

5.20.2020 Easter Midweek Meditation, Week 6
2 Corinthians 5:16-17, John 1:10-14

Pastor Timothy McKenzie
(Paul Tillich)

“The New Reality”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

More than ever during this time of pandemic, churches around the world have been using the internet to stay connected and continue their ministries. The internet can be a powerful tool for facilitating worship, fellowship, meetings, and visitation. Many of us may not realize that the Christian church was also a pioneer in the use of media technology. Immediately following the First World War, the “radio boom” allowed churches to experiment with broadcasting. In 1919 Trinity Episcopal Church in Hamilton, Ohio made the first known broadcast of a Christian worship service; and in 1921, KDKA-Pittsburgh began the first weekly broadcast of services from Calvary Episcopal. Rapidly during this period other programs appeared. From 1930-1952, Father Fulton Sheen hosted a weekly Sunday program, *The Catholic Hour* on NBC. In 1930, Walter Maier of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod began broadcasting *The Lutheran Hour* on KFZO. Fuller Seminary’s founder, Charles E. Fuller hosted *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour* (1937-1966). In 1931 the Vatican also began broadcasting; and in the postwar period, Billy Graham’s *Hour of Decision* (1950-2016) became one of the longest running Christian radio programs.

In 1940 Fulton Sheen officiated in the first television broadcast of a worship service, and from 1952-1957, Sheen’s television program, *Life is Worth Living*, was the first to be nationally televised. Rex Humbard’s *Cathedral of Tomorrow* (1952-1983), Robert Schuller’s *Hour of Power* (1970-2010), and Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club* (1966-present) shifted the religious landscape of the United States by centering on the person of a charismatic media evangelist, rather than a local pastor. In the 1970s, the religious right became a political force as evangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell used politically motivated media evangelism to give direction to their followers.

There has, of course, also been criticism about Christian use of media as shallow and exploitive, using a “gospel of health and wealth” to collect offerings from a distant audience. Critics have also argued Christian media has turned a gospel message of self-denial and service into a form of individual popular entertainment, focusing on manipulation, glitz, and spectacle. It has also not gone unnoticed that televangelists do not function as pastors by visiting the sick and burying the dead of their virtual congregations, or by doing in-person counseling, or performing baptisms and Holy Communion for their distant flock. Others have noticed that media driven churches can be anti-intellectual, avoiding difficult or ambiguous theological discussion, opting instead for “plain and direct” answers, that avoid the complexity and contradiction inherent in rigorous biblical and theological discourse. Without the oversight of national denominations, virtual churches have risked becoming religious entrepreneurs and political commentators, operating in a free market economy using tax-free religious status, while also eliding the political separation of church and state.

Today’s online church is a huge industry that runs into similar dangers by attempting to package and market religious experience. For viewers this can feel like manipulation as they experience an objectified worship service, depersonalized community, and what feels like a desacralized God.

Perhaps no theologian has written about modern existence and the relationships of the individual, the church, and the modern world, than Paul Tillich. Tillich argued that rather than defending the person against the dehumanizing tendency of the world, churches have become caught up in practices that have resulted in reinforcing this dehumanizing tendency. Tillich wrote, “Step by step, the church, including the way she has shaped and communicated her message, has been determined by the categories of life and thought that characterize the industrial society.”

When a church uses media to manipulate its audience to a particular response and outcome through using marketing, sophisticated video editing, costumes, makeup, and other props, it replaces the genuine call of Christ with its own agenda for church growth. In a world that measures success by numbers and returns on investment, religious organizations and churches that adopt these practices risk objectifying and depersonalizing fellow human beings.

Tillich, of course, didn’t advocate turning away from the modern world. Tillich advocated recognizing the degree to which churches can become complicit in the objectification and depersonalization of human beings through their participation in the world. Tillich argued the church must be a place of true sanctuary that values the individuality of people, helping them find rest and renewal in the midst the modern world. The church is that place that offers a living space that gathers and leads people into genuine service for others. Tillich wrote,

Technical development is irreversible and adjustment is necessary in every society, especially in a mass society. The person as person can preserve himself only by a *partial nonparticipation* in the objectifying structures of technical society. But he can withdraw even partially only if he has a place to which to withdraw. And this place is the New Reality to which the Christian message points.

Christian proclamation always points to the new reality that is Christ Jesus. Only the risen Christ forgives, creates and invites human beings into discipleship. The church is created and sustained by Christ’s invitation to self-denial, cross bearing, and outward service on behalf of others. Paul writes, “*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*” The body of Christ, the church, is a counter-cultural movement in the world that always recreates human community into a new shape offering new possibilities for the world.

