

Existentialism

A Survey and Assessment

Supplement to *Ministry*

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PREFACE

During recent years various forms of existential philosophy have swept through college campuses, both secular and religious, in North America. Younger men have found enormous appeal in some forms of existentialism. At times the reaction has suggested the discovery of something new, and in theological circles, the discovery of something not accessible through orthodox religion.

Existentialism is almost as difficult to interpret as it is impossible to describe. It may be wholly secular and totally atheistic, or it may appear as Christian philosophy that fits into the milieu of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, or the Orthodox establishment. It can also be at home with Judaism.

The support of intellectuals in each of these persuasions has made existentialism something “faddish” in educational and theological circles during the last two decades. This was especially so under the glamour of famous European exponents, such as Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Jaspers, Tillich, and a host of others. Not all who bandied these names about had read their works of course, but the vogue swept on nonetheless.

When our own SDA college campuses felt these currents, it was inevitable that many questions arose. It was for the purpose of answering some of these questions that certain men were asked to prepare papers for full discussion by an augmented research committee in October, 1967. These men were assigned topics, but were otherwise unfettered in their writing and, since they were in different parts of the world, there was no collaboration between them, and their assessments were quite personal and independent.

After free discussion of these papers, during which Dr. D. W. Holbrook was the Moderator, the following conclusions were reached:

1. Existentialism cannot be precisely defined. In fact, an exact definition is usually avoided by existential philosophers, since to define it would be to lose it in the bondage of too restricted confinement.
2. It is a somewhat radical philosophical departure that was foreseen by Pascal and worked out more methodically by Kierkegaard and his successors in this area.
3. Existentialism, as the name suggests, relates the destiny of the individual thinker to the ideas that engage and can be understood by his own mind.
4. In Christian existentialism this philosophy means that Christian beliefs are valueless except as they are vital experience in everyday life.
5. This vital existential experience has, however, always been a major emphasis in the doctrine of regeneration, so that by the new birth in Christ, all beliefs fundamental to the soul’s salvation become,

through the Holy Spirit, a cohesive, vital and continuing daily experience.

6. In the area of dogma, fundamentalist Christians of all persuasions are confronted with the fact that the Christian existentialists, especially the later ones, were of the modernist schools of thought. Instances are given in these papers.

7. Existentialism stresses some vital lessons for the Christian believer. For instance, doctrinal beliefs can be but ice-cold declarations unless they come alive and warm in a believing heart and a victorious life. Having said this, we must conclude that (a) these vital lessons are found in the New Testament commands and exhortations to live our beliefs and to be what we pretend to be, (b) in the area of doctrinal belief, there is little or nothing in existentialism that is not offered to us in Biblical teachings as we Adventists understand them.

8. Existentialism does appear to stimulate spiritual curiosity and concern among college students, but it has to be admittedly that a large percentage of them arrive at confusing arguments against the validity and importance of the teachings of the Christian church. To them there ceases to be a clear, convincing structure of objective truth expressed by a "Thus saith the Lord." The over-emphasis on relationships and processes tends to destroy a conviction that absolute truth exists for the purpose of man's redemption.

9. In the broad spectrum of truth, ranging from absolute objective truth to subjective relationships, the existential enthusiast tends to emphasize only the one extreme of subjective feelings as compared to absolute objective truths. Some existential enthusiasts would contend that Ellen G. White was one of their number, and it would require no great scholarship to compile a list of supporting quotations to this end. It would, however, be just as easy to put together an equally impressive list showing her belief in, and the importance of, absolute unchanging truth. Which means that Ellen G. White really stood in the middle of the road, removed from extremes in these matters. That is where we think we should all join her in our search for eternal values.

The General Conference
Biblical Research Committee

Dangers of Existentialism

Edward Heppenstall

The perils to be found in Christian existentialism are neither obvious nor easily discerned. On the contrary, existentialism's claim to relevancy and involvement of the whole of man's existence in truth offers much that is desirable.

The word "existentialism" is an extension of the word "existence." The crucial issues which face modern man require that he discover the true nature of his existence. For centuries the approach in philosophy has reduced the world of persons, including God and man, to mere objects of thought, as concepts set forth in the categories of language. The result has been the application of man's rational powers to control and direct life on the horizontal plane economically, politically, scientifically, and religiously. The consequence is the dehumanization of the individual. The Christian religion has been emptied of its vital meaning and its relevancy to life. This is due largely to the church's concern with and search for rational certainty, rather than with living truth. Because religious truth has become objectivised, man has been separated from God.

There is much truth to this critical observation by existentialism. The church has long operated principally in the context of ideas and doctrines, giving priority to formal utterances by church and school. It is possible to answer many questions about religion and life without dealing with the main issue: that of being personally involved in the whole of one's being. A rational philosophy of religion can be a substitute for the real thing. In the juggling of words and ideas, it is possible to reduce God to an idea. The effort to formulate a creed can get man nowhere. The God that people claim to believe in may become to them no

more than an intellectual abstraction. This is the great tragedy of philosophy according to existentialism.

Existentialism is a revolt against the attempt to get at the meaning of life through ideas. The assertion is that God cannot be made an object of human thought without distorting the truth about God. To deal with truth as an object to be grasped by the logic of mind and language is to lose the vertical relationship with God; that to believe reality is something to be known rather than lived is an illusion, denying to man the true nature of Christian meaning and existence. Man thereby becomes the captive of rational categories, rather than experiencing freedom through a personal relation with God.

Existentialism is a philosophy which shatters all rational security. It condemns all claims to truth which avoid or abdicate personal involvement. To interpret the Christian religion in terms of ideas and doctrines is to distort the truth and make participation in it impossible.

How does truth become relevant? Existentialism aims to answer that question. What is at stake is the very nature of man's being. The reality of truth is experienced when man faces decisions that constitute in essence a matter of life and death. Existentialism is a philosophy of crisis, where man is driven to vital decisions, thus penetrating to the inner meaning of life, facing up to the crises and anxieties that confront one's very existence.

The contrast is between being a participant and being a spectator. One may state his belief objectively about the nature of man, that he is mortal, subject to death. He can write that statement down, put it in doctrinal form, argue it as the basis of his own logical conclusions about man, all this without being involved. But let the doctor declare a man a victim of terminal cancer. He is now involved in death itself. Death is no longer a theory to be discussed. It is now part of man's very existence. Consequently, truth must fail if it stops short of securing the involvement of the whole man.

What Is Truth?

The crucial problem in Existentialism centers in the question of how to arrive at truth. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, regarded as the father of Christian Existentialism, wrote that "Truth is Subjectivity."

Here is such a definition of truth: an objective UNCERTAINTY help fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. . . . Truth is precisely the venture which chooses an OBJECTIVE UNCERTAINTY. . . . The paradoxical character of truth is its UNCERTAINTY is an expression for the passionate inwardness, and this passion is precisely the truth.¹

According to this, man discovers truth, not by the certainty of objective knowledge, but only by personal decision, a "passionate inwardness." Man's involvement comes first. Truth depends for its validity upon man. Truth comes from within, not from without. Man's decision creates out of itself what is existentially true. The rational consistency of biblical content as doctrine is not essential in order to know the truth. Truth is not objectively given in the Bible so that it is eternally true. The Word of truth has never been given once for all. Truth is always contemporaneous. Only the Word today, existentially, can be the Word of God. The same word tomorrow could be demonic once the encounter and the involvement with God is lost.

The crucial question is: at what point are men actually confronted with truth? at the point of knowledge or at the point of decision? At the point where the objective truth of Scripture is brought to bear upon the mind, or at the point of personal involvement through an act of decision? What is the basis of a right decision? At what point is a man able to tell whether or not he has made the right passionate commitment? If a Biblical concept or doctrine is not truth until man becomes involved by personal commitment, then what is it? Is the falsity or the truth of the idea or doctrine no longer relevant to the intrinsic meaning of truth itself?

The objectivity of the truth of Scripture, fixed by the very nature of divine revelation and inspiration, is incompatible with this subjective approach. Existentialism is unwilling to be bound by the normative

character of the Word of God. Is the truth of Scripture autonomous? Existentialism denies this. What is prior, says traditional Christianity, is the knowledge of and from God, not the decisions of men. The latter is tested by the former. Truth stands apart from man's decision. It possesses a pre-established harmony with the God of the Bible and His Son Jesus Christ. Consequently, belief on a knowledge basis is essential to and prior to personal involvement in truth. It can be depended upon regardless of man's participation in it.

To believe that the source of truth can be found in the human situation, in the decision of man, rather than in the movement of God towards man through the apostles and prophets is perilous in the extreme. God alone is responsible for the gift of truth. God nowhere leaves sinful man to grope around within himself for the norm or the experience of truth. Existentialism shatters faith in objective truth, moral absolutes, and eternal principles revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

The traditional Christian position states that belief in the Bible as the revealed Word of God is, first, a statement, not about human existence in a contemporary situation, but an objective knowledge of truth given by God existing in and of itself. Granted that existentialism has a point in warning against abstract intellectualism. Undoubtedly, the vital importance of deciding for truth cannot be overestimated; but how shall man know that what he decides for is in reality the truth? In Scripture, the principles of truth, morality, God, and man, are fixed for all time and for all men. Here God tells man about Himself, who He is, what He has done, is doing, and what He will do, and what He requires men to believe and do. This is the given knowledge content of truth. He addresses man personally and calls for an intelligent personal response, an involvement in harmony with the knowledge given and present to the mind. True involvement requires obedience to that which is objectively given. The knowledge of Biblical truth involves more than mere thinking. It requires the bringing of man's whole life into captivity to and harmony with the revealed truths of God's Word. Subjectivism can lead only to a moral relativism and an irrationalism without a firm foundation.

When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. . . . When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship. . . . **THE INDIVIDUAL IS IN THE TRUTH EVEN IF HE SHOULD HAPPEN TO BE THUS RELATED TO WHAT IS NOT TRUE.** . . . The paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty.²

Thus there is no universal truth for all men. The discovery of truth for each man is unrepeatable in anyone else. The truth for one man constitutes no norm for another. The peril here is that man will attach himself to that which is false. Here exists the unbridgeable gulf between existentialism and the traditional Christian religion. For existentialism refuses to be bound by the eternal truths of the revealed Word of God.

The traditional Christian view is that the historical events and doctrinal truth of the Bible have significance for men in every age on the basis that they constitute the eternal and fixed truth of God. A trustworthy approach to the truth is both objective and existential. If men are to discover the truth for heart, mind, and life, harmony between the given Word and the existential experience is essential. When only the latter is required, truth and knowledge have passed over into sheer subjectivism.

If Christian existentialism is to become aware of its responsibility to make truth relevant to life, it must speak with the voice of certainty. But this is the one thing it cannot do, and denies, as a possibility.

The paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty . . . without risk there is no faith, and the greater risk the greater the faith; the more objective security the less inwardness, and the less objective security the more profound the possible inwardness.³

In direct opposition to this, the Christian church says to men everywhere: There is the sure word of God. No man lives by what appears to be right in his own eyes and in his own experience. God has spoken both in His Son and in His Word. Life in commitment to this Word alone has real meaning and certainty. If the Christian Church of today ever does anything to make the Christian religion meaningful, it will occur only by a return to revealed truth as given by God; for a given truth from God alone is sufficient to give birth to spiritual life and to awaken in man an existence that is in harmony with God.

