

## 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 22: Behold, I Am Doing a New Thing

*Thus says the Lord Who made a way through the sea, A path through the mighty waters.  
Remember not the former things,  
Neither consider the things of old.  
Behold, I am doing a new thing,  
Even now it is springing to light.  
Do you not perceive it?  
A way will I make in the wilderness  
And rivers in the desert! Isaiah 43:16, 18-19.*

Let us listen to words of the Old and New Testaments which speak of the new that God makes in life and history.

*Behold the days come, saith the Lord,  
That I will make a new covenant  
With the house of Israel  
And with the house of Judah.  
Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers  
On the day that I took them by the hand  
I?o bring them out of the land of Egypt;  
Which my covenant they brake,  
So that I had to reject them.  
But this shall be the covenant  
That I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord:  
I will put my law within them  
And write it in their hearts;  
And I will be their God  
And they shall be my people. ...  
For I will forgive their guilt  
And I will remember their sin no more. Jeremiah 31:31-34.*

*(Thus says the Lord God:)*

*I will give them a new heart,  
And I will put a new spirit within them.  
I will remove their heart of stone  
And will give them a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 11:19.*

*(Thus says the Lord God:)  
I ignore the troubles of the past.  
I shut mine eyes to them.  
For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth.  
The past shall be forgotten  
And never come to mind.  
Men shall rejoice forever in what I now create. Isaiah 65:16, 17.*

But let us not omit the tragic words of the Preacher. *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,*

*Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.  
What has been is what shall be;  
What has gone on is what shall go on;  
And there is nothing new under the sun.  
Is there a thing of which it is said:  
Lo, this is new?  
It was already in existence in the ages  
Which were before us. Ecclesiastes 1:2, 9-10.*

And this is the answer the apostle gives:

*Therefore if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, all things have become new. I Corinthians 5:17*

*(And Jesus said to them:) No one puts a piece of new cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into new wineskins, and so both are preserved. Matthew 9:16-17.*

And finally, let us listen to the seer of the New Testament:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.  
And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down . . . and I heard a great voice from the throne  
saying: Behold, the dwelling of God is with men . . . he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death  
shall be no more, for the former things have passed away. . . . Behold, I make all things new. Revelation  
21:1-5.*

Let us meditate on the old and the new, in ourselves and in our world. In these Biblical texts the new contrasted with the old: the old is rejected and there is stated, in passionate words, expectation of the new. Even the Preacher, who denies the possibility of anything really new on earth, does not hide his longing for the new, and his disappointment in not being able to find it. Why do these writers feel and speak in this way? Why do they prefer the new to the old, and why do they believe that God is the God of the new? Why do they demand and expect the new birth, the new heart, the new man, the new covenant, the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth?

They do not announce the new because they believe what many people of the last decades have believed: that the later things are better than the former things simply *because* they are later; that new developments are more divine than old ones, because they are nearer to a final perfection; that God guarantees a perpetual progress, and that for *this* reason He is the God of the new. Against such illusions the disappointed words of the Preacher are true for all history. And certainly such illusions are not the content of the prophetic and apostolic preaching concerning the new. What is the content of their expectation? What do they mean when they warn us not to consider the things of old? What are those old things, and what are the new things which they ask us to see and to accept?

"Old" sometimes means that which lasts though all times, that which is today as it was in the past and as it shall be in all the future. There is something that does not age, something that is always old and always new at the same time, because it is eternal. God is sometimes called the "ancient of days" or the "Redeemer of old". The wisdom of old and the law of God, which are as old as the foundations of the earth, are praised just because they are old; nothing new is set against them as no new God is set against the God of old. "Old" as it is used here means "everlasting", pointing to that which is not subject to the change of time.

