



BOOK REVIEW

Samuel Andrew Shearn, *Pastor Tillich: The Justification of the Doubter*

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In *Pastor Tillich: The Justification of the Doubter*, Samuel Shearn provides a carefully researched analysis of Tillich's early professional life and thought, all for the purpose of making this content available to those who cannot access Tillich's work in its original language (German). Instead of focusing on Tillich as a 'therapeutic theologian', something for which he became known after moving to America in 1933, Shearn examines Tillich's encounter with religious doubt where it began, first among his parishioners as a newly minted pastor and then among soldiers as a chaplain in the trenches of the First World War. While excessive attention to methodology and detail makes the analysis sometimes read more like a dissertation than a monograph, Shearn effectively shows how Tillich's understanding of doubt in relation to faith *develops* in the contexts of ministry and war. He also makes an original contribution to the field by uncovering evidence that substantiates a fascinating link between Tillich and Martin Luther on the topic of justification by grace.

Any Tillich specialist knows he updated Luther's message of grace by applying it to doubt. Tillich mentions it multiple times in his memoirs. Nobody, however, knows its genesis – at least not as Shearn presents it. The story begins in 1909. Tillich had recently completed his graduate studies in philosophy and theology. Following his father, he entered the ministry, where he promoted in sermon after sermon the strict moralism of his upbringing as well as the orthodoxy he had embraced during his student days in a Christian fraternity. Then something changed. Tillich realised his preaching was missing the mark. Neither he nor his parishioners were terror-stricken the way Luther and his late-medieval contemporaries had been regarding the apparent impossibility of satisfying God through the performance of good works. Their problem was the burden of *belief*, not the burden of *sin*. A pastoral 'intervention' was accordingly necessary.

Luther's intervention occurred by his own account after a breakthrough he experienced while studying the letters of Paul, who teaches that salvation comes from God by grace alone. Nothing we do can make us right with God, which explains why God meets and embraces *us* unconditionally through Christ. This discovery, often called Luther's 'tower experience' (because it allegedly occurred while he was reading scripture in the tower of the monastery where he was living), brought him immense relief from the debilitating fear that he could never merit God's favour on his own. It also led him to seek the same for his parishioners by preaching to them the good news that God had freed them in Christ from having to earn God's love through works of penance. Instead, good works should serve as a response born of gratitude

for the unmerited love sinners receive as a gift from God through Christ. The Reformation had begun.

When Tillich took to the pulpit 400 years later, he also saw the need for an intervention among his parishioners based upon a similar 'breakthrough'. Shearn sees evidence for this in the preparation of a sermon Tillich composed for Sunday, 31 May 1909. 'Abandoning a first draft', Shearn writes, 'Tillich [rewrote] the sermon and [spoke] for the first time about Christ meeting the doubting sinner in the darkness of despair with a message of double grace: You need do nothing, you need not hold anything to be true' (p. 14). One can imagine the relief such a message brought to the members of Tillich's congregation who earnestly found themselves *trying to believe*, only to realise they could not convince themselves that 'God exists' simply by an act of will. 'I am content to call [the] crisis [Tillich had] an experience of the "breakthrough" of grace to the sinner who is also a doubter', Shearn observes, marking his fundamental contribution to Tillich studies. 'But in this moment of rescue, Christ's presence with the despairing sinner covers not only the sin but the sinner's *modern* inability – the inability to believe the truth' (p. 219).

The connection Shearn postulates between Luther and Tillich should thus be clear: both men not only *sought relief* from the burden placed upon them and their contemporaries thanks to graceless expressions of the Christian faith. They *found it* in the breakthrough they experienced of grace which they subsequently applied to the differing spiritual predicaments of the times in which they lived. By letting go of the desire to make oneself acceptable to God through morality *or* belief, a new encounter with the divine could emerge, the kind that led Luther from hating God to loving God and Tillich from the untenable 'God' of popular theism to 'faith without objectification' (p. 201). Unfortunately, Shearn draws other comparisons in his analysis that bear less fruit. For example, he repeatedly observes how the mature Tillich sometimes misremembers his early intellectual development, even though the discrepancies (at least to the present reviewer) seem trivial.

The result of Shearn's archival work could have led to an additional comparison truly worth making, however. It appears in Tillich's surprising affirmation of the 'suffering God who reigns in weakness' (p. 150) as evident in sermons he preached during the First World War. While Shearn helpfully notes how Tillich anticipates in these sermons the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann, he overlooks the radical discontinuity between what Tillich says here and what he argues in his mature reiteration of classical theism as evident in his doctrine of God as being-itself. Attention to this discrepancy would have helped Shearn more effectively fulfil another goal he identifies at the outset of his analysis, namely, to situate Tillich's early writings within the broader enterprise of twentieth century theology – including Tillich's own.

Criticism aside, *Pastor Tillich: The Justification of the Doubter* fills the gap of Tillich's early theological development for those who cannot access it due to the language barrier. This text would also be an indispensable resource for anyone who finds reading Tillich as a modern descendant of Luther (theologically and pastorally) illuminating. Perhaps the chief importance of Shearn's work would be to contemporary Christians for whom belief in 'God' has paradoxically become an obstacle to their faith in God/experience of God. This will depend, however, on theologically competent pastors who are willing to devote themselves to understanding Shearn's technical analysis and then explaining it, even if that means focusing exclusively on how 'you need not hold anything to be true' can be the very word of grace the modern (or postmodern) doubter so desperately needs to hear.