Shattering of an Objective Authority

Existentialism's dependence upon and appeal to the subjective repudiates the authority of any body of beliefs, or the fixity of the eternal truths of Scripture. It is a revolt against fixed systems and doctrines on the basis that such a set formula tends to separate thought from life. Absolutes, universals, are simply verbal expressions, and do not possess actual reality. Only the existential word is real and relevant. The word of truth is always contemporaneous. It has never been given with finality for all men.

If Christianity were a doctrine, the relationship to it would not be one of faith, for only an intellectual type of relationship can correspond to a doctrine. . . . The realm of faith is thus not a class for numskulls in the sphere of the intellectual, or an asylum for the feebleminded. Faith constitutes a sphere all by itself, and every misunderstanding of Christianity at once may be recognized by transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual.⁴

If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.⁵

In existentialism, faith and doubt belong together. In Scripture, faith depends upon the certainty of what one believes. The principles of truth in Scripture are certain for all men, believers and unbelievers. If they are not, then how can one communicate with an unbeliever at all? If truth cannot be understood without faith, all discussion with unbelievers would be impossible. Truth is truth for the believer, because it is knowable and valid for all men irrespective of personal faith.

For existentialism it matters little what a man believes so long as he believes it with passionate involvement. In the light of the sinfulness of man, extended to the whole of man's being, personal decision needs some moral and spiritual context, some authoritative norm, some guiding principle to test and try every claim to have experienced truth. How is one to distinguish between "I choose" and "I feel" since truth is subjectivity? In shifting the emphasis from objective truth to the individual's inwardness, who or what is going to correct any deviation from truth or save from self-deception?

Immediacy

Existentialism involves a return to immediacy with God in terms of an intensity of feeling, passion, and often ecstasy. These emotional involvements are claimed to have significance for man's relationship with God, bringing man into the very presence of the divine. This achievement of a religious faith is by way of ontology (being), which affirms that man possesses deep within his being the capacity for immediate access to God and religious reality, an inner awareness whereby man can know God directly. Immediacy magnifies the miracle of some immediate encounter with God.

Martin Buber declares:

What is the eternal primal phenomenon, present here and now, of that which we term revelation? It is the phenomenon that a man does not pass, from the moment of the supreme meeting, the same being as he entered into it. . . . At times it is like a light breath, at times like a wrestling bout, but always, it happens. . . . Man receives, and he

receives not a specific “content” but a Presence, a Presence as power.⁶

Emil Brunner asserts:

Revelation, as the Christian faith understands it, is indeed, by its very nature, something that lies beyond all rational arguments . . . which can be attained only through divine self-communication.⁷

We know God only through personal confrontation, no longer identified with concepts of any kind. “Truth is encounter.”⁸

The problem raised by existentialism is not an easy one. The Bible speaks of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as an essential factor in Christian experience. The chief concern of the Church, however, is for the genuineness of fellowship with God. Why should the Church oppose the claim to immediacy if it leads to an encounter with God?

Since encounter with the supernatural is the claim common to all religions, including those which are non-Christian, how shall man determine what is true and what is false?

Existentialism does not relate itself to the categories of the infallible Word of God. It therefore sets forth a view of man’s relationship to God far different from that revealed in Scripture. The God of the Bible is the speaking God. Communion with God is possible only between persons as rational beings. Once it is insisted according to the Bible that human reason must think harmoniously with the revealed truth of Scripture, the necessity for a given objective truth becomes obvious. God confronts us, not in ecstasy or emotional passionateness, not only as subject, but as object in terms of the revealed will and Word of God. Any claim to fellowship with God that dispenses with the rational category of fixed truth in the Word of God is open to the charge of demonic confrontation.

And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not the people seek unto their God? . . . To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.⁹

In rejecting the revealed truths of Scripture and the objective nature of revelation, existentialism deprives man of any criterion whatever to distinguish between truth and error, between the Holy Spirit and a false spirit. If Satan confronts man as an angel of light in some form of immediacy, how would man be able to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of the devil? If Christ is any judge at this point, His appeal to Scripture “It is written” in exposing the devil himself, still holds true for Christians in every age. Any religious philosophy which conceives of man’s relationship with God above and outside the sphere of conceptual revelation in Scripture lays men wide open to the deceptions of mysticism, sentimentalism, spiritualism, and every form of questionable supernaturalism. Instead of recovering the relevance of truth, it involves the surrender of the eternal truth of the Word of God. Existentialism is the rallying ground for the growing trend of our day towards a professed supernaturalism which could easily substitute the Spirit’s witness to the truth of Scripture for extremes of emotional and psychological fantasy.

Traditional Christianity has always insisted upon the personal and intimate nature of God’s relationship to man. But this relationship is not born of uncertainty about the truth of Scripture. All the “passionate inwardness” of man’s initiative alone cannot attain to the God who speaks to man through his Word.

Any claim to immediacy apart from the fixed word of truth in Scripture easily becomes deceptive, unrelated to the reality of truth at all. If there is no fixed truth in Scripture, what guarantee can men have that the immediacy they claim to experience corresponds to the reality of truth itself? By what standard are men to test and correct this “passionate inwardness?” How are men to know that these involvements constitute the truth?

Obviously, existentialism's only standard for testing its "passionate inwardness" is its own passionate commitment. But since sinful men are prone to pervert the truth, this immediacy can only leave man in a state of utter uncertainty. Unless man has direct access to truth normatively given by God by which men may test and correct their own fallible feelings, they are left to their own devisings. When existentialism asserts that the only certainty man has in his own passionate involvements, it exposes him to a thousand and one false claims to know God in some other way than that revealed in Scripture.

The very nature of sinful man involves restrictions and limitations to the nature of divine-human communication. One of the chief concerns of the Christian church must be for the genuineness of communion with God, because of the possibility of a counterfeit at the very point where truth and trustworthiness are so essential. The church must not countenance any immediacy which cannot stand the test of the Word of God. The Biblical communion with God brings the mind and life into harmony with the given truth of Scripture. Here man gains his true being and the purpose of God's revelation is realized. Here exist eternal categories that need no demythologizing. These categories belong to men in every age.

In Scripture, when God condescends to draw near to man through the Spirit, the prophet, or the apostle, the mind's grasp of rational knowledge given by God is both heightened and clarified. Everywhere the Spirit confirms the Word. It insists that the God man claims to encounter be the God of Scripture.

Existentialism rejects the *a priori* knowledge of God in Scripture in favor of an inward immediacy. In so doing, it is in grave danger of becoming the victim of other supernatural powers that fight against God.

Men come to a true relationship with God within a conceptual frame of reference by the inspired Word of God. God comes to man in His Word through the Holy Spirit. The rational categories of truth are not belittled. Rather is the mind exercised so that, by means of a trustworthy knowledge of God, man can choose truth intelligently and become involved to his ultimate salvation.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Book Two, Part Two, Chapter II, "Truth Is Subjectivity."

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Book 2, Part 2, Chapter 3, "The Subjective Thinker."

⁵ Kierkegaard, "Truth Is Subjectivity."

⁶ Martin Buber, *I And Thou* (Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Edinburgh, 1937).

⁷ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1946, p. 206.

⁸ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, London: S.C.M. Press, 1944, pp. 46-47.

⁹ Isaiah 8:19, 20.

Goals and Spiritual Values of Existentialism

Jean R. Zurcher

The existentialist philosophy holds today an important, almost an overwhelming, place in our society. Moreover, the feeling is there that it is destined to exert in the near future an ever more profound influence on the thought and the conduct of the masses of our fellow-men, just as much as on philosophy, literature, or theology. Some rejoice in this, and others deplore it. In order to form an objective opinion on the subject, it is necessary to give it a close examination. We shall approach the problem first by trying to define the existentialist philosophy negatively, that is, by stating what it is not. Then we shall be able to state precisely its goals, and finally we shall touch on a few of its unquestionable spiritual values.

I. What Existentialist Philosophy Is Not

To be able to judge existentialist philosophy at its true worth, at least five errors are to be avoided.

1. Fashionable Existentialism, or the Eccentricities of our Time

The first, the crudest and the most common error, consists of judging the philosophy simply according to appearances, according to certain worldly eccentricities which have no philosophical tie-in with authentic existentialism. In fact, it is easy to remember the fashion launched by a certain segment of student youth who haunted certain Parisian cafes and called themselves existentialists simply because they hung around Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The existentialism in fashion was then the utmost absurdity of the century, and if it contributed to making known to the public the name of the latest philosophy it was truly most detrimental to the existentialist philosophy itself. For, an existentialism adopted because it is the talk of the town can be nothing but a caricature of true existentialism.

2. *Existentialist Literature, or the Triumph of Despair*

It would be no wiser to make a general evaluation of existentialism, as a philosophy, according to the literary tendency which claims this title. For when it left the society of the philosophers to launch out in the world governed by the novel, existentialist thought found itself deeply altered. Without denying the quality of some of these authors, we must still recognize that this literary tendency, by making anguish, absurdity, and nothingness into the warp and woof of existence, has only retained the purely negative facet of existentialist philosophy; and this is a generous statement. As for an over-all judgment of this literature, this is what a competent critic has to say:

On top of the tragic consciousness of our age has been proliferated a shadowy and obscene literature, in which psychological truth is systematically sought at the level of the beast, in which a lucid recognition of disorder has turned into a delectation of evil, despair into rage, sensual drunkenness into erotic madness, and often, disgust with life into obsession with suicide.¹

Now, precisely nothing has done more to increase the prestige of what is believed to be existentialism than this outbreak of novels; nothing did more to assure its triumph than this literature of despair. Obviously it is not necessary to explain why we are not dealing with that type of existentialism in this essay.

3. *The Existentialism of Sartre, or the Philosophy of the Absurd*

A third wide-spread error is that of generally evaluating existentialism according to our personal opinion of its individual representatives. And when existentialism is not judged according to the eccentricities of fashion or literature, most people think immediately of Jean- Paul Sartre. He seems to be today's best representative of existentialism; first, because he went to the pains of presenting his thought in a system of doctrines; next, because he knew how to propagate his ideas outside of philosophical circles, using the most efficient propaganda methods: literary criticism, short stories, novels and the theater, and thus became the source of inspiration for the most popular literary tendencies. However, to be honest, we have to admit that except popularity and the tumult of the fashionable, authentic existentialism owes nothing to Jean-Paul Sartre. It is not in the least our intention to exclude Sartre from existentialism, "because the worldly wing of his influence is guilty of fraudulently claiming an identity."² But it is logical that the serious seeker be objectively put on his guard against the wide-spread tendency to almost automatically reduce the philosophy in question "to this mixture of existentialism and inexistentialism which makes up Sartrism."³ Not only is the latter not a faithful expression of existentialist thought, but rather an outgrowth, or as Emmanuel Monnier put it so well, "the last shoot off one of the existentialist traditions, tradition which originated with Heidegger and which formed a radical opposition to the founders of the modern philosophy of existence."⁴

4. *Existentialist Philosophy or a New Way of Philosophizing*

A fourth error is often committed by those who condemn existentialism, be it rightly or wrongly. We may welcome it or deplore it, but we cannot deny that this philosophy represents the most modern literary, philosophical, and theological mode of thinking, and is at the same time the most authentic, realistic, and

occasionally the cruelest expression of the age in which we are living. Trying to ignore this fact is one of the most serious errors that can come from one who is trying precisely to obtain a hearing from the men of this century. Speaking the language of his contemporaries, using the vocabulary of the people of his time, providing answers for the philosophical pre-occupations of his century: these are some of the characteristics of the preaching of the great apostle Paul. But here we have more than a question of method. A deeper study of existentialism is all the more necessary, since its origins are to be found in Christian thought and since, in certain cases, its representatives claim to be Christianity's most faithful witnesses.

