "existentialist" is in order now. The term is derived from the word "existence" as it is used in the general term "existentialism." One should not think of existentialism as a clearly defined system of philosophy, because there is considerable diversity among the existentialists. It is better to look upon existentialism as a way of thinking which is based upon the concept of existence. Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher (1813–1855), was the father of what is now known as existentialism. He was offended by Hegelian philosophy, which by exalting reason reduced all reality to reason. To Kierkegaard, the assertions of rationalism were not only inadequate but also arrogant. He argued that reason was only one aspect of reality. For instance, man is endowed with love, fear, anxiety, and hope, as well as with reason. Reason tends to be objective and can easily become disinterestedly analytical. But real human life is primarily subjective, because love, fear, anxiety, hope, and joy are its components and they are not primarily rational. In other words, one knows more about reality in the nonrational, subjective, and individual involvement in life than he does by general, objective reason. In fact, human existence is much more complex and meaningful than can be apprehended rationally. Kierkegaard rejected the supremacy of reason as an understanding of reality and chose the broader base of existence.

An illustration may help, even though it tends to distort by oversimplifying. Let us suppose that I am in my study working on this manuscript. A friend appears at my door and announces that a young girl has just been struck by an auto at a nearby intersection.

I may be moved to sympathy for the girl and her family. I may think about what could be done to relieve the traffic congestion. I may even organize or join in some effort to reduce the number of such accidents. But soon with the unpleasant, but generally held, conviction that such accidents are inevitable I resignedly return to my writing. However, let us suppose that my friend had reported that the girl's name was Anna Belle. The addition of this one detail changes both the message and the situation which follows. Anna Belle is my daughter. The message is no longer general. It is quite specific. It involves me. This message is no occasion for reflection, objective analysis, or even sympathy. It threatens and involves my entire existence. It has such mass that it draws reason into its appropriate orbit in harmony with fear, anxiety, faith, hope, and the other characteristics of existence. I respond to this message. I do not analyze it. I respond in my entire existence. This is existential response.

Existentialist Bultmann thinks that the message of the New Testament is this kind of event. It is an event in a message addressed to me. If I respond with curiosity, or even interest, and reflect on its reliability, I have missed the entire point. Christ appeared to the men of his generation, and they sensed that they had been brought into God's presence. Everything changed. Their counterfeit lives were transformed into authentic existence. Their shackles were removed and they were free for the first time. This happened when they came to faith in Christ. Their response was existential.

As a devout Lutheran Christian, Bultmann believes that this happens today when men really "hear" the Christian gospel. He set out to develop a method of interpretation which would open this door to modern man. In Kierkegaard's idea of existence he found what appeared to him to be the New Testament understanding of existence. In Martin Heidegger's philosophy, of which we shall hear more later, he found a comprehensive system of concepts and terms which afforded him the approach he needed. Bultmann used these concepts and terms in developing his own method of interpretation.

One illustration is the much-publicized “demythologizing.” Bultmann regards the worldview in the New Testament as mythological. Apparently, the writers thought that the universe consisted of a three-story structure: heaven, earth, and the underworld. God and the angels lived in heaven. Satan and the demons lived in the underworld. Man lived on the earth in-between and was likely to be visited, or invaded, for good or ill from above or below. When the writers described these invisible “other-worldly” powers in “this-worldly” language they were using the language of myth.

Furthermore, Bultmann maintains that a modern man with his scientific view of the universe could not believe in the mythological worldview even if he wanted to. To insist that one must accept the New Testament worldview in order to accept the Christian message would be both impossible and preposterous. Modern man knows more about the world and has a better explanation for illness than demons. Then, how can modern man understand that New Testament message? Bultmann replies that the New Testament message must be demythologized.

But to demythologize the New Testament does not mean that one strips away the myth. Rather, it means that the New Testament message must be interpreted existentially. This is so because the writers of the New Testament were intending to describe not the architecture of the universe but the facts of their own existence. They were expressing their convictions that they were not lords of their own existence, that the world had an origin and meaning beyond itself, and that Christ had delivered them from invisible powers. In short, their message was about their own existence, and only their language was mythological. To understand their existence and to interpret that meaning is existentialist interpretation, or demythologizing, which in this instance is the same.