But in the texts we have read from the words of the unknown prophet of the exile, in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, "old" means just the opposite. It means that which passes away and shall not be remembered any more -- the destiny of everything created, of the stars as well as of the grass in the field, of men as well as of animals, of nations as well as of individuals, of the heavens as well as of the earth. They all become old and pass away. What does it mean to say that somebody or something becomes old? All life grows; it desires and strives to grow, and it lives as long as it grows. Men always have been fascinated by the law of growth.

They have called that which helps growth good, and they have called that which hinders it evil. But let us look more deeply into the law of growth and into its tragic nature. Whether we observe the growth of a living cell or of a human soul or of a historical period, we see that growth is gain and loss at the same time; it is both fulfillment and sacrifice. Whatever grows must sacrifice many possible developments for the one through which it chooses to grow. He who wants to grow as a scientist may have to sacrifice poetic or political possibilities which he would like to develop. He has to pay a price. He cannot grow equally in all directions. The cells which adapt themselves to one function of the body lose the power to adapt themselves to other functions. Periods of history which are determined by one idea suppress the truth of other possible ideas. Every decision excludes possibilities and makes our life narrower. Every decision makes us older and more mature.

Youth is openness. But every decision closes doors. And that cannot be avoided; it is an inescapable destiny. Life makes decisions in every moment; life closes doors in every moment. We proceed from the first minute of our lives to the last minute, *because* we are growing. The law of growth lends us greatness, and therefore tragedy. For the excluded possibilities belong to us; they have a right of their own. Therefore, they take their vengeance upon our lives which have excluded them. They may die; and with them, great powers of life and large resources of creativity. For life, as it grows, becomes a restricted power, more rigid and inflexible, less able to adapt itself to new situations and new demands. Or, on the other hand, the excluded possibilities may *not* die. They may remain within us, repressed, hidden, and dangerous, prepared to break into the life process, not as a creative resource, but as a destructive disease. Those are the two ways in which the aging life drives toward its own end: the way of self-limitation, and the way of self-destruction. Often the two ways merge, carrying death into all realms of life.

Let us consider one of these realms -- our historical situation, the life of our period. Our period has become what it is though innumerable decisions and, therefore, innumerable exclusions. Some of the excluded possibilities have died away, depriving us of their creative power. Many of them have not died, and after having disappeared for a time, are now returning destructively. The former greatness of our period has produced its present tragedy and that of all who live within it. Even those who are young amongst us are old,

in so far as they belong to an aged period. They are young in their personal vitality; they are old because of their participation in the tragedy of our time. It is an illusion to believe that youth *as youth* has saving power. When the ancient empires aged and died, their youth did not save them. And our younger generation will not save us, simply by virtue of the fact that it is young.

We have made many decisions in order to become what we are. But every decision is tragic, because it is the decision against something which cannot be suppressed with impunity.

At the beginning of our period we decided for *freedom*. It was a right decision; it created something new and great in history. But in that decision we excluded the security, social and spiritual, without which man cannot live and grow. And now, in the old age of our period, the quest to sacrifice freedom for security splits every nation and the whole world with really daemonic power.

We have decided for *means* to control nature and society. We have created them, and we have brought about something new and great in the history of all mankind. But we have excluded ends. We have never been ready to answer the question, "For what?" And now, when we approach old age, the means claim to be the ends; our tools have become our masters, and the most powerful of them have become a threat to our very existence. We have decided for *reason* against outgrown traditions and honored superstitions. That was a great and courageous decision, and it gave a new dignity to man. But we have, in that decision, excluded the soul, the ground and power of life. We have cut off our mind from our soul; we have suppressed and mistreated the soul within us, in other men, and in nature. And now, when we are old, the forces of the soul break destructively into our minds, driving us to mental disease and insanity, and effecting the disintegration of the souls of uncounted millions, especially in this country, but also all over the world.

From the very beginning of our period we have decided for the *nation*, as the expression of our special way of life and of our unique contribution to history. The decision was great and creative, and for centuries it was effective. But in that decision we excluded mankind and all symbols expressing the unity of all men. The former unity was broken, and no international group has been able to re-establish it. Now, in the old age of our period, the most powerful nations themselves claim to represent mankind, and try to impose their ways of life upon all men, producing, therefore, wars of destruction, which will perhaps unite all mankind in the peace of the grave.