5. *Existentialism or Another Way of Talking Christianity*

A deplorable confusion exists precisely between existentialism and Christian thought that we must do our best not to foster. The more one is capable of rightly evaluating how much contemporary theological thought owes to existentialism, the more this error is easy to commit. However, it would be a serious misunderstanding not to see that the identity is essentially valid vis-a-vis the form of thought and that there is often a radical distinction in the fundamental meaning. No one doubts the Christian origins of existentialism, and Kierkegaard was perfectly right in presenting Christian truth as the model of existential truth. But is this sufficient reason to conclude that existentialism is just another way of talking Christianity?

This was certainly the first intention of the father of existentialism. We know to what pains Kierkegaard went in trying to re-establish the spirit of authentic Christianity. For he felt that, under the influence of the great Protestant philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, the spirit of the Reformation had been covered over by the rationalist tendency which was sweeping current philosophical and theological thought in its train. Desirous to follow up the work of Luther, Kierkegaard reacted against this alteration of the spirit of the Reformation and by returning to the original thought of Christianity, he hoped to wave the banner for a new Reformation.

But alas, existentialism is not limited to Soren Kierkegaard's thought, neither to the purely Christian expression of his thought. Other branches have sprouted out of the common trunk, and even if we held to the branch fed by Christian sap, we would still have to admit that it has not brought forth Christians who are assured and calm in their doctrinal edifice. If Christian existentialism were the authentic expression of Christian thought, would it have such a peculiarly Protestant color with Kierkegaard, Catholic with Gabriel Merce, Orthodox with Berdyaev and Jewish with Buber?

We have said enough, we feel, about the necessity of an infinite amount of caution in order to have an objective evaluation of existentialist philosophy. It would be unjust to make a decision based on appearances, or to judge it only on its negative side exploited by one brand of literature. It would be just as sorry to foster prejudices against it based on a particular case, or to condemn the entire system en masse without even taking the trouble to examine it beforehand. But the most subtle error, as far as we can see, would be not to discern the limits between existentialist thought and Christian thought with the pretext that the former originated in the latter, or simply because throughout all the variations of existentialist thought, an eminently Christian form of thought is to be found.

II. **Goals of Existentialism**

As precarious as the connection between the different existentialist traditions may be, nevertheless they have in common a certain manner of stating problems, a certain sound in the subjects they choose, a certain seeking after common goals which permit us to speak of them from a global point of view.

1. *Man as an Individual*

And thus, in very general terms, we can characterize existentialist philosophy-

as a reaction of the philosophy of man against the excesses of the philosophy of ideas or of the philosophy of things. In it, it is not so much existence in all its extension, but rather the existence of man which is the first problem of philosophy. It accuses

traditional philosophy of having too often misappreciated it, to turn to the philosophy of the world or of the products of the mind.⁵

Modern philosophy had been a humanism, that is a philosophy of man, but of man in a general way, man as a being gifted with reason. Rather than man, it had considered human reason. Now, the worth of the existentialist philosophers was precisely to remind humanism of the existence of man. Over against Hegel's rationalism, over against the idea that the object of philosophy is reason in its universality, Kierkegaard was the first to oppose what he himself called the existential philosophy, that is, a philosophy which considers above all the individual, the human individual in his tangible life, not the knowing individual, the thinking subject, but the existing individual, with his suffering, his anguish and his passion. For to exist, as he says, is above all being an individual. What is essential, is not therefore a general principle, universal Reason, Humanity or Man with a capital, or even human nature in that which it has in common with all individuals, but the tangible man, the human individual. For this reason, Berdyaev was able to assert:

Existentialist philosophy is a personalistic philosophy: the subject of knowledge is the human person.⁶

2. *Priority of Existence*

But if it is first of all a reversion to man and even to the tangible man, existentialism is more than just that. What is interesting in man, what forms the foremost object of its research, is existence. From its very beginnings, existentialism has been characterized by its tendency to accentuate that which exists, or even better, the existence of that which exists. It is not the individual's being which must be attained, but rather his existence. Only this existence provides the true being. Every subject is first an existing subject. The existence is what actualizes man's essence. Our words prove this. When we say, "I am a man," "I am" asserts the existence; "man" designates the essence. In man, therefore, existence precedes essence and this assertion, with its variations makes up the fundamental thesis of all the existentialists.

Before the arrival of existentialism, philosophy had always judged that the essence of a thing was anterior to its existence. Thus it was taught that the individual man was derived from the concept of man, which is found in divine intelligence, or which simply makes up human nature, of which every man is an example. But once again existentialism upsets the relation established by philosophy between essence and existence. There is at least one being whose existence precedes his essence, one being who exists before being able to be defined by any concept: This being is man. Man exists first of all, he appears in the world, and only hereafter can he be defined. Man is first of all nothing; he will only be after being nothing, and he will be what he has made of himself. This is the basic principle of the new philosophy.

3. *Existence is in Interiority*

But what must we understand by "existence?" The answer is not easy, for unless we seize man existing, existence will always be a pure abstraction. In the existentialist vocabulary, *to exist* is not a synonym of *to be*. *To be* designates a state, whereas *to exist* designates an act. Existence is the very act by which the passage from possibility to reality is accomplished. Now, it is only man who can carry out this act, because he alone, in the world of our experience, is free, and also because he alone is a conscious subject. Nature *is*, but *does not exist* outside of the mental act of the subject who thinks it and makes it exist. By seizing himself in the consciousness of self, the subject seizes himself existing, he seizes his own existence. That is why every subject is an existing subject; existence is the subject himself in his interiority. For the existentialist philosophers, the only true objectivity is therefore that of his own subjectivity, because it is in the depths of himself, in his interiority, that he discovers the only true reality, existence. To exist is his first worry, existence his supreme interest.

4. *Man and His Becoming*

Existence is therefore made up of interiority; it is the act by which the subject makes himself and

forms his own essence. However, this act presupposes liberty. Only he who freely chooses himself exists authentically; only he who makes himself according to the image of the person he wants to be. And thus choice is never once-and-for-all: one cannot anchor himself in existence as in a position that has been acquired once and for all. He who is existing and who stabilizes himself in the type of what he wanted to become transforms himself into an object and by that very act stops existing. Now, existence is what never becomes an object. We can only speak of it in terms of springing forth. It is the original appearance whereupon the subject thinks and acts. In short, existence is man in his becoming, in his incessant effort to outdo what he is. Consequently, existentialism puts on man's shoulders not only the entire responsibility for what he is, since he is what he makes of himself, but also for his own destiny.

5. *The Dramatic Conception of Man's Destiny*

This responsibility explains, on the one hand, the importance accorded to the problem of liberty by all the existentialist philosophers, as well as explaining, on the other hand, the singularly dramatic conception of human existence which characterizes them all. In fact, with the very vivid feeling that he has of making himself, the existentialist thinker cannot stay at the level of abstract and theoretical speculation: he lives his thought, it is the latter which engages him directly, he can only take upon himself the different situations of his existence. An example: Socrates whom Kierkegaard makes into the model of the existential thinker. He had come to the conclusion of immortality by one proviso, but in this proviso he engages his life, by assuming death in all liberty. This is authentically living. But out of this obligation of life flows, for different reasons, the anguish which is so characteristic of all the existentialists as well as their basically tragic understanding of the destiny of man.

That is, briefly, what the representatives of existential philosophy have in common. It is true that concerning every one of the several points of this common objective, the opinions are infinitely varied. We cannot go over every one of the different aspects to try to pick out one here, one there. Our judgment can only be general and touch on the form of thought which all the existentialist philosophers have in common, rather than on their completely different systems. Moreover, the essential worth of existentialism for us is to be found in this general judgment.

III. Spiritual Values of Existentialism

We cannot here discuss the value of existentialism as a whole, nor even take up some of the most justified criticisms which are commonly made concerning it. No one particular system can be accepted without reservations, and some of them-and this includes the most widely known, those of Heidegger and Sartre-are affected with a basic fault. These are, however, at the bottom of existential thought, truths of capital importance which come straight from Christianity. One of the merits of existentialist philosophers is precisely to have brought them to the forefront, and by doing this, to have brought contemporary theology to a better understanding of Biblical thought, particularly in the area of Christian anthropology.

1. *The Knowledge of Man as an Individual*

And thus the first value of existentialism for us is found in the very object of its greatest study and in the way this study was carried out: man, man as a tangible being, the existing individual, human personality. The Bible knows no other than this. In it there is no knowledge of man as such. The sacred writers were totally ignorant of an abstract, theoretical knowledge of human nature, the product of philosophical speculations. Their representation of man is breath-takingly realistic, and it is always the outline of the real life of types of men whose names we know. This is such an essential truth that the ideal image, the perfect stature of man, is incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ, which means that the definition of the conception of man, according to the Bible, can only be based on the living reality of existing individuals.

Existentialist philosophy has shown a remarkable acumen in exploiting for its own use this fundamental Bible truth. And thus it presents to us a representation of man radically different from that to which classical philosophy, and in turn all of Christian theology, had accustomed us. By this observation of men, the existentialist philosophers led us to an anthropology remarkably akin to that of the Bible and

which as well is harmonious with a realistic observation of the facts. We esteem this result to be the first great merit of existentialism.

2. *Biblical Thought Basically Existential*

The pre-eminence of existence is without the shadow of a doubt another Biblical notion enhanced by existentialist philosophy. It is asserted in the Bible's first mention of man, when the author of Genesis defines man as "a living soul." The drama of man, of which the Bible is full from *Genesis to Revelation*, is nothing less than an existential drama. Everything, absolutely everything, boils down to a problem of existence. God himself gives his own definition as the Existing One *par excellence*: The Eternal One. He calls himself "I am Who I am." In opposition with idols he is also named "the living God." The incarnation of the Word is, in the highest degree, a demonstration of the existential basis of Christianity. For the salvation of man, it was made "life-giving spirit." Not only does Christ present himself as "the living One," "the Prince of life," but as being life itself.

The existential characteristic is also found in Biblical truth. It resembles not in the least the abstract speculation of philosophy or even of traditional theology. Biblical truth only makes sense to the extent in which it is lived. Christ himself gave the example: "What He taught, He lived. . . . Thus in His life, Christ's words had perfect illustration and support. And more than this, what He taught, He was. . . . Not only did He teach the truth, but He was the Truth" (Ed. 78, 79). The same principle is valid for his disciples: "Only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven," says Jesus, can claim his name. Only those who listen to the truth and practice it are his authentic brothers and sisters. In his hymn on charity, Paul contrasts the uselessness of theoretic knowledge with the only real value of practical knowledge. Truth is really known only when it becomes inner life.

And there we have another existentialist merit, that of having grasped the existential basis of Christian truth, truth that is communicated more by testimony than by reason. Kierkegaard, especially, considered Christian truth to be the type of existential truth. For him, the "how" one adheres to truth seemed less important than the "what" is received as truth. He felt that truth known or memorized is nothing more than a cadaver—an object without value. The importance lies not so much in the truth as in the attitude of the knower. Without the inner attitude, the knowledge is vain, it trickles away into the simple act of knowing. He even says, "It is not truth which is truth, but it is the path which is the truth, that is, truth is only in the becoming, in the process of appropriation."⁷

3. *The Notion of Becoming*

The notion of becoming is another Biblical value forcefully affirmed by existentialist philosophy. It is no secret how this problem of the Christian becoming occupied the last years of the life of Kierkegaard. It was in the name of this principle that he denounced as the most formidable illusion of modern time the idea that Christianity is the same thing as Christendom, that all the inhabitants of a country are Christians because of the sole fact that they have been baptized, and that they do not need to become Christians. In the name of the same principle, he also spoke out against the ultra-conservativeness of the established Church, of the official, national Church, coinciding with the State. To the contrary, the true Church is a Church that is becoming, he says, just as each one of her members must be.

