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Bible and Church, Bultmann and Augustine: A Response to David Congdon

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Abstract — I respond here to Congdon’s 2014 response to my 2012 essay on Bultmann and Augustine. I argue that although Congdon offers a useful account of Bultmann’s theology and ecclesiology on its own terms, he does not sufficiently relate this to the question of the relationship between biblical interpretation, ecclesiology, and the social nature of knowledge, which I find to be well articulated by Augustine. I critique Bultmann’s application of justification by faith alone to epistemology, which seems to underlie his reticence about the possible epistemological significance of ecclesiology. And I suggest that Bultmann’s program for theological interpretation, although it has enduring depth and challenge, is nonetheless significantly limited as a resource for contemporary theological interpretation.

Key Words — *Bultmann, Augustine, ecclesiology, presuppositions, demythologizing, plausibility structure, social nature of knowledge, biblical truth*

One of the time-honored functions of journal articles is not just to think aloud and try out ideas but also to enter into dialogue with colleagues. So I am grateful to David Congdon for his response to my essay of a couple of years ago on Bultmann and Augustine,¹ and also to Joel Green as editor for giving space to my response to his response.

It is not always easy to respond to a critique of one’s work, as there is a temptation to fall into self-justification, which is usually an unlovely and unedifying spectacle. But I hope that this exchange will perhaps clarify some issues in a way that will be not without value for readers who are interested in the current debates about the nature of theological interpretation.

The key issue in my first essay was what creates for contemporary readers of the Bible the preunderstanding, the expectation, that the Bible

1. David W. Congdon, “Kerygma and Community: A Response to R. W. L. Moberly’s Revisiting of Bultmann,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8 (2014): 1–21; and my “Theological Interpretation, Presuppositions, and the Role of the Church: Bultmann and Augustine Revisited,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6 (2012): 1–22.



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contains, or at least may contain, truth about the living God and about human life as it ought to be in relation to God—rather than, say, solely containing ancient history and fascinating mythology, or solely being a major cultural item in Western civilization. My thesis was that the church (understood widely and flexibly) plays a key role in this preunderstanding, as what sociologists call a “plausibility structure.” In other words, what *we* hold to be true relates to what *significant others* also hold and in the past have held to be true. I suggested that, although Bultmann holds this classic preunderstanding about the Bible, he offers no sufficient account of why he does so. By contrast, I argued that Augustine offers a classic articulation of the point at issue in his famous and often-misunderstood saying, “I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me.” In the secular and post-Christendom context of contemporary life (at any rate in Britain and Europe) it is important to be able to articulate afresh why the Bible should be privileged with the preunderstanding that it contains, or at least may contain, ultimate truth.

CONGDON’S THESIS

Congdon’s primary concern in his essay is, I think, to commend Bultmann as a fundamental resource both for hermeneutics and for missiology in a contemporary context. He starts with my recent essay, at least in part because my essay, in his judgment, nicely illustrates the widespread problem that too many scholars simply misread Bultmann. My reading of him is better than some, but it nonetheless shows “just how far the scholarly world still has to go in order to truly appreciate the life and legacy of Rudolf Bultmann.”²

In the final section of his essay, Congdon seeks freshly to commend Bultmann’s controversial program of demythologizing. He sets out Bultmann’s account of divine grace and its relation to the Christian kerygma, a kerygma that is “simultaneously divine and human, a single divine-human event of proclamation that justifies the sinful hearer.” This kerygma “has to be differentiated from every theological conceptualization or objectification of it (for example, myths, creeds, and doctrines), because those conceptualizations are cultural phenomena that can, at best, only bear witness to the event within a particular time and place.” Indeed, “the kerygma is always open to new situations and new conceptualities. Or as Bultmann would say, the kerygma has to be *translated*.” This point is none other than “the program of demythologizing—a program whose logic is not determined by modernity but by the gospel itself.” This logic, whereby the kerygma must not be restricted to or confused with any of its particular instantiations, applies universally, including to Scripture itself: “Bultmann

2. Congdon, “Response,” 15.

realized it was inconsistent for theologians in the Confessing Church to criticize the confusion of gospel and culture in their present-day context if they were not similarly critical of the confusion of gospel and culture in past contexts, including the context of the NT itself.”³

