

The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 10: The Experience of the Holy

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and is train filled the temple Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: The whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then said, "I, Here am I; send me." And he said, "Go, and tell this people, hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.

Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." Then said I, "Lord, how long?" And he answered, "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant,

And the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate. And the Lord have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof. ISAIAH 6.

This chapter is one of the greatest in the Old Testament. It clearly reveals the essence of Biblical Religion. The prophet describes the vision of his vocation and pictures which express at the same time his fundamental experience of God, his interpretation of human existence, and his conception of the prophet's task. His experience of God is an experience of the holiness of God. He interprets man's condition as one of uncleanness and inability to face God. The prophet's task is paradoxically set against the natural meaning of prophecy. These three ideas belong together and comprise perhaps the highest expression ever given to the

prophetic spirit.

The prophet does not describe God Himself in any way. He speaks only of the train which filled the temple, of the angels surrounding the Lord's throne, of the shaking of the foundation, and of the smoke filling the house. In this manner he indicates that the revelation of God is at the same time the veiling of God. God can reveal Himself only by remaining veiled. But even the veiled revelation makes Isaiah feel that he is perishing. The facing of God, even if it be a mere approaching to His sphere, even if God Himself remain hidden, means the annihilation of man.

The same feeling is expressed in the cry of the seraphim "Holy" has a double meaning, as the context clearly shows. It means the majesty of which the world is full; and it means purity as against human impurity. Glory without purity is the character of all pagan gods. And purity without glory is the character of all the humanistic ideas of God. Humanism has transformed the inaccessibility of God into the sublimity of His moral commands. Humanism has forgotten that God's majesty, as experienced by the prophet, implies the shaking of the foundation wherever He appears, and the veil of smoke whenever He shows Himself. When God is identified with an element in human nature, as in humanism, the terrifying and annihilating encounter with majesty becomes an impossibility. But "Holy" means also moral perfection, purity, goodness, truth, and justice. God's glory can fulfill all the world, only because He is holy in this double sense. The glory of the gods who are not holy in this double sense can fulfill only one country, one family or tribe, one nation or state, or one sphere of human life. Consequently, they do not possess the truth and justice and purity of the God Who is really God. They are demons aspiring to holiness, but excluded from it, because their glory is majesty without purity. Therefore, let us say, during this time particularly, "Thou only art holy!"

The prophet confesses that he is a man of unclean lips, and that he lives in the midst of a people with unclean lips. He emphasizes his lips, because his work is preaching; but the impurity of his lips symbolizes the impurity of his entire existence, and of the existence of individuals and society as a whole. Isaiah exhibits profound insight, when he identifies himself with his unclean people in the very moment that he is made worthy of his exceptional vision. The difference between mystical and prophetic religion lies in that insight. For even in the greatest ecstasy, a prophet does not forget the social group to which he belongs, and its unclean character which he cannot lose. Consequently, the prophetic ecstasy, as opposed to the mystical ecstasy, is never an end in itself, but rather the means of receiving the divine commands which are to be preached to the people. Isaiah's vision reveals the two conditions for prophetic existence. The lips of the prophet must first be purified by fire. He can then hear the Voice of God, the condition for his being sent by God. Nobody can be the prophet of God through his own strength; and nobody can absolve himself. Only the power of Divine Holiness, having touched our existence, can bring us near to God. Something of our existence, sin, iniquity, or uncleanness must *be* burned away, must be annihilated. Only through such annihilation can God speak to us and through us. But whether or when He speaks to us at all does not depend upon us in any way. Isaiah did not produce either the vision or the purification. He was overcome with terror and awe. And he had to act. For God asks, "Who will go for us?" God waits for the answer. He does not compel. Isaiah's decision to go must be free. Freedom of decision is the second condition for prophetic existence. A prophet must decide whether or not he will dedicate himself to the task. With respect to our fate and vocation we are free; with respect to our relation to God we are powerless. The majesty of God is evident in either case.

The prophet then describes the content of the divine command. "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes." Our natural moral feelings refuse to accept such a paradox. For if we speak, we wish to make ourselves heard; and when we preach, we wish to convert and to heal. But the prophet accepts the divine command. And when his natural feeling impels him to ask, "How long?" he receives the answer, "Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate!" No hope or promise is expressed. What is the meaning of that paradox? It means that true prophets are the instruments of God in the actualization of His judgment against mankind. They are

instruments in so far as the prophetic word always excites the opposition of man with respect to both his vital existence and his moral and religious existence -- indeed, particularly with respect to his religious existence.

All people desire false prophets, who, through the glorification of their gods, glorify their followers and themselves. People long to be flattered in regard to their desires and virtues, their religious feeling and social activity, their will to power and utopian hopes, their knowledge and love, their family and race, their class and nation. And a false prophet can always be found to glorify the demon they worship. But when the voice of the true prophet is raised, they shut their ears, they contradict his statements, and they ultimately persecute and kill him, because they are not able to receive his message. The order endures until the prophet's words are fulfilled, and the cities are destroyed, and the land is made desolate.

We are all eager for the prophetic spirit. We are anxious to lead the people to a new justice and to a better social order. We long to save the nations from a threatening doom. But does *our* word, if it be God's word, have better effect than that which Isaiah saw in his vision and experienced in his life? Are we more than he was? Are our people today less devoted to demons than his people were? If not, can we expect anything other than what he was told to expect through his vision? We must pray for the prophetic spirit which has been dead for so long in the Churches. And he who feels that he has been given the prophetic task must fulfill it as Isaiah did. He must preach the message of a new justice and of a new social order in the name of God and His honour. But he must expect to be opposed and persecuted not only by his enemies, but also by his friends, party, class, and nation. He must expect to be persecuted to the degree to which his word is the word of that God Who alone is holy, that God Who alone is able to create a holy people out of the remnant of every nation.

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