Do we need to demonstrate how right these assertions are or to emphasize how well they reflect one of the dominant characteristics of the Biblical concept of man?⁸ The creation story marks conspicuously the privilege accorded to the human creature—" . . . and man *became* a living soul." This expression indicates clearly that man does not exist as does an object, that he is not a given substance of being, but rather a soul whose existence depends at every moment on the activity through which he makes himself, a soul who not only has life, but is himself living. In other words, man did not come from his Creator's hands a finished being, possessing from the beginning an acquired character, a well determined personality, in a word, an immortal essence. The perfection of man did not lie in a finishing, a fullness accorded from the beginning by the Creator, but rather in the possibility of an infinite development, that eternity itself cannot exhaust. To realize his being, to make himself, as it were, to become a being in the likeness of God, this is the privilege of man as well as the special grace of the Creator. For in creating him, God gave man the

possibilities necessary to attain all the fullness to which he was destined, provided that the free creature consent and cooperate in the realization of God's plan for him.

The trial of the Garden of Eden must be considered in this light, as well as the pilgrimage of God's children since the fall, the sanctification of Jesus for those who obey and the never-finished perfecting of those who want to be like Him. God has accorded to man the grace of becoming what he has resolved to be. By consenting to the plan of God and his cooperation with divine power, man has the possibility of creating himself as that which he wants to be, to work toward his transformation according to the representation which he makes of his model, by participating in the very life of his creator.

This idea of the progressive becoming of man, that of the Christian included, this idea of a maturation, of a necessary development and of a transformation foreseen by God in the primitive economy, so that man might attain adulthood, his fullness, his form as son of God, stands out just as clearly in the over-all Biblical conception of time and history. The process of gradual revelation, just as the progressive realization of the plan of salvation, confirms this law of becoming for everything that touches man's being. Christian ethics is founded on this principle; it is the highest form of open-end ethics. It fixes no arrival, no leveling-off for the Christian; far from stopping, in his forward march, every progress becomes a means of going higher, of ever coming closer to the ideal. The Christian can never be content with what he is since he is told to be perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect.

4. Existentialist Realism and its Theological Meaning

To be complete, only as far as anthropology is concerned, we must add a few lines concerning the particularly dramatic conception of the destiny of man found in the writings of existentialist philosophers, conception which is not entirely foreign to the Biblical notion of man, a mortal creature, drawn from nothingness, threatened with returning there at every step, and even more, loaded down with an original fault which makes death inevitable. No philosophy has ever grasped with more reality this natural fragility of man, the reasons for his deep-seated anguish and tragic feeling about life, faced with death and nothingness. There is no trouble understanding how the existentialist thinkers of the atheistic branch could do nothing better than launch out into nothing, to be faithful to nothingness, to joyfully embrace death or absurdity and to consider that "the history of any life is the history of a failure."

However that may be, even this negative aspect of existentialism contains something interesting for the knowledge of the individual man. All this human reality made up of misery, anguish, contradiction, vanities, that the existentialist authors have taken so much time to write out so loyally and so precisely, sometimes even brutally and cynically, illustrates perfectly what the Bible tells us about the natural man, separated from God and in revolt against Him. The consciousness of this tragic situation of natural man, abandoned to his own forces and impotent because he is "sold unto sin," led Paul to exclaim in a strangely existentialist cry, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" However, the apostle does not stop with the anguished cry of the writers of despair; on the contrary, he knows the remedy, and he hastens to give it. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:14-25).

5. The Existence of God and His Relations with Man

This reference to God, and to the God of Jesus Christ, leads us naturally to the greatest value, on which all the others depend: the existence of God and his relations with man. On this most important point, it is true enough, the existentialist thinkers have a radically divergent attitude. And here, for each one of them, the test of authenticity is situated. The question of God provides the distinctive mark of the different existentialist systems: those which are truly faithful to existential thought and those which betray it.

The radical opposition between existentialism and classical philosophy which was based on reason and abstract theories, has been abundantly emphasized. It would be just as correct to say that the new philosophy has contradicted traditional theology, a close imitation of classical philosophy. For just as it had lost man, the human individual, from sight, modern humanism had also lost from sight the connecting line between God and man. And it was precisely the reaction of Kierkegaard which marked out both a return to individual man and a return to the God of the Christian revelation in whom man possesses the eternal source of his existence.

In fact, for Kierkegaard, Christianity supposes not only the existence of man but also the existence of God. The object of Christian faith, he says, is the existence of God. But here again, as with man, it cannot be a question of an abstract God, of the god of philosophical speculation. It is vainly that the latter claims to grasp and demonstrate the existence of God. The demonstration can never, moreover, touch on the existence itself. It is impossible to really demonstrate that something exists. Nothing is more improper than trying to demonstrate the existence of someone who exists. Thus, for him, the efforts of speculative thought to demonstrate the existence of God are nothing better than a mockery of God himself. And therefore Christianity rests, according to Kierkegaard, beyond all the rational proofs of the existence of God. Of course God is everywhere in creation, but he is not there directly visible. It is only by descending into himself, into his own inner abyss, that the individual is prepared to see God. "God discernible in the heart," as Pascal said, this is the reality of God according to Christian existentialism. Even more, the fact that God has existed as an individual man, born into time, makes Christianity to the highest degree a "message of existence," an "existential message."

It is true that in this major point, existentialism, with Heidegger and Sartre, has not stayed in the line that its founder had pointed out. Because of the overwhelming position accorded to the thought of these philosophers, existentialism is affected with a fundamental fault. By wanting to again consider man as depending on no one but himself and by cutting him off from his relations with God, who according to Sartre, does not even exist, these thinkers have simply betrayed the intentions of the new philosophy. With them existentialism, which was born as a vigorous reaction against modern humanism, has gone back to humanism and thus risks being swallowed up by this great rationalistic current of modern thought. Everything depends on the final solution which will win out concerning the great question of the existence of God and his relations with man.

If it escapes this grotesquerie of spiritual poverty where some seem to be pushing it, if it rediscovers without playing on words the fullness of existence, existentialism can renew the face and the spirit of occidental rationalism.¹⁰

Otherwise, it will simply be necessary to keep from taking as the classical conception of life the caricature that the atheistic existentialists propose.

But alas, we cannot help fearing that the tendencies of atheistic existentialism are winning out more and more, and that, finally, the term may only designate the eccentricities of our age, the literature of despair, the philosophy of the absurd, and even the theology of a post- Christianity without God. In this case, existentialism will truly be, as has already been asserted, the clearest expression "of the doctrinal collapse which characterizes our era," or else "the consciousness of a lack" which authentic Christianity will be all the better qualified to satisfy because it is not a stranger to the mode of thinking which favors such an understanding. The gospel message could then well be, for a society which has kept only the negative aspect of existentialist philosophy, what a well applied remedy can be for an illness which is dangerous but has been clearly diagnosed.

Whatever the future may have in store for existentialist philosophy, it is nonetheless impossible to deny the Christian nature of its original reaction, which betokens, as E. Mounier has said, "a return of religion in a world which has tried to find its meaning in what is purely manifest. Christian existentialism is an obvious defense against the secularization of faith. A sort of prophetic awakening on a philosophical plane." And it is not totally lacking in interest for us to notice that the beginning of this awakening is situated exactly in 1843, the year of the publication of the first protest from the founder of existentialism. It would therefore be unjust not to recognize the very real value of the goals striven for by the existentialist thinkers as well as the spiritual values of several of the Christian truths on which this philosophy has been founded. To be perfectly honest, we must even add that contemporary theology owes a debt to existentialism for several of its most essential discoveries, especially in the domain of Biblical anthropology.

¹ P.H. Simon, *l'Homme en Proces*, p. 21, Paris, 1965.

² E. Mounier, *Introduction aus Existentialismes*, p.8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p.9.

⁶ N. Berdiaef, *Clnq Meditations sur l'Existence*, Editions Montaigne, p. 74.

⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *Post-Scriptum*, p. 50.

⁸ We studied this notion of the Christian becoming in *Christian Perfection According to the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy*, Paris, 1965. It is particularly discernible in the writings of Mrs. E. G. White.

⁹ J.P. Sartre, *L'Être et le Neant*, p. 631, Paris, Gallimard, 1943.

¹⁰ E. Mounier, p. 189.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 189, emphasis ours.

Faith As an Existential Experience

Herbert E. Douglass

Faith is set forth in the New Testament as an existential experience. However, the rational unfolding of authentic Christian faith discloses a thought content radically different from that developed in philosophical existentialism.

This radical difference between New Testament existentialism and much of modern existentialism is possible because existentialism is primarily *a way of thinking* rather than a discrete system of thought. Existential thinkers may differ widely regarding their concepts of God, the cause for man's anxiety, or the meaning to man's existence. Yet, they all share a common approach to these fundamental questions.

For example, existential thinkers, including Biblical writers, agree, above all else, that there is a basic distinction between *essence* and *existence* (that is, between the worlds of thought and reality), and that the world of reality, or existence, is primary. They believe that the truth about existence is not grasped by mere reason but by reflecting on the individual's actual experience as a hoping, fearing, loving, willing, anxious person. Truth, for existentialists, is not grasped until the thinker experiences the impact of the vital questions of existence, such as death and ethical responsibility, in his own life of decision. In fact, insight into the basic problems of existence remains walled off to that person who refuses to involve his whole self in decision-making. Theoretical detachment is mere play-acting when existential questions are at stake, and thus does not lead to truth.

Yet, the chasm exists between a Biblical understanding of God, of life, truth, faith, subjectivity, anxiety, death, essence and existence, and what philosophically-oriented existentialists mean. The thought content of authentic New Testament faith is radically different from that of Sartre, Camus and Heidegger, on the one hand and that of Tillich and Bultmann on the other, because the existential experience of authentic Christian faith is, as developed in the New Testament, *sui generis*. It is unique primarily because the experience is God-initiated and not man-initiated.

Although Biblical writers agree with most other existentialists that truth must be inwardly appropriated, that man is unique and must not be de-humanized into organizational cogs or mere biological units, that anxiety must be recognized and dealt with constructively, that belief in God is not at the end of rational effort, etc., the vital difference and thus the fundamental issue that makes the Bible unique is that the Biblical writers insist that man cannot answer the basic questions of existence by self-reflection or mere decision-making. Christian faith begins as a personal response to a self-communicating God and the knowledge gained through this encounter is such that it can be learned in no other way that is, neither through reason, intuition, feeling, or historical research.

For the man of authentic faith, existence does precede essence. Only the Christian knows the meaning and purpose of human existence but this knowledge is his only after he realizes that he is a responsible person (that is, one able to respond), and that he has inescapable anxieties until he is reconciled with his

Creator and Lord. But this information about his essential nature is not a matter of reason or even passive acceptance of someone else's testimony. It is a knowledge which comes to him, that apprehends him-not knowledge which he "discovers" or apprehends by the normal methods of mental activity.