Congdon suggests two potentially fruitful applications of this insight. First, with regard to contemporary interest in theological interpretation, he suggests that it should help make theological interpreters more rigorously self-critical. The widespread tendency to appeal to a “Rule of Faith” as a necessary presupposition for theological interpretation and to see the content of this rule as “the theological norms conceptualized and codified in the ecumenical creeds,” is “often in danger of failing to interrogate the cultural-historical presuppositions behind these purportedly universal statements of Christian faith.” Theological interpreters “must therefore develop a theological hermeneutic commensurate with the fact that the kerygma cannot be confined or conflated with the assumptions of their particular situation, even if those assumptions are internal to the canonical Scriptures or the ecumenical ‘Rule of Faith.’”⁴

Second, and related, Congdon finds here a crucial missional hermeneutic. Bultmann “anticipated missiological insights within his hermeneutical program long before the intersection of missiology and hermeneutics entered the theological academy.” The point is that “biblical interpreters, like missionaries past and present, must learn that all interpretation, all mission, is about their own conversion to the infinite and unanticipatable translatability of the gospel. . . . A demythologizing hermeneutic is therefore an *emancipatory* hermeneutic that creates a pentecostal space of interpretive freedom for new possibilities of mutual understanding and transcultural hybridity.”⁵

These are major issues that indeed merit serious discussion.

WOULD BULTMANN HAVE AGREED WITH AUGUSTINE?

Despite the intrinsic interest of Congdon’s account of Bultmann, I come away from his essay slightly puzzled. This is because Congdon leaves unclear the issue of how Bultmann (rightly understood) would have responded to the thesis of my essay. My prime concern was not with Bultmann but with Augustine, and specifically Augustine’s famous statement, “I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me.” After setting this in its context of origin, I related it to Berger and Luckmann’s notion of a plausibility structure, which I further developed via Lesslie Newbigin’s account of local congregations as

3. Ibid., 16, 17, 20.

4. Ibid., 18, 19.

5. Ibid., 19, 20.

plausibility structures, so as to argue that “the biblical portrayal of human nature and destiny will present itself to consciousness as reality only to the extent that its appropriate plausibility structure, the church in its many forms, is kept in existence.”⁶ In other words, my thesis was that Bible and church necessarily belong together in ways that, if they are rightly appreciated, offer scope for moving beyond the polarization of Bible and church that has so often derailed Western theology since the Reformation.

My discussion of Bultmann is ancillary to this prime concern—indeed, it might be suggested that I use Bultmann as a springboard for commending Augustine rather as Congdon uses me as a springboard for commending Bultmann. Why discuss Bultmann? The obvious point of entry was that one of Bultmann’s most famous essays on biblical hermeneutics concerns appropriate preunderstandings for biblical interpretation: “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?”⁷ Moreover, Bultmann is one of the giants of 20th-century biblical interpretation and theology; he has the stature to bear some comparison with Augustine. If there are presuppositions or preunderstandings that are validly brought to biblical interpretation, then what does Bultmann consider them to be? Especially if I want to argue that the life and witness of the Christian churches is in important ways a legitimate presupposition, at least for belief in the biblical content, then what does Bultmann have to say about it? Here, I commended Bultmann’s argument for the hermeneutical importance of a life relation to the subject matter of the text, but suggested that Bultmann had other presuppositions also, about which he was silent or perhaps unaware, at least in this specific discussion of the issue. In particular, I contended that Bultmann’s ecclesiology is thin and that he fails to recognize the epistemological importance of the church.

Put differently, nowhere in his essay on presuppositions—or indeed in any other essay of which I am aware (though I may well have missed something)—does Bultmann reflect on how he *knows* that the Bible, or at least the Pauline and Johannine portions of the NT, offers unique and definitive truth (the kerygma). For example, he nowhere argues that he has studied all the world’s great religious texts and traditions and in the light of that study he has decided that he finds in the NT what he finds nowhere else. The conviction of unique and definitive truth in the NT is as much his starting point as his conclusion in his long scholarly career, however much he has had to probe, criticize, and appropriate his starting point so as to arrive at his conclusion. I suggested that it is his lifelong membership of the Lutheran Church, which privileges the NT and indeed privileges a par-

6. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 20.

7. Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden; London: SCM, 1985), 145–53.

ticular emphasis on Paul and John, that has provided him with the crucial preunderstanding of where unique and definitive truth is to be found, and I suggested that he has not sufficiently reflected on how much he owes to this ecclesial context that he has made his own. In effect, I was suggesting that it might be said of Bultmann, even if he would not have said it himself, that “he would not believe the kerygma if the authority of the Lutheran Church did not move him.”

Congdon’s response to my contention that “Bultmann, thoroughgoing Liberal Protestant that he was, had little to say theologically about the church”⁸ is to argue that I have misread him: “Bultmann’s work evinces a longstanding engagement with the question of the church that Moberly seems to have overlooked. . . . our only access to Jesus is *through* the church’s witness to him. Ecclesiology is included at all times *within* Christology. Kerygma is inseparable from the ecclesial community.” Indeed, “in his final statement on the relation between the kerygma and the historical Jesus, Bultmann concludes with the axiomatic statement: ‘There is no faith in Christ which would not be at the same time faith in the church as the bearer of the kerygma, that is, in dogmatic terminology: faith in the Holy Spirit.’”⁹

It is one thing to maintain that Bultmann indeed had an integral ecclesiology, but the significant question in my essay concerns the role that ecclesiology may appropriately play. No doubt kerygma and ecclesiology are inseparable for Bultmann, because that is ultimately a formal and structural observation about the interrelationship of NT, kerygma, and church. This interrelationship Bultmann had no desire to deny, especially in a context of resisting certain kinds of natural theology as proposed by National Socialism. But does such an ecclesiology have epistemological significance in the way that I argue that the Catholic Church has for Augustine? Congdon does not really address this. Toward the end of my essay, I explicitly raised the issue of the possible relationship between Bultmann and Augustine in terms of ecclesiology and the social nature of knowledge. I observed of Bultmann that “when he touches on the social nature of knowledge, it is only family and nation, not church, that are mentioned as formative factors. He would not, I imagine, have given a positive reading to Augustine’s sentence.”¹⁰ But although Congdon takes me to task for misreading Bultmann’s silence about the church in the text to which I was referring,¹¹ he still seems to think it sufficient simply to maintain that Bultmann “does not ignore the church in the least” but rather in reality he had a “very lively

8. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 21.

9. Congdon, “Response,” 10, 11.

10. Moberly, “Theological Interpretation,” 21.

11. Congdon maintains that, “by refraining from putting the church alongside family and *Volk*-community, [Bultmann] was actually preserving the insight that the church is always

interest in it,"¹² without explicitly discussing how his ecclesiology functions in relation to the social nature of knowledge, which was the point at issue.

Would Bultmann have agreed with Augustine? Although Congdon does not address this question, my reading of Congdon makes me more confident than before that the answer to that question is "no." The reason for this "no" is, I think, worth probing, as it relates to Bultmann's programme of demythologizing.

SOME ASPECTS OF DEMYTHOLOGIZING

It is difficult in a short space even to begin to do justice to Bultmann's program of demythologizing. For example, that aspect on which I briefly focused in my essay, the intrinsic limitations of religious language, which necessarily depicts that which lies beyond the world with the categories of the world as though it were something within the world, is not Congdon's concern. For convenience, I will focus solely on those dimensions that Congdon highlights.

First, Congdon emphasizes the importance of distinguishing "between the *subject matter* (*die Sache*) of Scripture and its cultural-historical *form* (inclusive of language, conceptuality, and world-picture)" because "Bultmann's program of demythologizing begins by differentiating between the two." On the one hand, "the kerygma (that is, the subject matter of the text) is permanently alien, because it is the scandal of the crucified Christ." On the other hand, "the mythical world-picture becomes a false scandal when its historical strangeness is made necessary to the kerygma itself, in which case one is forced to believe not only the word of the gospel but also the cultural context within which this gospel originally took root (thereby effectively deifying that ancient cultural situation and rendering the gospel untranslatable into different cultural situations)."¹³

Second, Congdon sets out Bultmann's understanding of demythologizing as intrinsic to the gospel and faith on the grounds that faith "insists on *the liberation from bondage to every world-picture that objectifying thinking conceptualizes*, whether it is the thinking of myth or the thinking of science." In a footnote, he also cites a famous and substantive account of how Bultmann understands the significance of demythologizing for epistemology:

In fact, *radical demythologizing is the parallel to the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification through faith alone without the works of the law. Or, rather, it is the consistent application of this doctrine to the field of knowledge.*

a *missionary* church, always an eschatological reality. Or, as he would later put it, the church is always included in the event of the kerygma" ("Response," 15). I am not sure that I find this account of the silence to be entirely persuasive.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 8, 9.

