Apocalypse as Perpetual Advent:

The Christmas Sermons of Rudolf Bultmann

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One could narrate the story of twentieth-century theology in terms of a tension between incarnation and crucifixion: a theology of incarnation focuses on God's noncompetitive presence while a theology of the cross focuses on God's competitive inbreaking. Rudolf Bultmann ended his programmatic lecture on demythologizing by quoting John 1:14—"The word became flesh"—and wrote extensively on the Gospel of John. He saw John 1 attesting the paradox of the eschatological God present noncompetitively in human history. By contrast, his student Ernst Käsemann, the initiator of contemporary apocalyptic theology, focused on the cosmic event of God's reign in the crucified Christ and charged the Fourth Gospel with a "naïve docetism."[1] Their dispute over eschatology and apocalyptic could be construed as a divide between incarnation and crucifixion, between Johannine theology and Pauline theology.[2] The descendants of Bultmann are typically found among liberal theologians, especially those in the process school thanks to the influence of Schubert Ogden. These theologians can be characterized as basically incarnational in their approach: they have a thoroughly noncompetitive view of God and Christian theology, which leads them to find significant points of contact between theology and other disciplines, such as science, history, psychology, and philosophy. The descendants of Käsemann, by contrast, are found especially in the burgeoning school of apocalyptic theology,

[1] Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, 26.

[2] This distinction between "incarnation" and "crucifixion" is, of course, a false contrast that I am using merely to highlight the tensions evident in modern theology. I am not suggesting, for instance, that Bultmann ignores the cross or that apocalyptic ignores incarnation—far from it. I am suggesting instead that it is *plausible*—though not actually accurate—to interpret Bultmann and apocalyptic as having their centers of gravity in incarnation and crucifixion, respectively.

which can be characterized as basically crucicentric in its approach. Theirs is a radically disruptive and competitive view of God's relation with the world. All "points of contact" are denied. Fleming Rutledge perhaps epitomizes this perspective in her recent work on *The Crucifixion* in which she declares that "the cross itself is the definitive *apokalypsis* of God."[3]

The divide between Bultmann's incarnation-theology and apocalyptic's cross-theology often seems unbridgeable. What I want to argue in this paper, however, is that Bultmann is himself an apocalyptic theologian—and he displays his apocalypticism at precisely the place where his theology is most incarnational, namely, in the sermons he gave during the Advent season at the University of Marburg. I will suggest that Bultmann presents an apocalyptic account of God's advent. Incarnation and crucifixion are paradoxically identical in the kerygma.

I.

Before we look at Bultmann's sermons, we first need to clarify what we mean by apocalyptic. The debate between Bultmann and Käsemann in the 1960s focused on the distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic. Eschatology for Bultmann refers to the transcendent otherness of divine action; it is eschatological because it comes *from* the future but it meets us *in* the present. Eschatology is not about the future but about *futurity*—an orientation toward the world and ourselves that sees all things in the light of the God who encounters us from beyond history. Eschatology for Bultmann is a *realized* eschatology because the decisive eschatological event has already occurred in Christ. Apocalyptic, by contrast, was understood by Bultmann to be a worldview that makes concrete claims about world history itself—not about the past or the present but about the *future*, understood as the scene of God's action. The future within apocalyptic is not a predicate of God but rather a predicate of the world: it refers to history as

[3] Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 353.

generally experienced by people regardless of faith. The defining characteristic of apocalyptic in the early 1960s—for both Bultmann and Käsemann—was the concept of "imminent expectation," the notion that faith expects the imminent arrival of the Messiah. To summarize, Bultmann's eschatology referred to God's future meeting us in the present on the basis of an event that had already occurred in the past. Käsemann's apocalyptic referred to God's imminent arrival in the future to fulfill the coming of the kingdom promised in the prophets and Jesus Christ.

If this distinction sounds different from today's textbooks, that's because it is. Take a look at Rutledge's recent work on the crucifixion, for example. She also reflects at length on the distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic, referring to the mid-twentieth century debate. "The words 'eschatology' and 'apocalyptic,' though future-oriented, are not interchangeable," she writes. "The key apocalyptic idea, to be developed further in later chapters, is *the sovereign intervention of God*."[4] Later she defines apocalyptic as the belief that "the cross/resurrection event is a genuine *novum*, a first-order reversal of all previous arrangements," and thus "not an inevitable final stage in an orderly process, or an accumulation of progressive steps toward a goal."[5] Apocalyptic claims that this *novum* is a present reality now and thus "the apocalyptic perspective is 'bifocal.'"[6] It sees both the present age and the age to come simultaneously. Rutledge refers here to the work of J. Louis Martyn, who is especially responsible for this shift from the imminent future to the present. But Martyn himself was developing the position of the later Käsemann. In 1980, four years after Bultmann's death, Käsemann says that "God's royal dominion is not merely imminent in the near future. It has instead already begun with the word