Faith-A Relationship Between Persons

The New Testament *pistis* (faith) is employed to describe the right relationship of responsible man to the Lordship of the self-communicating God. Theology, as set forth in the Bible, is the story of a personal relationship between the Creator God, the Eternal Person, and men and women who were created to be His personal counterparts. Regardless of the nature of man's response to God's self-communication, man can not escape being in some kind of relationship with his Maker. He cannot ignore the call of God; man can be responsible or irresponsible, but not un-responsible. Man is always responsible.

From the moment of creation the infinite dialectic from God's side has been on one hand God's self-affirmation as the Holy One (the One for whom there is no other), and on the other God's self-communication, as the One who loves unconditionally. From man's side as he responds to this eternal dialectic in God's nature, the emphasis is Lordship and Fellowship-the central themes of the Bible and the whole point of Christian proclamation.

Because God can be Lord only over those who are able to respond with their decisions and loyalties, He made man "in His image" so that there could be fellowship between them. God can fellowship only with persons who can respond to his love with love. Thus man's destiny was to exist as a loving person, a being in right relationship to all other persons. Man, in his freedom, thrived and fulfilled his destiny only when he remained in accord with his essential nature as created by God. To reject this original destiny for some other of his own making was to rebel against the will of a personal God. When "existence-for-love" did not become "existence-in-love" the original fellowship between God and man was severed; man had turned from God as his Lord and set himself up as autonomous.

Yet, because man was by nature made to relate to others (that is, an essence which fulfilled its purpose in the right kind of existence), he could not shake off his essential relationship to God even though he did his best to ignore or evade it. Man remained responsible because his flight from God was a personal decision (an existential decision) and because, in his rebellion, God did not leave him "without excuse." In many ways, God has reminded men of their lostness, and also of His continuing desire for fellowship.

Thus, the aim of God's self-communication has been to woo back the free response of trusting, loving human beings. His Word goes forth and faith responds: the personal act of faith becomes the correlate to the personal act of God's self-communication. This personal transaction of fellowship is not the mere acceptance of something that happened in the past. It is not the mental assent to even true statements about God. Authentic faith is a contemporary event in the life of modern disciples in which the Word (the personal address of self-communicating God) speaks today through the Word of History and the Word of the Spirit just as vividly as in the past. In this experience a responding man *knows* that God has accepted him as a forgiven son with the same comparable self-authenticity shared by any of the gospel writers.

Ellen White understood well this existential nature of faith, that the faith experience lies on the existential level rather than the intellectual:

The faith that is unto salvation is not a mere intellectual assent to the truth. He who waits for entire knowledge before he will exercise faith cannot receive blessing from God. It is not enough to believe *about* Christ; we must believe *in* Him. The only faith that will benefit us is that which embraces Him as a personal Saviour; which appropriates His merits to ourselves. Many hold faith as an opinion. Saving faith is a transaction by which those who receive Christ join themselves in covenant relation with God. Genuine faith is life. A living faith means an increase of vigor, a confiding trust, by which the soul becomes a conquering power. (Italics in original.)¹

Relationship of Faith Reveals Truth About Man God

In linking faith with knowledge something other than normal cognition is being considered; authentic

faith is not achieved by the means of normal intellectual or intuitive processes. From one point of view, the man of faith, instead of the knower, becomes the known and God is the knower. What faith learns is that God has spoken with unique authority and man's best response is to believe what he hears—a belief which leads to an entirely new way of relating to reality, or existence. Often Ellen White emphasizes that “it is contrition and faith and love that enable the soul to receive wisdom from heaven. Faith working by love is the key of knowledge, and everyone that loveth ‘knoweth God.’ 1 John 4:7.”²

First, faith is the awareness of God as Lord who merits obedience and as Love who merits responding trust and love. When God says, “I am the Lord thy God, the Creator,” this means “Thou art my property.” There is something inherently absurd when a created being elects to disregard his Creator's design for his life. But to understand God as Lord without knowing Him as Love would over-power man and lead to the most profound despair. At the heart of the Biblical presentation of salvation is faith as man's answer to God's claim and assurance. Man hears God call him, not as mere property, but as His son, accepted with all the privileges of a son. Thus the Holy Lord is also the Loving Father. This information is known for a certainty only by the man of faith.

But there is more that is learned. Faith is also the awareness of man's state as rebel. Before God is known as Lord, man knows no other authority but his own to which he is responsible. But in the act of faith man learns Who alone it is Who has the right to call man to account. To turn from God is to reject not only legitimate authority but the truth about existence. When God is seen as Lord, the appeal to autonomy is seen in its powerlessness and ultimate collapse. The response of faith includes the disclosure and the removal of this deluded human craving for autonomy. Faith says, “Thou art the Lord, I belong not to myself but to Thee.”

Faith does not arise until a person realizes how desperate his need is and in this negative disclosure (not only of human distress but also his guilt in rebellion) there springs the hope that exactly where he is in need, a Person meets his personal needs. As with the centurion, so with all men, “in the teaching of Christ, . . . he found that which met the need of the soul.” A personal God breaks through the perimeter of man's autonomy and is accepted as the loving invader who desires only the reclamation and restoration of property lost for awhile. For the authentic Christian, the anxieties of life are not natural to his existence and something to be bravely endured. He sees anxieties as an unnatural state which can be overcome by the grace of God.

Such was Nicodemus's problem, and his experience is common to all men:

Nicodemus had come to the Lord thinking to enter into a discussion with Him, but Jesus laid bare the foundation principles of truth. He said to Nicodemus, It is not theoretical knowledge you need so much as spiritual regeneration. You need not to have your curiosity satisfied, but to have a new heart. You must receive a new life from above before you can appreciate heavenly things. Until this change takes place, making all things new, it will result in no saving good for you to discuss with Me My authority or My mission.⁴

Such disclosures in faith accentuate the existential nature of faith—that faith is not something discovered by ordinary mental processes and thus possessed by man. Truth here possesses man but only when the man of faith responds wholeheartedly by living in and doing the truth. (John 7:17).

Truth Discovered in Existential Decisions

Truth is existentially apprehended because truth itself is a description of the right relationships which on the one hand should exist within all creation, and on the other hand, between all creation and its Maker. Nothing is static—all creation is in some kind of dynamic relationship with its counterparts. To thwart the proper or destined relationship is to reject life and to invite disaster. For this reason, “genuine faith is life.”⁵

God is not understood as Lord except to the man who recognizes his human impotency and who chooses to accept His claim and demands as well as His offers and assurances. The act of faith is a decision of obedience in response to God's own personal encounter with man. The last words in the letter

to the Romans seem to sum up well this encounter aspect of faith:

Now to him who is able to set you on your feet-according to my gospel, according to the preaching of Jesus Christ himself, and in accordance with the disclosing of that secret purpose which, after long ages of silence, has now been made known (in full agreement with the writings of the prophets long ago), by the command of the everlasting God to all the Gentiles, that they might turn to him in the obedience of faith. .⁶

Pistis, carrying in its meaning the fullest dimensions of trust and confidence, is the predominant relationship between the authentic Christian and God. "Faith includes not only belief but trust."⁷ That trust leads to loving obedience only when man is convinced that God's foundation for his life is more secure than his own. *Pistis* awakens only when man is confident that God will be as gracious with mercy and power as He has promised; trust awakens when man sees how God in His acts has proved Himself worth trusting.

Mis-trust (*a-pistis* of Hebrews 3:19) is the basis of all sin. Rebellion, the decision to set up some lord other than the Lord of Heaven, springs from mis-trust, and state of broken personal relations. Such was Paul's argument in Hebrews 3 and 4:

Yes, it is all too plain that it was refusal to trust [*apistis*, lack of faith] God that prevented those men from entering his rest. Now since the same promise of rest is offered to us today, let us be continually on our guard that none of us even looks like failing to attain it. For we too have had a gospel preached to us, as those men had. Yet the message proclaimed to them did them no good, because they only heard and did not believe as well. It is only as a result of our faith and trust that we experience that rest.⁸

Reconciliation with God, "his rest," is knowledge that can be gained only through personal decision. Neither keen logic nor breadth of intellect can grasp the truth about man's essential nature or his destiny. Only when man begins with his existence, sees his nature as a dynamic tension of contradictions, studies the lamentable consequences of these contradictory inclinations and the human inability to cope with them, will he be prepared to receive the ever-present reconciling, problem-solving gospel of Jesus Christ. This personal analysis of the human situation may be either elementary or sophisticated but the very act of drawing the conclusion of human impotence in the face of God's gracious offer is in itself an all-encompassing act of the whole man in decision. The accompanying fulfillment of God's personal answer of "yes" to man's "yes" is knowledge *sui generis*, beyond human comprehension on one hand but profoundly simple and self-authenticating on the other.

Ellen White could write the following only after her own existential experience of faith:

The perception and appreciation of truth, He said, depends less upon the mind than upon the heart. Truth must be received into the soul; it claims the homage of the will. If truth could be submitted to the reason alone, pride would be no hindrance in the way of its reception. But it is to be received through the work of grace in the heart; and its reception depends upon the renunciation of every sin that the Spirit of God reveals. Man's advantages for obtaining a knowledge of the truth, however great these may be, will prove of no benefit to him unless the heart is open to receive the truth, and there is a conscientious surrender to every habit and practice that is opposed to its principles. To those who thus yield themselves to God, having an honest desire to know and to do His will, the truth is revealed as the power of God for their salvation.⁹

Faith Arises in Response to the Word

Here especially does the Biblical witness cut across all other forms of existential thought as well as

any philosophically based epistemologies. The man of faith does not discover the truth about existence by any form of human activity, initiated by reason, intuition, feeling, or historical research. Authentic faith is first confronted by a Thou who stands over-against man and who presents himself as One worthy of trust. God, to the Christian, is not an inner power, or a “ground of being” but a Person who is infinitely other than man from the standpoint of time and being. The clearest expression of His address to man was conveyed in God Incarnate, in Jesus Christ as an historical event. For Christians, this historical encounter is bed-rock for Christian faith.

However, Jesus as the Man from Nazareth, the historical Person, is not, as such, the all-sufficient Word whom to know would evoke faith. If this were true, all those who saw and heard His daily witness would have recognized Him to be their Lord. The remarkable aspect of Peter’s testimony at Caesarea Phillipi (Matthew 16) was that here, for the first time, the nature of authentic Christian faith was revealed. The response of Jesus to Peter’s affirmation reveals that Christian faith is the product of a marvelous union of the historical Word and the interior Word.

The truth which Peter had confessed is the foundation of the believer’s faith. It is that which Christ Himself has declared to be eternal life. But the possession of this knowledge was no ground for self-glorification. Through no wisdom or goodness of his own had it been revealed to Peter. Never can humanity, of itself, attain to a knowledge of the divine. . . . Only the spirit of adoption can reveal to us the deep things of God, which “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man.”¹⁰

Faith could not arise without the historical Word; yet, neither could it arise apart from the interior Word which Peter was willing to acknowledge as the Word of truth. Peter acknowledged that what Jesus said historically and what the Spirit said within was the truth about Him as a man and that he needed what they offered as man’s solution.

Because the historical witness is fundamental to Christian faith, the apostles became the foundation of the Christian church. Without apostles there would be no Christian church; the apostles are distinguished from all later believers by the fact that he received his faith in direct, immediate, historical encounter with God and not through the mediation of other human beings. Their faith, as they witnessed to it, helped to generate the faith of others who through them found their own personal encounter with God.

The apostles were the first of the many communities of faith to follow. Those early believing communities considered it their responsibility to protect and preserve the historical witness of the apostles; they collected their writings and distributed them with a clear demarcation between them and all other religious writings.