Historians cannot agree yet as to how they will appraise Bultmann’s efforts. But they do agree that he has faithfully and consistently applied his method, and that he has changed theological studies at least for a generation.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rudolf Bultmann is a churchman. It is not surprising that he has given his life to the church. He was a product of the church, born August 20, 1884, in Wiefelstede of Oldenburg, Germany, the oldest son of Arthur Bultmann who was at that time the Evangelical Lutheran pastor in the town. Arthur Bultmann had been born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa, while his parents were serving as missionaries. Rudolf's maternal grandfather had been a pastor in Baden.

Bultmann's entire life has been focused on the fields of theology and biblical studies. Seemingly, he never contemplated any other career and never interrupted his work for other endeavors. His elementary schooling was in Rastede (1892-95). He attended the *Gymnasium* in Oldenburg (1895-1903). In his "Autobiographical Reflections," he spoke of his school days as having been most pleasant.¹

He began his study of theology in 1903 in the University of Tübingen. After three semesters, in keeping with the European practice of studying in several universities, he went to the University of Berlin for two semesters, and later to Marburg for two semesters. He took his first theological examination in Oldenburg in 1907 and then taught in the *Gymnasium* for one year. In 1910 he was awarded his degree (Lic. theol.) by the University of Marburg. His second research dissertation, which qualified him to be an instructor in the theological faculty, was completed in 1912. From that date until 1916 he lectured in New Testament at the University of Marburg.

Bultmann held professorships in three universities. From 1916 until 1920 he was assistant professor at the University of Breslau. During his time in Breslau he was married and his first two daughters were born. His youngest brother was killed in France in 1917, and Bultmann suffered the privations of a country defeated by war. In 1920 he moved to Giessen as a professor, but remained only one

year before returning to his alma mater in 1921. He succeeded his old teacher Wilhelm Heitmüller in the New Testament chair in Marburg and remained in that position until his retirement in 1951. Since 1951, as professor emeritus, Bultmann has continued to be very active in writing and lecturing.

Bultmann's modesty is obvious in his autobiographical sketch and in the fact that there is a scarcity of biographical material about him. He has, in spite of worldwide fame, remained personally in the background while his thoughts have been presented, debated, and evaluated. In his autobiographical sketch, he did not even mention the essay on "demythologizing." This is also indicative of his own evaluation of its importance. Actually, that essay got the attention of the world but the method of interpretation is obvious in his earlier works.

Rather frequently, Bultmann acknowledged particular indebtedness to several of his teachers. Of particular importance were Johannes Weiss and Wilhelm Herrmann. Weiss, famous as a New Testament scholar in the History of Religions School, guided Bultmann in his graduate study and doctoral preparation. Herrmann was the acknowledged systematic theologian of the liberal theological movement in which Bultmann began his work. Bultmann departed from the liberal school, but he never ceased to express gratitude to his teacher Herrmann. Bultmann also acknowledged his gratitude to Adolf Harnack, the church historian, to Hermann Gunkel, the Old Testament scholar, both of the University of Berlin, and to Karl Müller of Tübingen and to Adolf Jülicher of Marburg.

Bultmann is held to be quite radical in his theological and hermeneutical methods by many of his English readers. Nevertheless, the more one learns of and from Bultmann, the more he is impressed by the stability and consistency which characterize his whole life and writings. For instance, Bultmann moved from liberal theology into the dialectical theology associated with the name of Karl Barth, but in such a way that he never turned against his teachers of the liberal school and never ceased to appreciate his

liberal heritage. At the same time, he advocated many of the major themes of dialectical theology, but never did he make any radical switches or changes of direction. Furthermore, his consistency in thought spans more than half a century, and the ideas he expressed in the 1920s are reaffirmed and deepened in his writings of the '60s, but are strikingly unchanged.

