

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 18: Waiting

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord There is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption.

Psalm 130:5-7.

For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. Romans 8:24-25.

Both the Old and the New Testaments describe our existence in relation to God as one of waiting. In the psalmist there is an anxious waiting; in the apostle there is a patient waiting. Waiting means *not* having and having at the same time. For we have *not* what we wait for; or, as the apostle says, if we hope for what we do *not* see, we *then* wait for it. The condition of man's relation to God is first of all one of *not* having, *not* seeing, *not* knowing, and *not* grasping. A religion in which that is forgotten, no matter how ecstatic or active or reasonable, replaces God by its own creation of an image of God. Our religious life is characterized more by that kind of creation than anything else. I think of the theologian who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within a doctrine. I think of the Biblical student who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in a book. I think of the churchman who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed in an institution. I think of the believer who does not wait for God, because he possesses Him, enclosed within his own experience. It is not easy to endure this not having God, this waiting for God. It is not easy to preach Sunday after Sunday without convincing ourselves and others that we *have* God and can dispose of Him. It is not easy to proclaim God to children and pagans, to skeptics and secularists, and at the same time to make clear to them that we ourselves do not possess God, that we too wait for Him. I am convinced that much of the rebellion against Christianity is due to the overt or veiled claim of the Christians to possess God, and therefore, also, to the loss of this element of waiting, so decisive for the prophets and the apostles. Let us not be deluded into thinking that, because they speak of waiting, they waited merely for the end, the judgment and fulfillment of all things, and not for God Who was to bring that end. They did not possess God; they waited for Him. For how can God be possessed? Is God a thing that can be grasped and known among other things? Is God less than a human person? We always have to wait

for a human being. Even in the most intimate communion among human beings, there is an element of *not* having and *not* knowing, and of waiting. Therefore, since God is infinitely hidden, free, and incalculable, we must wait for Him in the most absolute and radical way. He is God for us just in so far as we do *not* possess Him. The psalmist says that his whole being waits for the Lord, indicating that waiting for God is not merely a part of our relation to God, but rather the condition of that relation as a whole. We have God though *not* having Him.

But, although waiting is *not* having, it is also having. The fact that we wait for something shows that in some way we already possess it. Waiting anticipates that which is not yet real. If we wait in hope and patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us. He who waits in an ultimate sense is not far from that for which he waits. He who waits in absolute seriousness is already grasped by that for which he waits. He who waits in patience has already received the power of that for which he waits. He who waits passionately is already an active power himself, the greatest power of transformation in personal and historical life. We are stronger when we wait than when we possess. When we possess God, we reduce Him to that small thing we knew and grasped of Him; and we make it an idol. Only in idol worship can one believe in the possession of God. There is much of this idolatry among Christians.

But if we know that we do not know Him, and if we wait for Him to make Himself known to us, we then really know something of Him, we then are grasped and known and possessed by Him. It is *then* that we are believers in our unbelief, and that we are accepted by Him in spite of our separation from Him.

Let us not forget, however, that waiting is a tremendous tension. It precludes all complacency about having nothing, indifference or cynical contempt towards those who have something, and indulgence in doubt and despair. Let us not make our pride in possessing nothing a new possession. That is one of the great temptations of our time, for there are few things left which we can claim as possessions. And we surrender to the same temptation when we boast, in our attempt to possess God, that we do not possess Him. The divine answer to such an attempt is utter emptiness. Waiting is not despair. It is the acceptance of our not having, in the power of that which we already have.

Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny. And every time is a time of waiting, waiting for the breaking in of eternity. All time runs forward. All time, both in history and in personal life, is expectation. Time itself is waiting, waiting not for another time, but for that which is eternal.

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