[4] Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, 222.
[5] Ibid., 355.
[6] Ibid., 356.

and work of Jesus."[7] Martyn and Rutledge, among others, highlight this present, disruptive agency of God as the defining characteristic of apocalyptic. *Eschatology, in their view, refers to a collapse of God's future into the future actualized by the human subject. Apocalyptic, by contrast, is a view that acknowledges God's action here and now to bring about something genuinely new.*

We are now in a position to turn to Bultmann.

II.

Bultmann regularly preached at the University of Marburg chapel. Thirteen of his published homilies were preached during the liturgical seasons of Advent or Christmas. These were delivered between 1907 and 1943. What makes these sermons of special interest is the way they document the transformation of Bultmann's theology as a result of his conversion, so to speak, to dialectical theology in 1920—a conversion, I suggest, to apocalyptic theology.

Take, for example, his sermon on December 10, 1911, which had the title, "What does faith in the future mean for us?" He begins by recognizing that "early Christianity was a religion of hope," but this cannot be normative for us today, he argues, because "we all know we live in a great community of culture and work, and every day we enjoy its goods. . . . If we live for the future, it is a future in this world. If we believe in a future, it is the future our work creates."[8] According to the young Bultmann, Advent teaches us that "as much as we are committed to work, what the outcome will be is *wholly* God's gift."[9] Here we have an example of what Rutledge calls eschatology—a theology of the future as the conclusion to a process controlled by human beings, rather than by God's sovereign action.

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[7] Käsemann, *Kirchliche Konflikte*, 215.
[8] Bultmann, *Das verkündigte Wort*, 66–67.
[9] Ibid., 74.

Thirteen years later, however, we find Bultmann preaching a very different message. Instead of faith in a generic future towards which we can work, Bultmann proclaims an *event* that has fundamentally changed the world. On December 19, 1924, he preached on the "God is love" passage in 1 John. He opens the sermon by declaring that "we are not celebrating an idea but an event."[10] To say "God is love" means that "what takes place there is not something that can be understood as the result of a development, not even a moral development, but rather there takes place something new, something wondrous, which is in a true sense an event."[11] This event, he says, "has a wholly concrete content: God forgives sin." And in this event "God makes us new; God leads us from the old, from the shadow, from death into the new, the light, the life—from appearance into reality."[12] In this sermon Bultmann articulates a sovereign divine action that inaugurates a radical discontinuity between the old and the new. In other words, he expresses precisely the themes that Rutledge identifies as characterizing apocalyptic, as opposed to eschatology.

This isn't the only example. Two years later, on December 17, 1926, Bultmann preached on John 1:14, "The word became flesh." This sermon is important because of the way it demonstrates Bultmann's "third way" between an eschatology that emphasizes the freedom of the human subject and an apocalyptic that emphasizes the sovereign freedom of God. "The message of Christmas," he says, "is that there is a *second beginning*; that event, 'the word became flesh,' is this beginning." But what is the nature of this new beginning? Bultmann here walks a fine line, as he does throughout his theology. On the one hand, this event is not a "world-historical occurrence," by which he means something that is objectively visible for all people, like a volcanic eruption or a beautiful autumn morning, whose effects we participate in whether

[10] Ibid., 208.
[11] Ibid., 210–11.
[12] Ibid., 211–12.

we choose to or not. In contrast to such occurrences, the event of Christ's advent confronts us with "the *choice* whether this beginning will be our beginning." On the other hand, Bultmann goes on to clarify that this event is not merely a product of individual or collective imagination. The advent of Christ "*is* in fact always the beginning for us, whether we want it to be or not. We *choose* always only in which sense it will be the beginning for us."[13] The new beginning of Christ's advent is neither an objective datum nor a subjective illusion; it is an advent whose reality "always demands our decision," a decision that does not constitute the reality of this event but rather confirms the truth of the advent as a truth that concerns our existence.