Students frequently ask how Rudolf Bultmann remained in a German university during the Hitler regime when Karl Barth and Paul Tillich were forced to leave Germany, Martin Niemöller was imprisoned, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and killed. It is with reluctance that I mention this question, lest I do harm to the life of a great man who lived in a difficult setting which can hardly be understood by an outsider. Perhaps the clue to understanding this question is to be found in Bultmann's "Autobiographical Reflections," in which he said, ". . . I have never directly and actively participated in political affairs."² Furthermore, Bultmann participated in the formation and continuation of the Confessing Church, which was organized by those churchmen who were unwilling for the church to become an agent of Nazism.³ He signed the Barmen Declaration. On May 2, 1933, he departed from his stated precedent long enough to enunciate his attitude about some problems of the Hitler regime then before the German people. In a lecture to his students, he denounced the defamation of the German Jews, but did not specifically condemn Hitler.⁴

Walter Schmithals, a friend and student of Bultmann who has written a superb introduction to Bultmann's thought, cites other occasions on which Bultmann maintained his Christian stance in Hitler's Germany. On one occasion, the General Synod of the Lutheran Church passed a regulation concerning the appointment of pastors and other church officials, which required not only the candidate's unconditional support of the state but also that the candidate and his wife be of Aryan descent. On September 19, 1933, the Marburg faculty unanimously opposed these provisions in a statement written for the most part by Bultmann. In his sermons of 1937 and 1938 Bultmann spoke specifically and disapprovingly

of the current nationalistic myths and acts which stood in contrast to the Christian way.⁵

Bultmann's numerous and significant publications span half a century. No attempt will be made at this time to list them, but the more pivotal writings will be mentioned in connection with the following discussion of the theological climate in which Bultmann lived and the issues to which he responded.⁶

THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF BULTMANN'S CAREER

Bultmann was educated in, accepted, and cherished until at least 1920 the liberal theology which had developed in the nineteenth century. Liberal theology was characterized by an openness to truth and the employment of scientific methods in research. It tended to break away from tradition unless other grounds than tradition could be found for keeping previously held ideas. Liberals were skeptical of claims about ultimate truth and regarded their own conclusions as tentative. They applied the principle of continuity in the study of the Christian faith, and therefore tended to interpret its content in the light of outside influences and causative factors. The liberals tended to emphasize the immanence of God in preference to his transcendence. They were optimistic about man and believed in his progress. To most of them, Jesus was the focus of Christian thought and the legitimate object of the "historical quest," which produced a kind of sentimental attachment to Jesus and a noticeable disinterest in Christological problems. Liberal theology stressed social justice and brought about some of the more desirable reforms of the twentieth century.

Adolf Harnack, though a church historian by specialty, wrote what became the popular summary of liberalism, a little book entitled *What Is Christianity?* Bultmann wrote the introduction to the new (1950) edition of this book because he thought every theological student should read it in order to understand the present

theological situation. However, he criticized Harnack for missing both the importance of the History of Religions School and the eschatological consciousness of the New Testament. He thought Harnack "diluted to the point of harmlessness" the problematical core of Christian faith.⁷ It was this kind of liberalism exemplified by Harnack's oversimplification that Bultmann abandoned when he went with Karl Barth into the new dialectical theology. However, he retained many of liberal theology's characteristics and contributions.

The History of Religions School was one development in the liberal tradition from which Bultmann learned much and to which he made a significant contribution in his later work (1949) *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*.⁸ In this book, Bultmann portrays Jesus as belonging to Judaistic rather than Christian thought, and interprets much of early Christianity in terms of Gnosticism.

One cannot understand Bultmann without understanding his use of form criticism. This method of research reflects the liberal appreciation for scientific method. Bultmann, along with K. L. Schmidt and Martin Dibelius, developed and applied this method to New Testament study as Gunkel had done in the study of the Old Testament. The form critics assume that the Gospel contents first circulated as small and independent units which, under community influence, developed according to discoverable laws of form. They assume that in the period of oral tradition, prior to the written Gospels as we have them, the chronological, geographical, and transitional statements were added by the editors. The most helpful clue toward understanding Gospel material is to discover the "life situation" of the early community, which called forth, used, interpreted, and preserved the particular narrative. A scientific study of the material following the guidelines of form criticism would allegedly show what actually happened and was said.⁹

Bultmann's first major work was *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, published in 1921,¹⁰ one of the classics in the form criticism tradition. It received much opposition for many years, but

has become something of a requirement in the critical study of the Gospels. Its importance can hardly be exaggerated. This book appeared to be so clearly in the liberal tradition that Karl Barth was amazed when Bultmann, so shortly thereafter, favorably reviewed his own sensational commentary on Romans which broke radically with the liberal tradition.