But the transmission of the gospel was not merely a matter of conveying historical information. It was not only the message *about* Christ and His encounter with the first-hand apostles which the Church transmitted through the years. If the Church merely passed on the Bible as a factual document there would have been no “believers” in the days which followed. Genuine faith was not and is not “belief about” but an on-going response to the contemporary self-bestowing love of God which every generation may receive afresh. Peter’s confession, which became the paradigm and bed-rock of all faith to follow, accepted both the historical witness and the interior witness and this combined encounter brought Peter to his knees and transformed his life. The truth Peter learned through both the historical and interior Word was that he would solve his human problems if he learned how to love others as God had loved him, as well as to trust God for the answer to his most pressing existential needs. This was the gospel which shook the first generation.

The Experience of Faith Is Self-authenticating

The interior Word is the Holy Spirit. Jesus made clear that the chief function of the Spirit is to bear Him witness. The beautiful truth about the work of the Holy Spirit is that He not only makes the person of Jesus Christ present, but also personally packages the truth in such a way that it answers the special needs of each individual. This is basic to the existential dictum that “truth is subjectivity.” If truth is not

individually appropriated, if truth does not speak meaning and solution to each particular individual, there will be no abiding conviction. There would be no *personal* faith and a *personal* Saviour.

John stressed the function of the Holy Spirit as that of witnesses to Christ but the “witnessing to” is not accomplished by mere referral to an historical event. Faith is no mere memory of a past event but life and activity in the presence of Him who creates anew and is Himself present in His gifts.

By faith we behold Him here and now. In our daily experience we discern His goodness and compassion in the manifestation of His providence. We recognize Him in the character of His Son. The Holy Spirit takes the truth concerning God and Him whom He hath sent, and opens it to the understanding and to the heart.¹¹

The work of the Holy Spirit is to make faith self-authenticating. The Biblical witness itself is the product of faith; it speaks of a God-man encounter which can be experienced by any man who is willing to listen to the God who is speaking. But the Bible remains pure history to the man who does not share its faith; its meaning is not grasped. However, when man responds to the Lord of the Scriptures, just as the Biblical writers once did, His Spirit within makes personally real the truth which gladdened the hearts of the apostles: “God is with us.” No line of logic, no appeal to the heterogen authority is now needed. The self-validating interior witness of the Spirit to the exterior historical witness requires nothing more in the way of proof; it is a self- authenticating witness no less real to men today than it was to the apostles.

Thus through faith they come to know God by an experimental knowledge. They have proved for themselves the reality of His word, the truth of His promises. They have tasted, and they know that the Lord is good.

The beloved John had a knowledge gained through his own experience. He could testify: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life (for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

So everyone may be able, through his own experience, to “set his seal to this, that God is true.” . . . He can bear witness to that which he himself has seen and heard and felt of the power of Christ. He can testify:

“I needed help, and I found it in Jesus. Every want was supplied, the hunger of my soul was satisfied; the Bible is to me the revelation of Christ. I believe in Jesus because He is to me a divine Saviour. I believe the Bible because I have found it to be the voice of God to my soul.”¹²

The self-authenticating experience of faith verifies the validity of the Holy Scriptures. Archaeology, linguistics, history or even prophetic interpretation do not, in the last analysis, establish the fact that the information contained in the Bible is incontrovertibly true. All such human efforts to recover the past and to devise rational evidences, necessary and helpful as they certainly are, remain subject to the contingencies and relativities of anything humanly reconstructed or performed. Ellen White points out that “he who has a knowledge of God and His Word through personal experience has a settled faith in the divinity of the Holy Scriptures. He has proved that God’s Word is truth, and he knows that truth can never contradict itself.”¹³

The Bible was written after an existential experience and can be rightly understood only when the words written lead the reader into the same kind of experience which once prompted the written witness. The perversion of faith occurs when faith is reduced to an intellectual exercise of memory and assent. The arguments for such a misunderstood faith rest on the shifting contingencies of history and dogmatic

reasonings and when the test comes, the perverted faith will be found insufficient. “Without a personal acquaintance with Christ, and a continual communion, we are at the mercy of the enemy, and shall do his bidding in the end.”¹⁴

For those who are concerned with the perennial problems of ancient history, such as the flood, creation, etc., the surest foundation for spiritual stability is the self-authenticating test of faith which verifies the validity of the apostles. “He who has gained a knowledge of God and His word through personal experience is prepared to engage in the study of natural science.”¹⁵

In summary, theoretical intellectualizing can not validate or even understand existential experiences. The contingencies present in the human understanding of knowledge have been apparent for centuries. The existential experience of faith possesses a logic far more satisfying than the normal processes of human argument, leading Ellen White to observe: “The truth as it is in Jesus can be experienced, but never explained. Its height and breadth and depth pass our knowledge.”¹⁶

Faith Transforms Existence

Men of faith have restored the right personal relationship with God and with their fellowmen. They are fulfilling the purpose of revelation in that they are reciprocating God’s initial invitation to fellowship. Thus, the man of faith glorifies God—he mirrors God’s way of life.

Hence, again, we are forced to use existential terms to describe the nature of faith. Faith is dynamic and involves the whole man in decision as he decides again and again to do God’s will, to relate to other persons as God has shown the way. Faith is not a means to a greater end; it is the great end which is also the great beginning. God can ask for nothing more than for the response of faith. Faith is not “believing something” but a happening which grips and changes the whole person.

Genuine faith will be manifested in good works; for good works are the fruits of faith. As God works in the heart, and man surrenders his will to God, and cooperates with God, he works out in the life what God works in by the Holy Spirit, and there is harmony between the purpose of the heart and the practice of the life. Every sin must be renounced as the hateful thing that crucified the Lord of life and glory, and the believer must have a progressive experience by continually doing the works of Christ. It is by continual surrender of the will, by continual obedience, that the blessing of justification is retained.¹⁷

Faith as related to God is trusting obedience and when related to man, it is love as God has loved us. According to Galatians 5:6, love is the experimental proof of faith. Love not only accepts other men as persons but also “as they are.” Sin treats persons as though they were objects of exploitation or enjoyment. Faith is the positive relationship—sin, the negative. Both are existential and when the Christian Church let both sin and faith slip into the intellectual, legalistic realm, untold damage was done to the Christian witness.

A legal religion is insufficient to bring the soul into harmony with God. The hard, rigid orthodoxy of the Pharisees, destitute of contrition, tenderness, or love, was only a stumbling block to sinners. They were like the salt that had lost its savor; for their influence had no power to preserve the world from corruption. The only true faith is that which “worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6) to purify the soul. It is as leaven that transforms the character.¹⁸

Faith does not consist in becoming free from the law; on the contrary, faith presses through the abstract character of the Law to the personal will which stands behind it, to the personal will of God who is Love. Faith hears God’s gift of grace but not without the simultaneous summons to obedience. With the indicative (“You *are* my son!”) there is always the imperative of discipleship (“*Be* my son!”).

Faith is inseparable from repentance and transformation of character. To have faith means to find and accept the gospel treasure, with all the obligations which it imposes.¹⁹

The task of “being what you are” is the Biblical program of sanctification. Faith and ethics are indissolubly entwined. Ethics become the manward side of the faith experience. Herein there is no cheap grace where man accepts the gift without attention to the claim of God’s Lordship.

A profession of faith and possession of truth in the soul are two different things. The mere knowledge of truth is not enough. We may possess this, but the tenor of our thoughts may not be changed. The heart must be converted and sanctified.

The man who attempts to keep the commandments of God from a sense of obligation merely-because he is required to do so-will never enter into the joy of obedience. He does not obey. When the requirements of God are accounted a burden because they cut across human inclination, we may know that the life is not a Christian life. True obedience is the outworking of a principle within. It springs from the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer. This will lead us to do right because it is right-because right doing is pleasing to God.²⁰

It is not enough for us to believe that Jesus is not an imposter, that the religion of the Bible is no cunningly devised fable. We may believe that the name of Jesus is the only name under heaven whereby man may be saved, and yet we may not through faith make Him our personal Saviour. It is not enough to believe the theory of truth. It is not enough to make a profession of faith in Christ and have our names registered on the church roll. “He that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him, and He in him. And hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He hath given us.” “Hereby we do know that we know Him if we keep His commandments.” 1 John 3:24; 2:3. This is the genuine evidence of conversion. Whatever our profession, it amounts to nothing unless Christ is revealed in works of righteousness.²¹

The ethical transformation of the Church is the reason for the delay in the second advent of Jesus Christ. The gospel is vindicated only when its claims are realized and validated in the lives of its adherents. Christianity is more a matter of exhibiting a product than of proclaiming news *about* God. The grand purpose of the life of Christ on earth was to demonstrate that man in his sinful existence can be elevated into a new existence which solves the twin human problems of meaning to life and the inter-personal relationships. Whether or not even the story of His beautiful life is true, for modern man at least, will depend upon the living witnesses to that power which the Church can exhibit. The world is tired of listening to words without power, and to power without meaning.

Our confession of His faithfulness is Heaven’s chosen agency for revealing Christ to the world. We are to acknowledge His grace as made known through the holy men of old; but that which will be most effectual is the testimony of our own experience. We are witnesses for God as we reveal in ourselves the working of a power that is divine. Every individual has a life distinct from all others, and an experience differing essentially from theirs. God desires that our praise shall ascend to Him, marked by our own individuality. These precious acknowledgements to the praise of the glory of His grace, when supported by a Christlike life, have an irresistible power that works for the salvation of souls.²²

The gospel is to be presented, not as a lifeless theory, but as a living force to change the life. God desires that the receivers of His grace shall be witnesses to its power.²³

Conclusion

Faith is an existential experience because it is concerned with moral decision and ethical transformation. Authentic faith cannot exist unless the whole man is involved in radical decisions daily. The most pressing human problems-death, anxiety, love, hate, etc.,-are the central concerns of authentic faith. At the heart of faith is the unshakable self-authenticating conviction that God has spoken to him, through both the historic and interior witness, in mutual corroboration. The man of faith is no detached spectator watching the game of life. His convictions regarding existential problems are not the products of human reasoning. He is a man who has been confronted and apprehended by his personal Lord. His destiny in faith is God-oriented and in the doing of his Lord's will, he finds genuine freedom and the solutions to human existence.

¹ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 347.

² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁶ Rom. 16:25-26, Phillips.

⁷ *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 389.

⁸ Heb. 3:19 to 4:2, Phillips.

⁹ *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 455-456.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

¹¹ *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 26.

¹² *Ministry of Healing*, p. 461.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

¹⁴ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 324.

¹⁵ *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 461.

¹⁶ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 129.

¹⁷ *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 397.

¹⁸ *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 53.

¹⁹ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 312, 313.

²² *The Desire of Ages*, p. 347.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 826.

Existentialism and the Basic Christian Doctrines

Harry W. Lowe

Of all the contemporary efforts to transform man's understanding of his own being, the existential philosophy is among the most notable. Bernard Ramm calls it "a radical new departure in philosophy that was anticipated in Pascal and worked out more systematically by Kierkegaard."¹

In order to appreciate this radical new philosophical approach to life, it needs to be borne in mind that almost all the philosophers of the nineteenth century were intent on solving the mysteries of the universe by an objective examination that would, it was confidently predicted, eventually solve these problems, even that of life itself.

Hegel spoke of "The Hidden Spirit of the Universe" which was "powerless to resist the might of

thought: it must unclose itself before it, revealing to sight and bringing to enjoyment its riches and depths.” “God the Universal” and “God Exists for Thought” were two dominant thoughts in his famous *The Philosophy of Religion*.²

Contemporary scientists developed this attitude to the point where all mysteries would bow before the power of thought, and the whole universe would stand naked and revealed to the mind of man.

