

## DESCRIBING THE STORM

### CHAPTER SEVEN

We now come to the final part of our discussion of the situation in modern culture. Modern man is under the spell of a new framework of thinking. He sees himself as a part of an evolving universe. This universe has no creator. It is ruled by mechanistic and spontaneous forces. Man is trapped in a world that has no meaning. There is no final truth. There are no moral absolutes. In this lesson we consider the way in which this new framework of thinking is also evident today in the visible church. We do not mean by this that *all* churches have capitulated, or that *everyone* in any particular church has accepted this new framework. Yet the fact remains that much of the visible church is infected with this unbiblical concept of reality.

#### *The Modern Church*

It is not possible in a brief study such as this to trace the development of modern theology. What we will seek to do, then, is to describe the fundamental shift and then give examples to illustrate it.

The teaching of the historic Christian faith is that God, who created the world at the beginning, has also *acted in history*. The biblical account of the flood, the deliverance of the Israelites from the bondage in Egypt, or the miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ, etc., were therefore regarded as events that men actually witnessed. The world of *fact* and the ideas of *faith* were never divorced from one another. The things of faith were things that had entered the stream of time and space. This culminated in the incarnation, in which the Word (God the Son) became flesh (truly human) and dwelt among us. In modern theology all is radically changed. The realm of *fact* is now seen as the province of science (the modern word for human thought) alone. *If there is a God*—so modern thought, conditioned by the new framework, insists—*then He must exist in a realm that is sealed off from man*. There is no contact between the two realms. Man is closed within a natural order, a mechanistic realm of visible events. The realm of faith has nothing to do with this realm of fact. To say that Jesus lives, or that the Bible is true, therefore—on the basis of new framework thinking—means something entirely different from what it meant on the basis of the old framework.

Let us seek to illustrate the contrast in a simple diagram. In the old view, (a) the realm of fact is also the realm of faith. Thus Jesus Christ is both God and man. The Bible is both human and divine, God's Word written through the instrumentality of men. The resurrection of Christ is a matter of both fact and faith. But under the new framework (b) these are severed from one another.

(a) God has entered into  
the realm of fact

(b) the realm of faith (upper story)  
the realm of fact (lower story)

We now illustrate the change in a number of quotations. First, let us consider the concept of Scripture. The following quotation is from Karl Barth, one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, who clearly speaks out of the new framework. Speaking of the Bible, Barth says this: "*We do not have here a direct speaking of God from heaven...the human word we hear in the Scriptures is not always appropriate or adequate to the Word of God which its authors have heard and to which they bear testimony...we cannot speak of a direct identity of the Scriptures as such with Revelation...in the Bible there is this 'wall' between us and divine Revelation, namely, the man-conditioned and time-conditioned character of the witness.*" To put the matter in our own words, we understand Barth to mean that 'the Bible cannot be the very word of God because it is part of the realm of time and space, and modern science has determined that this is the realm of blind chance.' Having accepted the new framework, in other words, even modern theology denies that there can be anything meaningful *in* the realm in which man exists.

It is the same when we come to the doctrine of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Bible the resurrection is treated as a plain fact of history which has tremendous importance for faith *because it happened*

*in the realm of fact and history.* Now the resurrection is seen quite differently as the following quotations from Rudolph Bultmann will illustrate. *“The resurrection is not an event of past history. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection. The historian can perhaps to some extent account for that faith from the personal intimacy which the disciples had enjoyed with Jesus during His earthly life, and so reduce the resurrection appearances to a series of subjective visions. But the historical problem is scarcely relevant to Christian belief in the resurrection....The real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives.”* Or again, as Paul van Buren puts it: *“As historians...we would prefer not to speak of the Easter event as a ‘fact’ at all, not in the ordinary sense of the word....The resurrection does not lend itself to being spoken of as a ‘fact’ for it cannot be described....We can say that the disciples were changed men. They apparently found themselves caught up in something like the freedom of Jesus Himself, having become men who were free to face even death without fear. Whatever it was that lay between [crucifixion and the change in the disciples], it is not open to our historical investigation. All we can say is that something happened.”* Or again, as Gunther Bornkam (a disciple of Bultmann) says, *“Certainly faith cannot and should not be dependent on the change and uncertainty of historical research.”* If these theologians do not come right out in the open to deny the traditional doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it is because they still want to *sound as if* they are Christian. They want those who hear them to accept them as Christian. Yet it is clear that there is no room within the new framework for authentic Christian belief.

