

One of the few places where I find what Bultmann says quite puzzling is his answer to the question of how we determine what the idea, or the essence, of Christianity really is (*GV* 3: 201). If I correctly understand his answer, it not only conflicts with many other things he says that answer (or imply an answer to) the same question, but is also quite unsatisfactory—and that for two reasons:

First, even allowing that, given the different understandings of Christianity, there is a sense in which what normative Christianity is *is* a matter of decision (which is what I take Bultmann to say and mean in the last paragraph), still this decision is a *controlled* decision in a way that he says nothing at all about, i.e., in the way he himself indicates when he says elsewhere that whether Luther's understanding of the Pauline doctrine of justification through faith alone is sound has to be determined ever anew in critical discussion with Catholic exegesis (149 f.); or when he says that there is no doubt that a theologian has to advocate certain thoughts—namely, "the thoughts of the New Testament and the Reformers" (*EF*: 163); or, finally, when he insists that "present preaching and systematic theology with it have need of a critical control that secures its identity with the apostolic preaching—namely, New Testament theology" (*NTM*: 62).

But, then, second, Bultmann seems to confuse (1) encountering the past existentially with (2) offering an existentialist interpretation of the past, which is to say, explicating the understanding of human existence, or the possibility therefor, that the past expresses or implies. That the first may indeed be a necessary condition of the second, at least to the extent that it is asking my own existential question that enables me also to ask the question that existentialist interpretation asks, I'm willing to allow. But my task as an exegete, as distinct from my responsibility as a human being, is to ask the second question, not the first; nor is there any justification for confusing, or not clearly distinguishing, the two questions.

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