Like the doctrine of justification, it destroys every false security and every false demand of human beings for security, whether the security is grounded on our good action or on our established knowledge. Those who would believe in God as their God need to know that they have nothing in hand on the basis of which they could believe, that they are poised, so to speak, in midair and cannot request any proof of the truth of the word that addresses them. For the ground and object of faith are identical. They alone find security who let all security go, who—to speak with Luther—are ready to enter into inner darkness.¹⁴

Although the issues here are many and complex, my brief response to these two contentions is that I disagree with both of them, as I do not so understand the Bible or the nature of Christian faith.

First, I do not see how one can so sharply distinguish between an enduring subject-matter and a historically contingent form, between the event of the kerygma and the content of its theological packaging. If the kerygma “is the scandal of the crucified Christ,” then the subject-matter and the form in certain ways are inseparable. “Christ” is an ancient Jewish title, which without Israel’s Scriptures, Jewish reception of those Scriptures in antiquity, and the reworking of the title through the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels, can hardly be understood. “Crucified” depicts a particular form of ancient Roman execution, which not only requires some historical knowledge of what the practice involved but also needs some further account of why this particular crucifixion matters in a way that other crucifixions carried out by the Romans do not. Neither of these terms is meaningful without some knowledge of their first-century context (and the same might perhaps also, though less straightforwardly, be said of the Pauline concept of “scandal”). To say this is not a matter of “effectively deifying that ancient cultural context and rendering the gospel untranslatable into different cultural situations” but rather a matter of maintaining that a particular history and story is necessary for giving content to the gospel, as in the historic Christian practice of privileging the Bible as a whole and the Gospels in particular in worship and study, both corporate and private. It is not a matter of denying that “the biblical writings must be *translated*,”¹⁵ but rather of holding that the content that needs to be translated is not simply detachable from its ancient and originating form.¹⁶

Second, the consistent application of justification through faith alone to epistemology surely cuts down good trees along with bad. To be sure, people can have false securities that need to be removed before they can

14. *Ibid.*, 17 (emphasis original).

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. I find myself in full agreement with the discussion of this issue in the fine recent essay by Kevin Rowe, “The Kerygma of the Earliest Church,” in *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology* (ed. Bruce Longenecker and Mikeal Parsons; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 23–37, esp. pp. 31–34.

genuinely hear and respond to the gospel. The letting-go of things in which one has invested oneself so as to be free to respond to God in faith can indeed feel like entering into darkness. But I cannot see why this has to be the sole account of faith that is given. Bultmann has too little to say about the nature of trust, reason, and judgment, not least of what may move people to make a thoughtful and trusting decision that the content of the Bible and of Christian faith can be life-giving for them. This, I think (if I may venture an impressionistic judgment), lies at the heart of the widespread reservation about Bultmann's program of demythologizing that was often expressed within the churches during his lifetime. It was not that people could not see the point that language drawn from life in this world is intrinsically limited in depicting the reality of God but rather that Bultmann was happy to make negative judgments about the value of content and processes for formulating responsible judgments that people generally find helpful. Congdon reminds us that for Bultmann both historical-critical study and philosophy are "only *negatively* relevant to Christian faith," and that for Bultmann "the Christian is free to investigate history because she does not look to the phenomena of history as the source of her identity *coram deo*."¹⁷ But what if one looks to history, both past and present, not as a potential source of identity but as potentially providing reasons one might or might not trust a certain account of reality in such a way as to dare to discover one's identity *coram deo*? What for Bultmann was a matter of removing obstacles to true faith felt to many like sawing off the branch on which they were sitting. And I cannot see that this feeling is unjustified.

CONCLUSION

There is so much more that might be said. But the purpose of this short essay is not to give any thoroughgoing appraisal of Bultmann, or even a complete response to Congdon's critique of my previous essay. Rather, there are two concerns.