Tillich writes, “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.” Christ is the eternal Word through which everything was created and in which all things hold together. To follow and proclaim Christ as a church means the rejection of turning Christ and the gospel into tools of manipulation. The church is a genuine encounter with the risen Christ - “the New Reality” - who forgives, welcomes and accepts each of us. The new reality of Christ is not prerecorded, edited, and curated by a media team. Christ doesn’t seek to manipulate or sell us something; rather, Christ comes to free us with grace to live for others. The new reality of Christ challenges everything we call “new,” by renewing us each day after the failures yesterday. In the words of Paul, “*See, everything has become new!*” Amen.

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Easter Week 6 midweek meditation reading: Paul Tillich (1886-1965)

Excerpt from “The Person in a Technical Society” (1953, in *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, pp. 123-137)

One must ask, especially on Christian ground, why the church and her message are so powerless in their fight against the depersonalizing forces of the present world. The reason cannot be that they themselves are without power. The opposite is true, not only for the vision of faith, but also for the sociological and psychological observation. The reason that the church and her message are unable to resist the progressive annihilation of the person within industrial society is something else. It is the unintended participation of the church in the essential structure of industrial society. Step by step, the church, including the way she has shaped and communicated her message, has been determined by the categories of life and thought that characterize the industrial society. The church became a section of that against which she was supposed to defend the person. The process of depersonalization has caught up even with churches and their members. One should not close his eyes in the face of this situation, and one should not glorify the churches as more protected against depersonalization. Certainly, they are more protected in principle, namely, by their foundation, their message, their community – but this is not a necessary protection in the actual churches. They have the means of resisting depersonalization in their traditions, their symbols, their rites – but their means can be transformed into powerful tools of dehumanization. They emphasize the infinite value of the individual person – but they are in danger of depersonalizing the person in order to preserve his infinite value. One must transcend not only society but also that section in the society that is taken by the churches, in order to see the situation in its threatening power. Only from “beyond” can industrial society and its dehumanizing forces be resisted and finally overcome...

To struggle for the right of the person under the conditions of technical society should not become a fight against the technical side of mass communications; it should not even become a fight against their adjusting power. The technical development is irreversible and adjustment is necessary in every society, especially in a mass society. The person as person can preserve himself only by a *partial nonparticipation* in the objectifying structures of technical society. But he can withdraw even partially only if he has a place to which to withdraw. And this place is the New Reality to which the Christian message points, which transcends Christianity as well as non-Christianity, which is anticipated everywhere in history, and which has found its criterion in the picture of Jesus as the Christ. But the place of the withdrawal is, at the same time, the starting point for the attack on the technical society and its power of depersonalization...

Christian action must point to the ultimate roots of personal being. It must show that man can maintain his nature and dignity as a person only by a personal encounter with the ground of everything personal. In this encounter, which is the living center of religion and which, against rational as well as mystical criticism has been defended by Christianity, the person is established. In showing this, Christian action shows also the place to which it withdraws from the technical society in order to attack this society. This place is that which transcends every place, even the Christian churches. It is the New Reality that is manifest in Christ and against which even technical society

and its power of destroying the person as person cannot prevail. Only out of the ground of the personal can the personal be saved. Only those who withdraw from action can receive the power to act. Christian action today rests on two poles, the one that transcends the structure of technical society – the New Reality of which Christianity is the witness; the other that is present within the structure of technical society – the movements that struggle, from different sides, against its dehumanizing power. In the correlation of these poles, Christian action must find a way to save the person in industrial society.

Excerpt from *The Shaking of the Foundations*, “Behold, I Am Doing a New Thing”

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.

Book recommendations:

Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948.

Tillich, Paul, *The Eternal Now*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.

Tillich, Paul, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*. (Edited by J. Mark Thomas), Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988.

Paul Tillich (1886-1965)

Paul Johannes Tillich was a German-American Lutheran theologian and philosopher, who immigrated to the United States in 1933. In the first half of his career Tillich taught at the University of Marburg, Dresden University of Technology, the University of Leipzig, and the University of Frankfurt. After Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor in 1933, Tillich's theological views brought him into conflict with the Nazis and he was dismissed from his post at the University of Frankfurt. Invited by Reinhold Niebuhr, in the same year, to come to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Tillich became professor, in succession, at Union Theological Seminary (1933-1955), Harvard Divinity School (1955-1962), and the University of Chicago (1962-1965). In 1959, Tillich was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* (March 16, 1959). A bibliography of Tillich's works is massive, but his *Systematic Theology*, collections of sermons, and essays on life in a modern technological world continue to offer dynamic theological dialogue.