
4.32 Paul Tillich on the Dispensability of the Historical Jesus

Tillich's Existential approach to theology often leads him to treat the specifically historical aspect of the Christian faith as being of less than critical importance. Opposing those who insist on strict historical veracity, Tillich discussed this question in response to the work of New Testament critic R. B. Smyth. He maintained that "Jesus Being a man of history is not in itself sufficient reason to rule out the historical existence of Jesus". (Tillich, 425, 426, 428, 430, 432-434)

The preceding evaluation of the historical approach to the biblical records led to a negative and a positive assertion. The negative assertion is that historical research can neither give nor take away the foundation of the Christian faith. The positive assertion is that historical research has influenced and must influence Christian theology, first, by giving an analysis of the three different semantic levels of biblical literature (and, analogously, of Christian preaching in all periods); second, by showing in several steps the development of the christological symbols (as well as the other systematically important symbols); and, finally, by providing a precise philological and historical understanding of the biblical literature by means of the best methods developed in all historical work.

But it is necessary systematically to raise once more a question which is continuously being asked with considerable religious anxiety. Does not the acceptance of the historical method for dealing with the source documents of the Christian faith introduce a dangerous insecurity into the thought and life of the church and of every individual Christian? Could not historical research lead to a complete skepticism about the biblical records? Is it not imaginable that historical criticism could come to the judgment that the man Jesus of Nazareth never lived? Did not some scholars, though only a few and not very important ones, make just this statement? And even if such a statement can never be made with certainty, is it not destructive for the Christian faith if the non-existence of Jesus can somehow be made probable, no matter how low the degree of probability? In reply, let us first reject some insufficient and misleading answers. It is inadequate to point out that historical research has not yet given any evidence to support such skepticism. Certainly, it has not yet! But the anxious question remains of whether it could not do so sometime in the future? Faith cannot rest on such unsure ground. The answer, taken from the "not-yet" of skeptical evidence, is insufficient. There is another possible answer, which, though not false, is misleading. This is to say that the historical foundation of Christianity is an essential element of the Christian faith itself and that this faith, through its own power, can overrule skeptical possibilities within historical criticism. It can,
it is maintained, guarantee the existence of Jesus of Nazareth and at least the essentials in the biblical picture. But we must analyze this answer carefully, for it is ambiguous. The problem is: Exactly what can faith guarantee? And the inevitable answer is that faith can guarantee only its own foundation, namely, the appearance of that reality which has created the faith. This reality is the New Being, who conquers existential estrangement and thereby makes faith possible. This alone faith is able to guarantee—and that because its own existence is identical with the presence of the New Being. Faith itself is the immediate (not mediated by conclusions) evidence of the New Being within and under the conditions of existence. Precisely that is guaranteed by the very nature of the Christian faith. No historical criticism can question the immediate awareness of those who find themselves transformed into the state of faith. One is reminded of the Augustinian–Cartesian refutation of radical skepticism. That tradition pointed to the immediacy of a self-consciousness which guaranteed itself by its participation in being. By analogy, one must say that participation, not historical argument, guarantees the reality of the event upon which Christianity is based. It guarantees a personal life in which the New Being has conquered the old being. But it does not guarantee his name to be Jesus of Nazareth. Historical doubt concerning the existence and the life of someone with this name cannot be overruled. He might have had another name. (This is a historically absurd, but logically necessary, consequence of the historical method.) Whatever his name, the New Being was and is actual in this man.

Comment

Tillich’s theology is often described as “existentialist,” meaning that it addresses or engages with fundamental questions of human existence. Tillich argues that Christianity proclaims and enables a new form of human existence to come into being. But how is this new possibility related to Jesus of Nazareth? For Tillich, the event upon which Christianity is based has two aspects: the historical fact which is called “Jesus of Nazareth,” and the reception of this fact by those who received him as the Christ. The factual, or objective—historical, Jesus is not the foundation of faith apart from his reception as the Christ; here, the influence of Martin Kähler may easily be discerned (see 4.26). Tillich has no real interest in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth; all that he is prepared to affirm about him (insofar as it relates to the foundation of faith) is that it was a “personal life,” analogous to the biblical picture, who might well have had another name other than “Jesus.” “Whatever his name, the New Being was and is active in this man.” If historical criticism were ever to demonstrate that the man Jesus of Nazareth never actually existed, Tillich declares that his theology would not be affected by this result.
Questions for Study

1. What purpose does history serve for Tillich? He is often accused of “retreating from history.” Does this passage support this complaint?