Our period has decided for a *secular* world. That was a great and much-needed decision. It threw a church from her throne, a church which had become a power of suppression and superstition. It gave consecration and holiness to our daily life and work. Yet it excluded those deep things for which religion stands: the feeling for the inexhaustible mystery of life, the grip of an ultimate meaning of existence, and the invincible power of an unconditional devotion. These things *cannot* be excluded. If we try to expel them in their divine images, they reemerge in daemonic images. Now, in the old age of our secular world, we have seen the most horrible manifestation of these daemonic images; we have looked more deeply into the mystery of evil than most generations before us; we have seen the unconditional devotion of millions to a satanic image; we feel our period's sickness unto death.

This is the situation of our world. Each of us should realize that he participates in it, and that the forces in his own soul which make him old, often in early years, are part of the forces which make our period old. Each of us strengthens these forces, and each of us is a victim of them at the same time. We are in the desert of which the prophet speaks, and none among us knows the way out. Certainly there is no way out in what some idealists tell us: "Make decisions, but don't exclude anything! Take the best in *all* possibilities. Combine them. Then will our period become young again!" No man and no nation will become young again in that way. The new does not appear from a collection of the elements of the old which are still alive. When the new comes the old must disappear. "Remember not the former things, neither consider the things of old", says the prophet. "Behold, all things are become new", says the apostle. Out of the death of the old the new

arises. The new is created not out of the old, not out of the best of the old, but out of the *death* of the old. It is not the old which creates the new. That which creates the new is that which is beyond old and beyond new, the Eternal.

"Behold, *I* am doing a new thing, even now it is springing to light. Do you not perceive it?" If the new were a part of the old, the prophet would not ask, "Do you perceive it?" for everybody would see it already. But it is hard to perceive. It is hidden in the profound mystery which veils every creation, birth as well as rebirth. It springs to light -- which is to say that it comes out of the darkness of that mystery.

Nothing is more surprising than the rise of the new within ourselves. We do not foresee or observe its growth. We do not try to produce it by the strength of our will, by the power of our emotion, or by the clarity of our intellect. On the contrary, we feel that by trying to produce it we prevent its coming. By trying, we would produce the old in the power of the old, but not the new in the power of the new. The new being is born in us, just when we least believe in it. It appears in remote corners of our souls which we have neglected for a long time. It opens up deep levels of our personality which had been shut out by old decisions and old exclusions. It shows a way where there was no way before. It liberates us from the tragedy of having to decide and having to exclude, because it is given before any decision. Suddenly we notice it within us! The new which we sought and longed for comes to us in the moment in which we lose hope of ever finding it. That is the first thing we must say about the new: it appears when and where it chooses. We cannot force it, and we cannot calculate it. Readiness is the only condition for it; and readiness means that the former things have become old and that they are driving us into the destruction of our souls just when we are trying most to save what we think can be saved of the old.

It is the same in our historical situation. The birth of the new is just as surprising in history. It may appear in some dark corner of our world. It may appear in a social group where it was least expected. It may appear in the pursuit of activities which seem utterly insignificant. It may appear in the depth of a national catastrophe, if there be in such a situation people who are able to perceive the new of which the prophet speaks. It may appear at the height of a national triumph, if there be a few people who perceive the vanity of which the Preacher speaks. The new in history always comes when people least believe in it. But, certainly, it comes only in the moment when the old becomes visible *as* old and tragic and dying, and when no way out is seen. We live in such a moment; such a moment is *our* situation. We realize this situation in its depth only if we do not continue to say, "We know where the new will come from. It will come from *this* institution or *this* movement, or *this* special class, or *this* nation, or *this* philosophy, or *this* church." None of these, of course, is excluded from being the place where the new will appear. But none of these can guarantee its appearance. All of us who have looked at one of these things as the chosen place of the new have been disappointed. The supposedly new always proves to be the continuation of the old, deepening its destructive conflicts. And so I repeat: the first thing about the new is that we cannot force it and cannot calculate it. All we can do is to be ready for it. We must realize as profoundly as possible that the former things have become old, that they destroy our period just when we try most courageously to preserve the best of it. And we must attempt this realization in our social as well as in our personal life. In no way but the most passionate striving for the new shall we become aware that the old is old and dying. The prophets who looked for the new thing *He* is doing were most passionately and most actively involved in the historical situation of their nation. But they knew that neither they themselves nor any of the old things would bring the new.

