

On the face of it, there appears to be a certain contradiction between Bultmann and Marxsen on the question of Jesus' idea of God.

Bultmann, for his part, is insistent that Jesus (as well as, indeed, early Christianity generally) does not teach a new idea of God, but simply proclaims the urgent gift and demand of the God already envisaged by the old Jewish idea. Marxsen, on the contrary, emphasizes that, as compared with the idea of God represented, in their different ways, by the Pharisees and John the Baptist as well as the evangelist Matthew, the idea of God taught by Jesus as well as by Paul is certainly a different and, insofar forth, a new idea. Is this apparent contradiction between the two thinkers anything more than that?

No, I don't think it is, because each thinker, in his way, also allows for the main insistence or emphasis of the other. Thus Bultmann allows for Jesus' idea of God, as Jewish as it certainly is, being "radicalized"—so much so, in fact, that Jesus quite overcomes Jewish legalism. Marxsen, for his part, allows for Jesus' being concerned not only, or even primarily, to teach a new idea of God, however new his idea may, in fact, be, but, above all, to mediate the transformation of his hearers from worldly to eschatological existence.

What is to be learned, then, from their different, even if not really contradictory, positions on this question? I should say that two things are to be learned: (1) that Jesus' idea of God is, in an important respect, new, in that it precludes any thought of meriting God's unconditioned love; and (2) that Jesus' overriding concern is not simply with teaching a new idea of God but with effecting the transition from one (inauthentic) mode of human existence, or self-understanding, to another (authentic) mode.

4 October 2003