

The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 15: The Theologian

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: but all these worketh that one and the self same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. II CORINTHIANS 12:1-11.

This sermon, and the two succeeding sermons were given with students of theology especially in mind.

Most of us are students of theology, whether we teach or learn, whether we be missionaries or educators, ministers or social workers, administrators or political leaders. But in this particular community, we are *theologians*, persons who ask the question of our ultimate concern, the question of God and His manifestation. Whatever else we may be, we are first of all theologians. Therefore, it is most natural, although not most usual, for us to consider our existence as theologians. On what is this existence based? What makes a man a theologian? What is his relation to other forms of existence? What is the significance of our existence as a whole? Paul makes very clear what he thinks is the foundation of all theology: the Divine Spirit. And the word of wisdom and knowledge, theology, according to the witness of the whole Christian Church, is basically a gift of the Spirit. It is *one* of the gifts, besides others. It is a *special* gift, besides other special gifts. But it is a *gift* of the Spirit, and not a natural capacity. The word of knowledge -- theology -- is spoken *to us* before *we* can say it to others, or even to ourselves. To be a theologian means first of all to be able to *receive* spiritual knowledge. But on the basis of this criterion, can we call ourselves theologians? Can we say that *our* theological thought is a gift of the Spirit? Are we certain that our theological existence transcends our human capacities, or that we have the word of knowledge, the word of spiritual wisdom?

Paul gives a very concrete criterion for theological existence, which is also the criterion for all spiritual existence. He says: He who cries "Cursed be Jesus" does not speak in the Spirit of God; and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. He who accepts Jesus as the Christ proves by that very acceptance that he has received the Spirit of God. For the spirit of man alone is not capable of making the statement: "I accept Jesus as the Christ". That statement is the mystery and the foundation of the Christian Church, the paradox and the stumbling-block, which produce curses against Christianity. It is the depth and the power which create a new Being in the world, in history, and in man. Therefore, he who joins in the Church's confession that Jesus is the Christ participates in the Divine Spirit. It is he who *can* receive the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge; it is he who *can* become a theologian.

Theology does not exist outside the community of those who affirm that Jesus is the Christ, outside the Church, the assembly of God. Theology is a work of the Church, precisely because it is a gift of the Divine Spirit. Theological existence is an element of the existence of the Church. It is not simply a matter of "free" thinking, of scientific research, or of general philosophical analysis. Theology expresses the faith of the Church. It restates the paradoxical statement, *Jesus is the Christ*, and considers all its presuppositions and implications. Theological existence indicates the existence of one who is grasped, within the Church, by the Divine Spirit, and who has received the word of wisdom and knowledge.

But we must ask another question. If that be theological existence, which one of us can call himself a theologian? Who can decide to become a theologian? And who can dare to remain a theologian? Do we really belong to the assembly of God? Can we seriously accept the paradox upon which the Church is built, the paradox that Jesus is the Christ? Are we grasped by the Divine Spirit, and have we received the word of knowledge as a gift? If somebody were to come and tell us that he *certainly* belongs to the Church, that he does not doubt that Jesus is the Christ any longer, that he continuously experiences the grip of the Divine Spirit and the gift of spiritual knowledge, what should be our answer to him? We certainly should tell him that he does not fulfill even the first condition of theological existence, which is the realization that one does *not* know whether he has experienced the Divine Spirit, or spirits which are not divine. We would not accept him as a theologian. On the other hand, if someone were to come and tell us that he is estranged from the Christian Church and its foundations, that he does not feel the presence of the power of the Spirit, that he is empty of spiritual knowledge, *but* that he asks again and again the theological question, the question of an ultimate concern and its manifestations in Jesus as the Christ, we would accept him as a theologian. Perhaps we would test the seriousness of his doubt, in order to see whether his emptiness and despair expressed a new and more refined vanity. But if we were convinced of his seriousness, we would consider him a theologian.

There are many amongst us who believe within themselves that they can never become good theologians, that they could do better in almost any other realm. Yet they cannot imagine that their existence could be anything other than theological existence. Even if they had to give up theology as their vocational work, they would never cease to ask the theological question. It would pursue them into every realm. They would be bound to it, actually, if not vocationally. They could not be sure that they could fulfill its demands, but they would be sure that they were in its bondage. They who believe those things in their hearts belong to the assembly of God. They are grasped by the Divine Spirit. They have received the gift of knowledge. They are theologians.