It was due in part to this Hegelian philosophy, and in part to the pretense and formality of institutional religion, that Soren Kierkegaard, the introverted, brilliant Danish writer, offered his resounding protests, - disturbing protests almost ignored at the time, and unknown to the English- speaking world till Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* revealed and re-interpreted this “Danish Pascal” to the theological world.

Leslie Paul, professor at Queen’s College, Birmingham, England, comments as follows on the scientific outlook of the nineteenth century, which was too naive for Kierkegaard to accept:

Sooner or later, the average scientist thought, everything will be known: there will be nothing left in the universe which is not explained. Man had only to pursue untiringly the scientific studies he had already begun in order to account for everything. The astronomical discoveries, the evolutionary hypothesis, the vast progress in both vital and mechanical sciences promised not only that soon man would know everything, but would more or less be able to do everything. This scientific world view also confidently expected that it would in the end account for man: that he too would be scientifically explained and objectively known.³

Soren Kierkegaard set in motion a train of thought, largely ignored by his own century, on which subsequent existential philosophies are built. He categorically refused to objectify everything in the universe; he vehemently and persistently refused to ignore the subjective, and to regard everything, even God, as an object to be scientifically examined. To him, what mattered above all else was the transcendence of a living inward experience. A man must believe what he professes; he must be what he pretends to be.

Blaise Pascal had acknowledged human *reason*, and also the realm of the *heart* as the two highroads to the acquirement of knowledge. Reason reigned where objective knowledge was concerned, and the heart dominated in religion. Kierkegaard, knowing nothing of Pascal, also developed two roads to knowledge. First was the way of *approximation* whereby objective knowledge of physical surroundings, science, mathematics, become known to man. Then came the way of *appropriation*, by which the existent man could know the salient facts of religion, - Christ, God, salvation. Kierkegaard was averse to mixing these two highways to knowledge.

The Primacy of Personal Experience

In the existential philosophy, existence precedes essence. That is to say, personal being, selfhood, is basically more important than any ontological or metaphysical processes by which a man comes to understand the realities of the surrounding world.

Kierkegaard grasped this as he searched for truth, and he said,

. . . truth exists for the particular individual only as he himself produces it in action. . .
. . Truth has always had many loud preachers, but the question is whether a man is willing in the deepest sense to recognize truth, to let it permeate his whole being, to assume all the consequences of it and not to keep in case of need a hiding place for himself, and Judas-kiss as the consequence.⁴

He was so insistent on the primacy of personal sincerity and dynamic experience, that he even went so far as to say that as existents we need not be primarily concerned with true propositions, but we should be supremely concerned about being personally “in the truth.” When we respond with faith and passion to Christ as the Incarnate One, then we are in truth.

Only when a man is alone can he face the Eternal. And the act that is called for at this point is not one of mere noetic recognition. When all is known that can be known, the responsible core of the will in the man has still to yield. He must act, he must choose, he must risk, he must make the leap. For in an existence where qualitative differences remain, there is no other entry into the deepest level of existential living as an individual. Only by this leap on faith could one know the release of guilt, the sense of commitment, the acceptance of a vocation, of a calling in whose service is perfect freedom.⁵

To read *Purity of Heart* in long sessions is to catch the author's haunting refrain embodying the prayer to know God as *the* one thing that matters, to possess "a life that has willed one thing," to experience sorrowing repentance and "victory in the day of need. . . . to will only one thing." And to do the same with Kierkegaard's *Edifying Addresses* is to hear his cry across the years to live before the Eternal "as an individual."⁶ Unfortunately, this personal "self" does not mean the same thing in the hands of some other philosophers and theologians. To one man "self" is tangible, to another intangible; to one it is "body" and "soul," to another a unity, or a psychosomatic unity; still others have talked of the substantiality of self, but Heidegger and others have severely criticized this. Many avoid definitions and speak of self as a unity.

The Christian student recognizes, of course, that, beautifully as some Christian existentialists have expressed themselves on the importance of self in relation to God, their ideas are not new. They are, though not intentionally so, a re-emphasis of the Christian doctrine of conversion and regeneration, which embodies confrontation, total commitment, as expressed also in various other experiential terms in the existentialist vocabulary. Men are groping for terms in which to express their helplessness, their dread (to use a frequent existential term), and their desperate need. A recent issue of *The Ecumenical Review* refers to "the current revival of interest in conversion among Christian communions," and states that "an impressive array of books has been published on the subject."⁷ The differences between existential commitment and Christian conversion serve only to denote the search for reality and authenticity in the moral and spiritual forces dominating the life of man.

The Seventh-day Adventist Christian will acknowledge the vital necessity of living faith and complete personal surrender of the individual. He knows that his denominational literature is replete with the appeal for "unconditional surrender" of the self to Christ, for acknowledgement that "all that we have and are is consecrated to Him."⁸ At the same time he will confess that his trouble is not to find official theoretical expression of such ideals, but to find adequate response in his own living experience. He knows that he must fight the tendency to settle into a nominal or dead Christian adherence, and he must ever seek a vibrant, living, personal faith. Can we as Christian existents galvanize ourselves into this existential dynamism, or do we need outside help provided through the Holy Spirit? Only in some such a way or ways can doctrinal beliefs be translated into a semblance of relevance to the contemporary situation.

It is precisely at this point of specific standards of belief and conduct that modern theology, including Christian existential philosophy, falters in its attempts to provide struggling humanity with anything like secure anchorage. Confrontation must be more than an ecstatic experience; and the subsequent commitment must be to some ideals and standards of life, or all ends in futility. Commitment must be to a transcendent God whose revealed standards are requirements NOT under man's control. D. S. Lewis maintained the futility of setting up human reason or the self, as the yardstick by which all is judged. "Unless the measuring rod is independent of the things measured, we can do no measuring."⁹ Lewis was a scholar, lecturer, author of repute, who was also a thorough-going supernaturalist who to the end remained an apologist for Christian fundamental beliefs. It is seriously open to question whether Kierkegaard's dictum that truth is reached only as a man "produces it in action" is correct, except in the sense that a man must live known truth in order to perceive more truth. This requires an initial revelation which is beyond human contrivance. It is untenable to us that man creates his own moral standards.

A glance at some of the basics in Christian belief as viewed by modern existentialists reveals some things which should suffice to bring concern to Seventh-day Adventists.

I. Deity

From the time that Nietzsche proclaimed that God is dead, and non-Christian existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre declared that the idea of God was impossible, modern philosophic theologians have tended in some cases to drift into a “God is dead” consciousness. They assume that gods have died continuously throughout human history, and now Christian institutionalism and the Christian God are on the decline. Thus John Wild, a distinguished philosopher, teacher, member of the Society for Phenomenological and Existential Philosophy, says:

That this is happening once again is indicated by the sense of the absence of God which is expressed by several discerning and sensitive religious thinkers of our time, such as Heidegger, Paul Tillich, and Simone Weil. God has withdrawn from the realm of machines and . . . these great systems of technology are unable to help us in understanding ourselves as responsible persons, to say nothing of transcendence, the source of our human freedom. We cannot even conceive of God in this way. So he has withdrawn, as the philosophers have seen and have said in their own peculiar way.¹⁰

If, as John Wild suggests, existentialism is one of several alternatives to modern radical theology, it surely needs something more to offer to restless, lonely mankind, than the uncertain philosophy that God may be absent, even though He is not dead.

Paul Tillich, prince of modern existentialists, was strongly averse to the Christian doctrine of a personal God, and declared:

Many confusions in the doctrine of God and many apologetic weaknesses could be avoided if God were understood first of all as being itself or as the ground of being.¹¹

“Personal God” does not mean that God is a person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal and that he carries within himself the ontological power of personality. He is not a person, but he is not less than personal. It should not be forgotten that classical theology employed the term persona for the trinitarian hypostases but not for God himself. God became “a person” only in the nineteenth century, in connection with the Kantian separation of nature ruled by physical law from personality ruled by moral law.

Ordinary theism has made God a heavenly, completely perfect person who resides above the world and mankind. The protest of theism against such a highest person is correct. There is no evidence for his existence, nor is he a matter of ultimate concern. God is not God without universal participation. “Personal God” is a confusing symbol.”¹²

This is not intended to attach any atheistic stigma to the brilliant Paul Tillich. Nevertheless, any Seventh-day Adventist Christian who does extensive reading of Tillich is certainly left with extremely attenuated ideas of the Deity, the divinity of Christ, the miraculous, etc., and if Rudolf Bultmann’s ideas on the supernatural are added, then the conclusion seems inevitable that simple Christian faith as the Seventh-day Adventist understands it, cannot comprehend such negative witness.

Martin Heidegger presents the views of many neo-orthodox existentialists on the doctrine of a personal, sovereign deity. In objecting to the universality of a highest being, he comments:

Whoever has come to know theology from within its development, both that of the Christian faith as well as that of philosophy, prefers to remain silent today in the realm of thought about God.¹³

In the same article Wolfhart Pannenberg calls attention to the idea of a dispensable God to which existentialists, as well as many others, are contributing:

Whoever tries to speak of God today can no longer count on being directly understood. At any rate, this is the case if one has in mind the living God of the Bible as the reality which determines everything, as the creator of the world. Talk of the living God, the creator of the world, is threatening to become a hollow sound today, even a hindrance, in understanding the reality of the world in which we exist, determined as it is by science and technology.

The attack on Christian ideas of God has always existed, and in Protean forms, but in the long years of church history, the attack from within has probably never been as virulent as it is today. Man suffers from a sense of alienation, and the more he submits himself to philosophical examination, the more he feels like "an alien in an alien universe." A hostile universe complex has led a vocal minority to attack the idea of a person, superintending Deity. When this idea is surrendered, then, as one editor recently commented:

We have the paradox of a Church that, according to certain influential spokesman, does not know what it is and what it is to do, presuming to speak to men and women who do not know who they are.¹⁴

Small wonder that so many people no longer believe our Lord's prediction concerning His church: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."¹⁵

In the discussion of existential alienation, Christian men might be expected to exercise restraint, lest they be logically compelled to take the succeeding steps that surrender all belief in a personal God, whose superintending control, though not always seen and understood, leads on to pre-determined ends. The disruptions brought upon us by the mystery of rebellion and perversity, have produced inexplicably confusing conditions of life; and nothing but faith in the unseen but guiding hand of God can solve the problems of the individual self under these conditions. Call this "the Kierkegaardian leap of faith," or the "total commitment" of existentialism, it remains true that God is known only to the man who exercises faith to the extent of total surrender of the self to Him.

Helmut Gollwitzer, in his recent book, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith*¹⁶ asserts anew the idea that God becomes known only through "Christian proclamation," and that all Christian ideas about God come from "the concrete and contingent experience of being addressed by God," Karl Barth has propounded the view that "God can be known only through God."

How does man get to know God? Does "Christian proclamation" connote a previous "address by God?" Could this address by God be identified with the orthodox Christian doctrine of grace, which is God's initiative in seeking man? These are some of the questions which we Christians must answer if we hope to place the basic Christian beliefs in a relevant contemporary existential context.