2. Notice how the concept of “skepticism” plays a very important role in this passage. What points does Tillich make concerning the causes and effects of skepticism? And how does this relate to his attitude to history?

3. “It guarantees a personal life in which the New Being has conquered the old being. But it does not guarantee his name to be Jesus of Nazareth.” Locate this passage within the text. What does Tillich mean by this? How does he arrive at this conclusion? What are the implications of this statement?

Wolfhart Pannenberg on the Indispensability of the Historical Jesus

The idea that theology, when it deals with Jesus Christ, must take its starting point in the proclamation of his community has become very influential since Martin Kähler. This idea was not completely original with Kähler. Albrecht Ritschl already had said this about the perception of Jesus: “One can attain the full extent of his historic reality only out of the faith which the Christian community has in him.” Such a point of view was suggested earlier by Schleiermacher and by the Erlangen school of theology. Kähler advocated this idea especially in his famous book *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (1892). In this book he attacked the theological claim of the quest for the historical Jesus which was at that time in full bloom. The quest for the historical Jesus sought to lay bare the man Jesus and his message from the later development of the piety and Christology of the Christian community as they are combined in the New Testament writings. The life of Jesus and his religion should have direct, exemplary meaning for Christians today. Jesus was set in opposition to Paul, who, as Harnack thought, had covered
up the simple humanness of Jesus with his own bizarre Christology. Such a harsh contrast between Jesus and Paul has recently been advocated anew by Ethelbert Stauffer. Kähler's work opposes that kind of quest for the historical Jesus which makes of him a mere man. Kähler rightly protests against the tendency to drive a cleft between Jesus and the apostles' preaching about Christ. In this sense his statement is correct: "The real Christ is the preached Christ." It is based on the fact that, in general, "the personal effect which survives in a noticeable way for subsequent generations" belongs to the historical reality of any important figure. This personal effect in the case of Jesus is "the faith of his disciples, the conviction that one has in him the conqueror of guilt, sin, the Tempter, and death."

We repeat, Kähler is correct in these statements, insofar as he protests against setting the figure and message of Jesus in opposition to the apostolic preaching in such a way that no sort of continuity between the two would exist any longer. However, it does not follow from the rejection of such false antitheses either (1) that the effects of the person Jesus are to be found only in the apostolic preaching or (2) that what is "truly historic" about Jesus is only his "personal effect." This effect radiated outward into definite and, already in early Christianity, varied historical situations. Therefore, something of the particular intellectual situation of the respective witness, of the questions that moved their times and to which they answered with their confession of Christ, also always adheres to the New Testament accounts of Jesus. This is the basis for the diversity of the New Testament witnesses to Jesus, which is not to be overlooked. Because the New Testament testimony to Christ so clearly bears the stamp of the particular contemporary problematic of the witnesses, one cannot simply equate Jesus himself with the apostles' witness to him, as Kähler expressed it in his formula about "the whole Biblical Christ." 5

In the sense of such an equation it is false to say that the real Christ is the preached Christ. One can and must get back to Jesus himself from the witness of the apostles by trying to recognize, and thus making allowance for, the relation of New Testament texts to their respective situations. It is quite possible to distinguish the figure of Jesus himself, as well as the outlines of his message, from the particular perspective in which it is transmitted through this or that New Testament witness. What is no longer "possible," according to the insights of the form-critical study of the Gospels, is really only the attempt to exploit the sequence of the presentation in our Gospels as a chronology of Jesus' life and ministry, for the sequence of presentation in all four Gospels has been proved to be determined by considerations of composition. This does not mean, however, that even the question of evidence in the Gospels for a chronology of Jesus' life is completely settled, not to speak of the question of a history of Jesus in general. Ultimately, Kähler is right on only one point: the historical reconstruction of the figure and proclamation of Jesus is always required to explain how the early Christian proclamation of Christ could emerge from the fate of Jesus. The assertion of an antithesis between Jesus and the primitive Christian kerygma about him remains unsatisfying also from a historical point of view. The continuity between the two must be made understandable.