Chapter 15: THE THEOLOGIAN (Part II)

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law,

that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ), that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

I CORINTHIANS 9:19-23.

We have seen in the first sermon that the foundation of our theological existence is that the Divine Spirit keeps us in its power, and makes it impossible for us ever to escape the theological question, the stion of our ultimate concern, the question of God. We considered the theologian as a believer in spite of his doubt and despair, and as a member of the Church, in whose power all theological work is done, in spite of his lack of certainty.

Now, some words of Paul about his ministry shall lead us to the understanding of another side of our theological existence. An apostle is certainly more than a theologian; and a minister exercises more functions than a theological scholar. But an apostle is *also* a theologian; and a minister cannot work without theology. Therefore, the words that Paul says about his ministry as a whole are *also* true of the theological part of his ministry: "To all men I have become all things." Theological existence demands the same attitude. The theologian, *in his theology*, must become all things to all men. We must consider the meaning of those words.

"To those under the Law I have become as one of themselves, to win those under the Law, although I am not under the Law myself." Let us replace the word "Law" by "idealism", not only because idealists are usually legalistic, but also, because idealism is a noble attitude, which elevates us above the lower strata of our existence, and produces faith and devotion, just as the Law does. "To the idealists I have become as one of themselves, to win those who are idealists, although I am not an idealist myself." How is such an act possible? How can the theologian, not being an idealist, become an idealist to the idealists? He can become an idealist in exactly the same way as the apostle of Christ can become a Jew to the Jews. Paul says that the Law is good, and that it is not abolished, but rather fulfilled, in Christ. Likewise, the theologian who is not an idealist (and who could never be an idealist) does not destroy idealism. He utilizes it and states that it contains some truth which creates a continuous temptation for the theologian to become an idealist himself, and to deny the Cross which is the judgment over idealism. The theologian uses idealism, its concepts and methods. He becomes a Platonist to the Platonists, a Stoic to the Stoics, an Hegelian to the Hegelians, a progressivist to the progressivists. But he cannot confuse any of these forms of idealism with the Christian message. He never imposes his preferred form upon others in the name of Christianity. He is aware of the despair that idealism, as well as the Law, can bring upon us. And he knows that in Christ there is a new Being in which all ideals are embodied and have become visible, no longer as ideals, but as realities.

"To those outside the Law I have become as one of them (although I am under Christ's law, and not outside God's Law), in order to triumph over those outside the Law." Let us replace the phrase "outside the Law" by "realism", not because the realists have no Law (for neither they nor the pagans are without some Law), but because they have no abstract principles to impose upon reality. Their greatness lies in their humble acceptance of things as they are. "The piety of realism is humility." "To the realists I have become as one of themselves, in order to win them, although I am not a realist myself." The theologian who is not a realist (and who could never become a realist) does not destroy realism. He recognizes the truth of realism, and is continually tempted to become a realist himself, and thus to deny the eternal life which is the judgment over realism. The theologian uses realism and becomes a positivist to the positivists, a pragmatist to the pragmatists, and a tragic interpreter of life to the tragic interpreters of life. But he does not say that realism is the Christian message. He does not fight for it in the name of Christianity. He knows the despair of mere realism, and he knows that there is a new Being which overcomes the self-destruction of reality.

"To the weak I have become weak myself in order to gain the weak." This is the most profound of the three statements that Paul makes about himself, and the most important one for our existence as theologians. We must become *as though weak*, although, grasped by the Divine Spirit, the basis of all theology, we are not weak. How can we become weak without being already weak? We can become weak by having the strength to acknowledge our weakness, by restraining ourselves from all fanaticism and theological self-certainty, and by participating -- not from the outside, but from the inside -- in the weakness of all those to whom we speak as theologians. Our strength is *our weakness*; our strength is not *our* strength. We are strong, therefore, only in so far as we point, for our own sake and for the sake of others, to the truth which possesses us, but which we do not possess.

Nothing is more disastrous for the theologian himself and more despicable to those whom he wants to convince than a theology of self-certainty. The real theologian is he who has the strength to perceive and to confess his weakness, and who, therefore, has the strength to become as weak to the weak, so that his is the victory.