II. Revelation and the Supernatural

Exploring and elucidating the Christian faith in a perplexed and hostile world is both thrilling and hazardous. Beliefs must be intelligently held, and they must withstand some scrutiny, even though they may be beyond complete human rationalization. The only source of Christian basics is in the New Testament, and the modern philosophical theologian finds it hard to believe some of its content. He is presumably prepared to accept some historicity and facticity in salient events such as the existence, ministry, trial, and death of Jesus of Nazareth. But he soon feels caught in a web, for there are miracles, such as the incarnation, wonders like angels sent by God, and resurrection from the dead, -and these things are incomprehensible to modern man. The attitude of the existential theologian has quite recently been set forth by John Macquarrie:

But we soon discover that even those passages which seem to be readily intelligible are closely entangled in other passages with which the case is very different. The general picture which the New Testament offers is a strange and almost fantastic one to anybody with a modern outlook. What do we make of the stories of wonders and miracles, of

voices from heaven and angels sent from God? How do we understand the mysterious “principalities and powers” those demonic forces of darkness under which the world is said to be held in subjection? What does it mean to speak of the death of Jesus as a “ransom for many,” or as a “propitiation” for the sins of the world? Can we attach any significance to the story of Christ’s descent into the underworld, where he preached to the “spirits in prison”? Can we make sense of the strange incidents that are reconciled in connection with his resurrection? With our ideas of the universe, can we understand his ascension into heaven, where he is exalted at the right hand of the Father? And what are we to say of those pictures of the coming end, when the Son of Man will return in the clouds and the faithful will meet him in the air?¹⁷

Emil Brunner is prepared to accept his own version of the New Testament tradition, provided he can delete the virgin birth, the empty tomb, the forty-day post-resurrection ministry, and the bodily ascension into heaven. And there are many other existential theologians to share his views. How far can we go in these attempts to de-historicize the New Testament, and to undermine its facticity?

Macquarrie mentions a comparison with our fathers’ ideas of a compact three-tiered geocentric universe with heaven above, the underworld beneath, and man’s earth in the middle. In the hands of less careful men, this comparison becomes a furious iconoclastic attack on almost everything sacred to Christian belief.

The problem becomes a very real one when such vitals as the ascension are said to have been “perfectly intelligible to men who entertained the old picture of the world, but it has become unintelligible to us in the post-Copernican era.”¹⁸

In its wider aspects this tends to vitiate the whole question of revelation, so far as the evangelical Christian is concerned. He may accept this and thereby surrender his loyalty to the church’s historic teaching on Biblical revelation, or he must find an adequate defense of orthodox Biblical faith against these sweeping assertions.

It is clear that such things as confrontation with, and commitment to, a divine Person, takes on new meaning in an existential philosophy which tends to destroy the God with whom the orthodox Adventist has practiced daily communion, the One in whom he lives and moves and has his being. Conversion, meditation, the study of the revealed Word is to him the immediate confrontation. Death is to him the gateway to the ultimate confrontation with *the* Person, and is not the dread that it was, and is, to so many philosophers. In fact, Kroner records that Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* dealt so much with death that it “transformed this philosophy of life into a philosophy of death,” and even gave it academic respectability.¹⁹

III. Eschatology

Among evangelicals generally, the last things play a meaningful, climaxing part in Christian theology, but it is difficult to escape the conviction that existentialist liberalism, in the hands of admittedly earnest and brilliant men, has dimmed “the blessed hope” not a little. Bultmann’s treatment is set forth succinctly by George W. David:

To be sure, he [Paul] does not abandon the apocalyptic picture of the future, of the parousia of Christ, of the resurrection of the dead, of the Last Judgment, of glory for those who believe and are justified. But the real bliss is righteousness, and with it freedom. The reign of God, he says, is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. xiv. 17). And that means: the conception of bliss is thought of with regard to the individual: and this state of bliss is already present. The believer who has received baptism is “in Christ.” . . . The time of bliss, promised by Isaiah, is present. . . .

In Bultmann’s understanding, eschatology is that which opens the door to authentic life; that is, to that which overcomes sin and death, making the future sure. In this sense, the [first] coming of Jesus is eschatological in character, as are also his death and

resurrection, since these events profoundly affect the life of man both in this world and in that to come.²⁰

In R. H. Fuller's translation of Bultmann's *Primitive Christianity and Its Contemporary Setting*, [21] he refers to New Testament eschatology as a "renunciation of the world," "escapism," "asceticism," "otherworldliness," and says that "Jesus was mistaken in thinking that the world was destined soon to come to an end." He views the first advent of Jesus Christ as "the eschatological event" which brought the old world to an end, and the second advent is to him, in the first instance, the coming of Christ into the human life by the act of faith, and in the second instance, it is "continual obedience" and readiness for the "inevitability of divine judgment." It is incomprehensible to Bultmann that a dead body can rise again, and bodily resurrection is to him "the legendary concretization" of the early church that God had exalted the crucified One.

Bultmann is admittedly a happy hunting ground for such modernistic views. But other existential philosophers and theologians provide similar views, -views that destroy the evangelical conceptions of divine transcendence, of the primacy of external revelation of truth, of an inspired Holy Word, of terminal judgment of the world, and the life to come. It would be possible to deal with other doctrinal emphases, such as redemption, atonement, grace, sin, faith, creation, the last judgment, the incarnation, and to show in every case that liberal existential philosophy is permeated with modernist conceptions that are far removed from fundamental evangelical doctrinal teachings. In suggesting that existential philosophy offers some profitable ways of making New Testament truth relevant to our time, John Macquarrie makes this admission:

A Christian existentialism has its own gaps and unsolved problems. It runs the danger of so subjectivizing the historical element in the New Testament message that the distinction between history and fiction gets blurred, and one would have to inquire about the importance of this problem. Again, while it saves dogma from a sterile intellectualism, it might seem to sweep away any ontological implications of dogma, and one would have to inquire about the importance of this problem also. It is doubtful whether existentialist philosophy in itself would be adequate for investigating either of these problems.²²

Conclusion

We have acknowledged in this paper, and in others in this series, that Christian existentialism has some lessons of value in the realm of dynamic living. The most difficult thing in Christian ministry is to get people to live according to their profession of truth, to meet God in absolute commitment. This commitment must involve standards of truth. If we accept the self-revelation of God as the source of spiritual and doctrinal truth, then at that point we shall be compelled to steer away from any philosophy that does not accept some basic Christian conceptions in this area of revelation, and of divine superintendence. The Biblical conception that a universal Deity can be at the same time personal to every believer, should not be impossible for the man of faith to accept. It has found acceptance, with certain modifications, in Roman Catholicism, Calvinism, Armenianism, and in most branches of Protestantism.

Somewhere between the Calvinistic and the Arminian conception of the sovereignty of God we must take a firm stand on this basic divine sovereignty, out of which most of our other basic Christian conceptions are derived. We Adventists are not one hundred per cent Arminian in this writer's opinion, and we are even more surely not one hundred per cent Calvinistic. The exact intermediate point does not matter, but basic truth common to both does matter.

It is interesting to note two not dissimilar statements on divine sovereignty, the first from a Calvinist and the other from an Arminian source:

The sovereignty of God! What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the Godhood of God. To say that God is

sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him, What doest Thou? (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purposes, or resist His will (Ps. 115:3). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is “The Governor among the nations” (Ps. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the “only Potentate, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.²³

In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.²⁴

These are strong assertions, but they contain some undergirding truths that are clearly Biblical, and they have given assurance to Christian saints throughout the ages. Can we surrender them to the onslaughts of modern philosophy which would leave us with a well-nigh meaningless explanation of life?

If we could concentrate on dynamic living that embraces the practice of truth as we now understand it, we could lead the church through the stormy seas that bring us to deeper faith and love, and to increasing light and truth—all based on the reassuring, undergirding truth that God is still “the Sovereign of the universe.”²⁵ In other places in our own church literature He is called “the Sovereign of the world, the Ruler of the universe.”²⁶ The assurance of “the guiding hand of God”²⁷ is needed among us, otherwise philosophy which is not based on the external Source of Truth will eventuate in unavoidable experiential and doctrinal confusion. Existentialists do not like to be described or classified, which has led some writers to call their philosophy a state of mind, an obsession with self, or even “a symptom of acute spiritual exhaustion.”²⁸ As such it cannot give spiritual stability to the life.

We are not depreciating the existential philosophy when we say, on the one hand, that whatever is bright and alluring in its teachings we can find already in the Christocentric presentation of our Biblical teachings, and, on the other hand, whatever is lacking in its modernistic doctrinal emphasis is offered to us in the balanced, conservative, reassuring content of the Advent Message.

It is said that in Hebraic thought the word “truth” conveyed fundamentally the ideas of solidity, security, faithfulness, steadfastness. In New Testament Greek thought the word suggests that which is disclosed and free from falsifying appearances. Both meanings are seen in such expressions as “O Lord God of truth;”²⁹ “Thy testimonies are very sure.”³⁰ Jesus Christ is called “the true”³¹ because He completes the purposes of God in salvation and judgment. Truth is found in the written Word³² and the gospel is called the “word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.”³³

The knowledge of the truth is not theoretical, but “existential,” a living reality rooted in the self-committal of the whole man.³⁴

Truth, above all else, is something to be believed, and then acted upon. Only thus can Christian existentialism find a true and satisfying meaning.

If we have lacked the holy fire of dynamic Christian commitment, the altar is still aflame for our rekindling; if our emphasis on dogma has been untouched by the divine *agape* and has therefore tended to be as cold as the stars in the wintry sky, there is still eternal and redeeming love to inject into meaningless doctrine to make it meaningful and attractive in a dedicated life.

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- ² *The World's Greatest Books*, Editors Harmsworth & McClure; McKinlay, Stone & Mackenzie, vol. 13 p. 138.
- ³ Leslie Paul, *Alternatives to Christian Belief*, Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, NY, 1967, pp. 90, 91.
- ⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, Princeton University Press, p. 123.
- ⁵ Douglas Steere, *Translator's Introduction*, Søren Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*, Collins Fontana Books, 1938, p. 15.
- ⁶ Paul Löffler, *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 19, no. 3, July, 1967, p. 252.
- ⁷ Listen among others are: Joost de Blank, *This Is Conversion*, London, 1957; Wm. Barclay, *Turning to God*, London, 1963; Stephen Swalley, *Conversion in the New Testament* in "The Churchman," vol. 78, no. 3, Sept., 1964; H. J. Schultz, *Conversion in the World*, London, 1967.
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- ⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1967, p. 73.
- ¹⁰ In C.W. Christian and Glenn R. Wettig, Editors, *Radical Theology: Phase Two*, Lippincott Co., Philadelphia and New York, 1967, pp. 177, 178.
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- ¹² Tillich, p. 269.
- ¹³ Quoted in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Question of God*, Interpretation, July, 1967.
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- ¹⁵ Matthew 16:18.
- ¹⁶ Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1965.
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- ¹⁸ John Macquarrie, p. 102.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Macquarrie, pp. 47, 48; see also Emmanuel Mounier, *Existential Philosophies*, Macmillan, NY, 1949.
- ²⁰ George W. David, *Existentialism and Theology*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1957, pp. 42, 47.
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- ²² John Macquarrie, p. 124.
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- ²⁵ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, Pacific Press, Mountain View, CA, p. 34.
- ²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2, Review and Herald, Washington, DC, p. 312; cf. *The SDA Bible Commentary*, 4:490, Review and Herald, Washington, DC; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, Pacific Press, Mountain View, CA, p. 325.
- ²⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, Pacific Press, Mountain View, CA, p. 528.
- ²⁸ Clifford Edwards, in *Christianity Today*, May 12, 1967, p. 13.
- ²⁹ Psalm 31:5.
- ³⁰ Psalm 93:5.
- ³¹ Revelation 3:7, 14.
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