The New Being 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. The New Being was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1955. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

Chapter 9: Faith and Uncertainty

In his book, *ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL,* Martin Luther writes, "What is more miserable than uncertainty!" He challenges the half-sceptical attitude of his great opponent, Erasmus of Rotterdam, who had declared that he would rather go over at once to the camp of the sceptics, if the authority of Scripture and the Church would permit him to do so. Luther demands *certainty* in the matter of our ultimate concern. He demands *assertions* and not sceptical possibilities or academic probabilities. "Take away assertions," he says, "and you take away Christianity." It is not the character of the Christian mind to avoid assertions, he declares. Every word of the prophets and the writers of the New Testament confirms his attitude and disproves that of Erasmus. Neither Jesus nor Paul nor John speaks in terms of probability or of accumulation of experiences. They make assertions with a certainty and an unshaken confidence about the truth of their message, which is often hard to stand and harder to understand for the modern mind. Paul writes to the Galatians, ". .. Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." We feel a kind of resistance and even resentment against this unbroken certainty, the immediate consequence of which is the "Anathema" against heretics.

Have we all become Erasmians, consciously or unconsciously? Do we approach Christianity as just another possibility among so many others? As, perhaps, a probability, but by no means a certainty? Was it not embarrassing for all of us when Karl Barth, following the attitude of the Reformers, said his uncompromising "No!" to all attempts to approach God in terms of progressive assurance? Did we not hear in his words the voices of ancient and modern dictators? Is the fight between Paul and the Jewish perfectionists, between Augustine and the Pelagian rationalists, between Luther and the Erasmian humanists decided by a compromise in which, in reality, Paul, Augustine and Luther are defeated? I do not speak here of a theological defeat. I speak of a defeat in our hearts, in our lives, in the depths of our souls. Or can we still realize what Luther means when he exclaims, "What is more miserable than uncertainty!"

But let us look more exactly at the nature of that certainty which Paul and Luther defend. The words of Paul show clearly that it is not *self*—certainty: ..... Even if *we* . . . should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you. . . ." The truth of the gospel Paul has preached is not dependent on Paul. The certainty he has is not dependent on the changes in his personal experience. He can imagine that some day he might preach a distorted gospel; he can even imagine that an angel from heaven might bring another message than that which the Church has already received. He is not sure of himself and he is not even sure of angelic

visions. But he is sure of the gospel, so sure that he places himself and the highest spiritual powers under the threat of a divine curse if he or they should distort the gospel. For, he continues, the gospel I preach is not a human affair; no man put it into my head. I, yet not I; my gospel and yet not my gospel; my certainty and yet not my certainty. This is a description of our situation before God which runs through the whole Bible and the confessions of all the great Christian witnesses. It *is* our certainty, but it is lost the moment we begin to regard it as our certainty.

We are certain only as long as we look at the content of our certainty and not at the rational or irrational experiences in which we have received it. Looking at ourselves and our certainty as *ours,* we discover its weakness, its vulnerability to every critical thought; we discover the small amount of probability which our reasoning can give to the idea of God and to the reality of the Christ. We discover the contradictions in the emotional side of our religious life, its oscillation between ecstatic confidence and despairing doubt. But looking at God, we realize that all the shortcomings of our experience are of no importance. Looking at God, we see that we do not have Him as an object of our knowledge, but that He has us as the subject of our existence. Looking at God we feel that we cannot escape Him even by making Him an object of sceptical arguments or of irresistible emotions. We realize that in our uncertainty there is one fixed point of certainty, however we may name it and describe it and explain it. *We* may not comprehend, but we *are* comprehended. We may not grasp anything in the depth of our uncertainty, but that we are grasped by something ultimate, which keeps us in its grasp and from which we may strive in vain to escape, remains absolutely certain.

In this sense Luther speaks of Christian certainty. "By assertion," he writes, "I mean a constant adhering, affirming, defending and invincibly persevering." This certainty was not something he possessed as his own. Nobody has experienced the profundity of doubt more than he. The refuge in authority finally taken by both Augustine and Erasmus was made impossible by Luther. So were all possible arguments for religious truth and all confidence in his vocation as a reformer, in his religious strength and his accumulated experience. All these do not count in the ultimate uncertainty. But sometimes, when, in this worst of all Hells, the First Commandment, "I am the Lord, *thy* God," came to his mind, he knew that one certainty had not left him, and this was the only one which is ultimately needed.

Can we maintain this certainty in spite of the fundamental uncertainties which are the character of our period in religion as well as in all other realms of life? Can we maintain it in spite of our personal doubts and despairs and of our sceptical heritage? The answer to these questions does not depend on us. We can attain the certainty of the Reformers and Apostles whenever it is given to us to touch the Ground of our existence and to look beyond ourselves. When we have left behind all objective probabilities about God and the Christ, and all subjective approximations to God and the Christ, when all preliminary certainties have disappeared, the ultimate certainty may appear to us. And in the power of this certainty, though never secure and never without temptation, we may walk from certainty to certainty.