Chapter 15: THE THEOLOGIAN (Part III)

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, y e men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; and hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if ha ply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, "For we are also his offspring." Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device. And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; and others said, We will hear thee again of this matte. ACTS 17:22-32.

The first time I spoke of our existence as theologians, I indicated that the foundation of this existence lay in the power of the Divine Spirit and in the reality of the Church. It was the *believing* theologian -- believing in spite of all his doubts and despairs -- that I tried to describe. The second time that we considered our existence as theologians, we looked at the *self-surrendering* theologian who, through the power of love, becomes "all things to all men", that theologian who seems to lose himself through the understanding of everything and everyone. This time let us think about the *answering* theologian who, in spite of his participation in the weakness and error of all men, is able to answer their questions through the power of his foundation, the New Being in Christ.

The famous scene in which Paul speaks from the central place of Greek wisdom shows us a man who is the prototype of the *answering* theologian. Paul has been asked about his message, partly because the Athenians

were always curious about novelties, and partly because they knew that they did *not* know the truth, and seriously desired to know it. There are three stages in Paul's answer, which reveal the three tasks of the *answering* theologian. The first stage of Paul's answer consists in the assertion that those who ask him the ultimate question are not unconscious of the answer: these men adore an unknown God and thus witness to their religious knowledge in spite of their religious ignorance. That knowledge is not astounding, because God is close to each one of us; it is in *Him* that we live and move and exist; these *also* belong to His race. The first answer, then, that we must give to those who ask us about such a question is that they themselves are already aware of the answer. We must show to them that neither they nor we are outside of God, that even the atheists stand in God -- namely, that power out of which they live, the truth for which they grope, and the ultimate meaning of life in which they believe. It is bad theology and religious cowardice ever to think that there may be a place where we could look *at* God, as though He were something outside of us to be argued for or against. Genuine atheism is not humanly possible, for God is nearer to a man than that man is to himself. A God can only be denied in the name of another God; and God appearing in *one* form can be denied only by God appearing in another form. That is the first answer that we must give to ourselves and to those who question us, not as an abstract statement, but rather as a continuous interpretation of our human existence, in all its hidden motions and abysses and certainties.

God is nearer to us than we ourselves. We cannot find a place outside of Him; but we can *try* to find such a place. The second part of Paul's answer is that we can be in the condition of continuous flight from God. We can imagine one way of escape after another; we can replace God by the products of our imagination; and we do. Although mankind is not strange to God, it is estranged from Him. Although mankind is never without God, it perverts the picture of God. Although mankind is never without the knowledge of God, it is ignorant of God. Mankind is separated from its origin; it lives under a law of wrath and frustration, of tragedy and self-destruction, because it produces one distorted image of God after another, and adores those images. The answering theologian must discover the false gods in the individual soul and in society. He must probe into their most secret hiding-places. He must challenge them through the power of the Divine Logos, which makes him a theologian. Theological polemic is not merely a theoretical discussion, but rather a spiritual judgement against the gods which are not God, against those structures of evil, those distortions of God in thought and action. No compromise or adaptation or theological self-surrender is permitted on this level. For the first Commandment is the rock upon which theology stands. There is no synthesis possible between God and the idols. In spite of the dangers inherent in so judging, the theologian must become an instrument of the Divine Judgement against a distorted world.

So far as they can grasp it in the light of their own questions, Paul's listeners are willing to accept this two-fold answer. But Paul then speaks of a third thing which they are not able to bear. They either reject it immediately, or they postpone the decision to reject or accept it. He speaks of a Man Whom God has destined to be the Judgement and the Life of the world. That is the third and final part of the theological answer. For we are real theologians when we state that Jesus is the Christ, and that it is in Him that the Logos of theology is manifest.

But we are only theologians when we interpret this paradox, this stumbling-block for idealism and realism, for the weak and the strong, for both pagans and Jews. As theologians, we must interpret that paradox, and not throw paradoxical phrases at the minds of the people. We must not preserve or produce artificial stumbling blocks, miracle-stories, legends, myths, and other sophisticated paradoxical talk. We must not distort, by ecclesiastical and theological arrogance, that great cosmic paradox that there is victory over death within the world of death itself. We must not impose the heavy burden of wrong stumbling-blocks upon those who ask us questions. But neither must we empty the true paradox of its power. For true theological existence is the witnessing to Him Whose yoke is easy and Whose burden is light, to Him Who is the true paradox.

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