The first is to reiterate the issue of ecclesiology and the social nature of knowledge in relation to taking the Bible seriously as a (potential) source of truth about God and human life. My concerns here seem to me to have been left untouched by Congdon's argument that Bultmann has a more integral ecclesiology than I had credited him with. Although those who wish to offer an account of taking God and the Bible seriously sometimes appeal to philosophy (and presuppositions in a philosophical-cum-theological sense) as a prime resource, and philosophy can indeed play an invaluable role,¹⁸ there are also valuable and underutilized resources that sociology,

17. Congdon, "Response," 5.

18. The conceptual resources of, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre (e.g., *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [London: Duckworth, 1988]) and Nicholas Lash (e.g., *The Beginning and the End of*

and especially sociology of knowledge, offers. One can constructively rethink the relationship of Bible and church in ways that not only offer deliverance from the historic stand-offs between Protestant and Catholic but also make better sense of how and why, in a secular and religiously plural society (or university), it can make sense to recognize certain ancient documents as the Bible and to privilege their contents. Put differently, I think there is an enduring wisdom in Augustine's "I would not believe the gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me."

My second concern is to express reservations about aspects of Bultmann's approach to the Bible at a time when there appears to be a renewed interest in his work.¹⁹ I do not for a moment deny the genius of Bultmann, or wish to denigrate the intellectual and existential rigor, breadth, and depth of his work. Not for nothing is he a major landmark in 20th-century biblical and theological scholarship. There is undoubted need for the work of scholars like David Congdon who seek to clarify the true nature of Bultmann's thought and to establish his achievement in relation to his own context of life and work. Nor can I deny that my own reading of Bultmann, and of the secondary literature related to him, is selective and patchy, or that there are important nuances and distinctions in his thought that have no doubt escaped me.

Nonetheless, unless I am greatly mistaken in such reading as I have done, I think there is need for discernment and reserve in seeking to reclaim Bultmann as a major resource at the present time, not least in the area of theological interpretation of Scripture.²⁰ One undoubted factor in this judgment is that I work primarily in the field of OT interpretation, where the kind of work that I do—as indicated by the subtitle of my most recent book, *Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture*²¹—would have been unthinkable for Bultmann himself (whose limited appreciation of the OT dismayed not a few of his contemporaries). The resources of the recent literary and hermeneutical turns in scholarship were largely unknown to Bultmann, but they substantially reconfigure the interpretive challenges. But perhaps the bottom line is that in important ways I simply disagree with Bultmann (insofar as I understand him) about God's ways with the world as these should be understood in the light of Scripture. I do not for

Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) are in my judgment indispensable for *ressourcement* and fresh light in theological interpretation of Scripture.

19. In addition to Congdon's own work, and the material he cites in his first footnote ("Response," 1), there is the significant recent volume by Bruce Longenecker and Mikeal Parsons, eds., *Beyond Bultmann: Reckoning a New Testament Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

20. This is a recurrent note also in the essays in *Beyond Bultmann*, alongside enormous respect for Bultmann's achievement.

21. R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

a moment doubt or deny that Christ, and faith in Christ crucified and risen that is given through God's grace, should be at the heart of understanding and entering into God's ways with the world. But the question is how this works out and what it does and does not entail. Congdon, for example, cites Bultmann as holding that "human beings outside Christian faith are indeed unable to come to an answer [to the question of God]. . . . [Christian faith] claims that *all* answers outside the Christian answer are *illusions*."²² If this means what it says, then I beg to differ. I do not believe the theological content and affirmations of Israel's Scriptures to be illusory, nor do I believe that the other "Abrahamic" faiths, Judaism and Islam, whatever their possible deficiencies from a Christian perspective, are illusory. Or at any rate, they are not necessarily illusory, and if in practice they can be illusory that is equally true of much Christian faith also.

In other words, I find Bultmann's vision of theology, faith, and the Bible to be in certain ways constricted and constricting. If this invites a *tu quoque* in terms of the limitations of my own preferred frame of reference, so be it. Let debate continue! But I would plead that any revival of interest in Bultmann, other than strictly in terms of historical theology, should submit his preferred categories of thought to critical interaction with other categories of thought, both older and more recent than his, which offer other ways of taking seriously the challenges of Christian faith and faithfulness for biblical interpretation in the contemporary world.

22. Congdon, "Response," 3 (citing Bultmann's "Die Frage der natürlichen Offenbarung," in *Glauben und Verstehen* [4 vols.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1952–67], 2:86).