Going back behind the apostolic kerygma to the historical Jesus is, therefore,
possible. It is also necessary. Wilhelm Herrmann properly criticized Kähler at just this point: precisely because the New Testament witnesses proclaimed Jesus as he appeared to faith at that time, "this proclamation alone, if we leave it up to that, cannot protect us from the doubt that we want to base our faith on something that is perhaps not historical fact at all, but is itself a product of faith." To be sure, Herrmann also shies away from basing faith on our historical knowledge about Jesus: "It is a fatal error to attempt to establish the basis of faith by means of historical investigation. The basis of faith must be something fixed; the results of historical study are continually changing. The basis of our faith must be grasped in the same independent fashion by learned and unlearned, by each for himself." In this, Herrmann agrees with Kähler's demand that faith ought not to "depend on scholarly investigation."

In the present revival of the quest of Jesus by Käsemann, Fuchs, Bornkamm, and others, this restriction has been overcome in principle. Whether Jesus himself or someone else was the real bearer of the message handed down by the writers of the Synoptic Gospels is no longer considered, with Bultmann, since it is an incidental question. This position is possible for Bultmann because, for him, "the person of Jesus is absorbed in his word." Over against that, it is recognized today that faith must have "support in the historical Jesus himself." That means, certainly, in Jesus himself as he is accessible to our historical inquiry. One can agree completely with this assertion. The only question that remains is: What is really the decisive factor in Jesus' life and proclamation upon which faith is based? We will return at length to this question later.

To go back behind the New Testament text to Jesus himself is unavoidable for another reason. Only in this way is it possible to see the unity that binds together the New Testament witnesses. As long as one only compares the varied witnesses, one will have to recognize the anestheses that appear even in passages that sound similar. The unity of Scripture will not be grasped in a comparison of the statements of the New Testament witnesses; it consists only in the one Jesus to whom they all refer, and will be recognizable, therefore, only when one has penetrated behind the kerygma of the apostles. The inner unity of the New Testament writings will be visible precisely when they are taken as a "historical source" and not only as a "preaching text." As a historical source they express not only "what was at once believed," but also permit something of Jesus himself, in whom the Christian believes, to be recognized.

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**Comment**

This passage represents an engagement with a continual conversation within Christian theology over the place of history in relation to the figure of Jesus. Christian interest in engaging with questions of history, and especially the philosophy of history, reached a peak during the 1960s. In part, this was due to the need to engage
with Marxism, which offered what seemed to be a coherent vision of historical events and the historical process as a whole. One of those who responded to this challenge was Pannenberg, who developed his "revelation in history" approach in response. It was therefore entirely natural that Pannenberg should stress the importance of history in relation to the questions of Christology.

Note that Pannenberg mentions two writers in particular, Wilhelm Herrmann and Martin Kähler; it would be helpful to read extracts from these writers as preparation for engaging with this text (see 2.35, 4.26). Pannenberg’s argument is clear, and requires little in the way of introduction or comment.

Questions for Study

1. Set out the reasons why Pannenberg insists on going "behind the New Testament text to Jesus himself."

2. Pannenberg engages in dialogue with Martin Kähler in this passage. Set out, in your own words, the points at which Pannenberg agrees with Kähler, and those where he departs from him.

3. "The assertion of an antithesis between Jesus and the primitive Christian kerygma about him remains unsatisfying also from a historical point of view. The continuity between the two must be made understandable." Locate this statement within the text. What does Pannenberg mean by this? Would Martin Kähler agree with this?