"Remember not the former things, neither consider the things of old", says the prophet. That is the second thing we must say about the new: it must break the power of the old, not only in reality, but also in our memory; and one is not possible without the other. Let me say a few words about this most sublime point in the prophetic text and in the experience of every religion. We cannot be born anew if the power of the old is not broken within us; and it is not broken so long as it puts the burden of guilt upon us. Therefore religion, prophetic as well as apostolic, pronounces, above all, forgiveness. Forgiveness means that the old is thrown into the past because the new has come. "Remember not" in the prophetic words does not mean to forget

easily. If it meant that, forgiveness would not be necessary. Forgiveness means a throwing out of the old, as remembered *and* real at the same time, by the strength of the new which could never be the saving new if it did not carry with it the authority of forgiveness.

I believe that the situation is the same in our social and historical existence. A new which is not able to throw the old into the past, in remembrance as well as in reality, is not the really new. The really new is able to break the power of old conflicts between man and man, between group and group, in memory and reality. It is able to break the old curses, the results of former guilt, inherited by one generation from another, the guilt between nations, between races, between classes, on old and new continents, these curses by which the guilt of one group, in reality and memory, permanently produces guilt in another group. What power of the new will be great and saving enough to break the curses which have laid waste half of our world? What new thing will have the saving power to break the curse brought by the German nation upon herself before our eyes? "Remember not the former things", says the prophet. That is the second thing which must be said about the new.

"Behold, *I* am doing a new thing." "*I*" points to the source of the really new, to that which is always old and always new, the Eternal. That is the third thing which must be said about the new: it bears the mark of its eternal origin in its face, as it did when Moses came from the mountain with the tablets of the law, opening a new period of history. The really new is that which has in itself eternal power and eternal light. New things arise in every moment, at every place. Nothing is today as it was yesterday. But *this* kind of new is old almost as soon as it appears. It falls under the judgment of the Preacher: "There is no new thing under the sun." Yet sometimes a new thing appears which does not age so easily, which makes life possible again, in both our personal and our historical existence, a saving new, which has the power to appear when we least expect it, and which has the power to throw into the past what is old and burdened with guilt and curse. Its saving power is the power of the Eternal within it. It is new, really new, in the degree to which it is beyond old and new, in the degree to which it is eternal. And it remains new so long as the eternal power of the Eternal is manifest within it, so long as the light of the Eternal shines through it. For that power may become weaker; that light, may become darker; and that which was truly a new thing may become old itself. That is the tragedy of human greatness in which something eternal appears.

When the apostles say that Jesus is the Christ, they mean that in Him the new eon which cannot become old is present. Christianity lives through the faith that within it there is the new which is not just another new thing but rather the principle and representation of all the really new in man and history. But it can affirm this only because the Christ deprived Himself of everything which can become old, of all individual and social standing and greatness, experience and power. He surrendered all these in His death and showed in His self-surrender the only new thing which is eternally new: love. "Love never ends," says His greatest apostle. Love is the power of the new in every man and in all history. It cannot age; it removes guilt and curse. It is working even today toward new creation. It is hidden in the darkness of our souls and of our history. But it is not completely hidden to those who are grasped by its reality. "Do you not *perceive* it?" asks the prophet. Do we not perceive it?

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