On December 16, 1931, Bultmann preached on the passage in John 3 where John says "the light has come into the world." Bultmann declares that "the coming of the Lord, which the Christian community anticipates in Advent and celebrates at Christmas, is not at all primarily his coming to the individual, his entering into the soul, but rather his coming to the *world*." He then cites one of his favorite lines from Luther: "the eternal light enters in, giving the *world* a new appearance." He stresses the actuality of this coming when he says "the Lord *has* come, that the eternal light *has* given the world a new appearance," and thus in Advent "we await one who has already come, who is already here."[14] The one who came already in history comes ever again in the word that confronts us with the ultimate decision. This word—the proclamation or kerygma in which Christ is present to us today—places us before the decisive question "whether we love the light or the darkness."[15] Here again we see Bultmann holding in tension both the *objectivity* of Christ's historical advent, in which he interrupted and transformed the world, and the *subjectivity* of Christ's advent, in which he interrupts and transforms *me*. Advent thus characterizes the past, present, and future of Christianity.

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[13] Ibid., 236–38.
[14] Ibid., 240.
[15] Ibid., 243.

For Bultmann, the Christian life is thus a life of perpetual advent. Bultmann himself recognizes this in his sermon on December 12, 1943. There he says that "to be a Christian means to be one who waits for God's future. Hence for the Christian perhaps all seasons are essentially an Advent season."[16] The event of advent is one that occurs perpetually anew; each moment holds the possibility of being the occasion for Christ to give the world a new appearance.

III.

What I want to suggest now in closing is that Bultmann's theology of perpetual advent is a genuinely *apocalyptic* theology. The caricature of Bultmann's eschatology is that it denies real divine action, is subjective in the extreme, and disregards the world in favor of a vicious individualism. What I am suggesting here is that Bultmann's advent theology is instead premised on genuine divine action that is simultaneously objective and subjective and concerns the world as a whole.

Moreover, the theme of expectation that is so central to Käsemann's work, especially in his earlier writings, is not abandoned by Bultmann at all but rather retained, and is even made central to his theology. Käsemann identifies imminent expectation as the framework of early Christian theology, which proved later to be a "delusion." Bultmann challenges Käsemann regarding the centrality of this expectation for early Christianity, but he does not reject expectation as such, as some apocalyptic interpreters suggest. Bultmann instead translates the *historical* imminent expectation of early Christianity into the *existential* imminent expectation that is essential to Christian faith. It is this existential version of imminent expectation that Bultmann considered the "mother of all Christian theology," but he tended to refer to this as *present or realized eschatology*. Bultmann opposed a very specific understanding of apocalyptic,

[16] Bultmann, *This World and the Beyond*, 210.

but it was taken as a rejection of apocalyptic *in toto*. The result was a false picture of apocalyptic on one side versus eschatology on the other. This was a convenient rubric but it lacked explanatory power. This is as true with respect to apocalyptic theology as it is with Bultmann. The work of J. Louis Martyn and Fleming Rutledge, among many others, shows that there is hardly a monolithic conception of apocalyptic operative even among its strongest proponents. If we accept Rutledge's basic definition—which emphasizes God's sovereign intervention to bring about a fundamentally new reality—then I suggest we can and should see Bultmann as an apocalyptic theologian. If we narrow the definition to exclude Bultmann, we risk also excluding others who are self-described proponents of apocalyptic.

Bultmann's distinctive form of apocalyptic theologian does not operate with the usual binary options. His approach tends to see objective and subjective as paradoxically identical; the one is impossible without the other. Similarly, I want to suggest, Bultmann sees advent and crucifixion as paradoxically identical. The past advent of Christ inaugurated a new reality that repeatedly confronts us anew as Christ comes to us ever again in the word proclaimed. But this advent is not a comfortable, kitschy Christmas lullaby that confirms the world as it is. For Bultmann the advent is an eschatological event that disrupts our existence. As he says in his commentary on John, Jesus is "the one who always shatters the given, who always destroys every security, who always irrupts from the beyond and calls into the future."[17] If this isn't apocalyptic, I don't know what is.

In other words, I want to suggest that Bultmann's apocalyptic theology unifies incarnation and crucifixion in the word-event of gospel proclamation in which Christ is present. This should come as little surprise. Elsewhere in his John commentary, Bultmann says explicitly that Christ's beginning and end are a single event:

[17] Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 431.

> The coming and the going of Jesus are a unity. Of course, his coming and his action would be nothing without his "glorification" through the passion. But this is not added to it as something new, for from the beginning it has already been contained in his coming; his death is only the demonstration of what has always happened in and since his incarnation. . . . The cross shows . . . the whole truth of ["the word became flesh"].[18]

Seen from this perspective, it should come as little surprise that Bultmann's theology of advent is indistinguishable from an apocalyptic theology of crucifixion. Just as Rutledge sees the cross not as a moment in the distant past but in terms of a cosmic war raging on our streets, so too Bultmann sees Christ's advent not as a single historical occurrence but as a perpetual event constantly shattering our old self-understanding and confronting us with the new reality breaking into our midst each day, here and now.

[18] Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 467–68.