Dialectical theology is generally regarded as having begun with Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*.¹¹ Bultmann, as has been noted, looked favorably upon this publication and regarded himself in the same theological movement with Barth and Friedrich Gogarten. His own writings of the period show that he had come to differ with liberal theology in several essentials. In his 1924 essay, "Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement," he indicated that liberal theology had made man the center of theology rather than God. To him, and other dialectical theologians, God is the subject of theology.¹² Liberal theology, with its primary emphasis on history, had searched for the historical Jesus and had sought to ground faith in historical objectivity. Bultmann rejected these conclusions and argued that historical research must never be understood as a basis for faith, since its conclusions have only relative validity.¹³ Along with the quest for the historical Jesus, Bultmann refused the "liberal" Jesus, the pantheistic idea of God often found in liberal theology, and the optimistic view of man. He rejected what he called the "pantheism of history" found in liberal theology, because it pretended to know God directly. He maintained that God is not an entity and cannot, therefore, be known as objects are known.¹⁴

In his 1928 essay, "The Significance of 'Dialectical Theology' for the Scientific Study of the New Testament," he indicated that he shared certain convictions with dialectical theology, such as the radical difference between God and man, the necessity for revelation, and the importance of the Word. However, Bultmann always charted his own course and never followed some other guide. To him dialectical theology was not a set of doctrines but a method of investigation.¹⁵ It provided the insight into the dialectic of man's existence, which is historical existence.¹⁶

The essay on demythologizing, which was first delivered as an address to pastors in 1941,¹⁷ precipitated the most heated debate of any of his writings. Actually, the program of interpretation outlined in that essay had been a standard part of Bultmann's method for at least two decades. However, the terminology was so striking that a furor erupted.

Of more importance than the demythologizing essay were several other works of Bultmann. His 1926 book on Jesus¹⁸ is considered a masterpiece by most New Testament scholars. His two-volume *Theology of the New Testament*,¹⁹ also available in English, first appeared in German in 1948 and 1953. His commentary on John's Gospel, now available in English, is considered to be the most outstanding commentary on the Fourth Gospel in this period.²⁰ In it he interpreted the Gospel against the background of Gnosticism.

In 1925, Bultmann published an essay, "What Sense Is There to Speak of God?"²¹ in which he prophetically stressed a number of themes which he later developed in his theology.

In 1963, he published another essay, "The Idea of God and Modern Man,"²² as a response to Bishop John A. T. Robinson's *Honest To God*. In this essay, he responded to the contemporary emphases of Robinson's radical talk about God and to the "death of God" idea.

The essays of the 1920s laid out the major themes which Bultmann later developed. He worked progressively and without any radical changes of direction. He saw the weaknesses of liberalism and the advantages which dialectical theology offered, but he never belonged to either. When his own students, now the teachers, moved away from some of his emphases, he showed no disappointment or resentment. His own pursuit of truth had removed the possibility of his being affected by wounded pride. His responses to his critics have been kind and often appreciative. One may differ with his interpretations and theological conclusions, but one cannot find fault with his spirit or his intent.

Throughout Bultmann's theological career, he has acknowledged indebtedness to Martin Heidegger with whom he was closely associated in the late 1920s. From 1923 to 1928 Heidegger was

professor of philosophy in Marburg. In 1927 he published his great work *Sein und Zeit*²³ which provided Bultmann an understanding of existence and a system of concepts which appear in all of his subsequent writings. The close association between Bultmann and Heidegger was interrupted in 1933 by Heidegger's close relationship with Hitler's emerging Nazi party,²⁴ but Bultmann later repeated his statements of appreciation for Heidegger. Although Heidegger has written in such a way since World War II that he is referred to as "the later Heidegger," our concern is with the thought of Heidegger as published in his *Sein und Zeit*.

The theology of Bultmann is biblical in content, Protestant-Lutheran in background, and dialectical in its immediate expression, but the indelible imprint of Heidegger's existentialist analysis is obvious throughout. To understand Bultmann's theology one must look first at Heidegger.