There was a time when theologians who accepted the new framework still tried (in one way or another) to find a way to bring the realm of fact into meaningful contact with the realm of faith. What is interesting to observe now is that this is fading. Just as the artists and poets have followed the line of new-framework thinking into the void, so have the theologians. Thus it is that some deny that there is any realm other than that in which man is trapped. John Robinson, of the Church of England, put it this way: *“A dualist model of the universe is out....‘There is no supernatural reality, high and lofty, above us. There is only the reality which concerns us directly concretely.’ There is no second storey to the universe, no realm of the divine over and above or behind the processes of nature and history which perforates this world or breaks it up by supernatural intervention.”* As William Hamilton expressed it: *“When we speak of the death of God...we speak as well of the death in us of any power to affirm any of the traditional images of God.”* To put it in our own words, when the biblical framework is once rejected, it is only a question of time before complete despair sets in. If (to look again at our diagram, section b) God is once banished from the world of fact, it is only a question of time before the realm of faith disappears. From a biblical point of view it makes no difference at all whether you have a two story universe (as in part b of the diagram) or just a lower story. A realm of faith divorced from fact is no more Christian than to have a realm of fact alone.

Again we point out that only a few theologians have worked out to a logical conclusion the results of new framework thinking. Most people in the Church—or even in a culture traditionally influenced by the Christian faith—still tend to hold to at least the comforting words of Christian teaching, even if they have lost their original content. Francis Schaeffer (an orthodox Christian) puts it like this: *“I have come to the point where, when I hear the word ‘Jesus’—which means so much to me because of the Person of the historic Jesus and His work—I listen carefully because I have with sorrow become more afraid of the word ‘Jesus’ than almost any other word in the modern world. This word is used as a contentless banner, and our generation is invited to follow it...and nowhere more than in the new morality which follows the New Theology. It is now Jesus-like to sleep with a girl or a man, if she or he needs you. As long as you are trying to be human you are being Jesus-like to sleep with the other person, at the cost, be it noted, of breaking the specific morality which Jesus taught. But to these men this does not matter, because that is downstairs in the area of rational scriptural content. We have come, then, to this fearsome place where the word ‘Jesus’ has become the enemy of the person Jesus, and the enemy of what Jesus taught.... Increasingly over the past few years the word ‘Jesus,’ separated from the content of the Scriptures has become the enemy of the Jesus of history, the Jesus who died and rose and who is coming again and who is the eternal son of God. So let us take care. If evangelical Christians begin to slip into a dichotomy, to separate an encounter with Jesus from the content of the Scriptures (including the discussable and the verifiable), we shall without intending to, be throwing ourselves and the next generation into the millstream of the modern system. This system surrounds us as an almost monolithic consensus.”*

People sometimes wonder why it is that once-great Protestant denominations can suddenly come out in favor of such things as premarital sex, adultery, and even the right to be homosexual! But the answer is not really difficult. The new framework of thinking eliminates the very basis of fixed moral standards. How can there be any fixed moral standards if the realm of fact and faith are separated? If God has never acted in history—so that His Word and His Son became part of the realm of fact—then how can anyone really be sure that a certain thing

is right or wrong? *Situation ethics* is an inevitable result of the kind of theology (which we could really call anti-theology) that we find within the new framework of thinking. In situation ethics it is man himself who is ultimate—who decides in any given situation, on the basis of his own concept of love, whether or not a thing is right. If this particular sexual relationship satisfies my own mind—and I feel certain that it will not hurt anyone—and that it is, for me, a meaningful expression of love—etc. (this is the way the situation ethics people reason), then I decide in that moment whether it is right or wrong, but I can never say that a thing is wrong per se. I can never say that all homosexual activity is wrong, because I do not have any absolutes of any kind in this realm of fact. The Ten Commandments, according to new framework thinking, cannot possibly be anything higher than Moses' educated opinion. The situation people do not say that the Ten Commandments have no value. To the contrary, they would say of them very much what the "new theologians" say of the resurrection story. They are an attempt to express something in the lower story which cannot really be expressed.

Someone has seriously suggested that the theologians (as they are falsely called) should stop talking about God entirely. The reason for this suggestion is the realization that on the basis of the new framework of thinking theologians really have nothing to say *that has meaning*. Just as the new framework leads a composer to silence the orchestra because he has lost contact with meaning, so it is with theologians too. The only difference between the theologian who says, "I have nothing to say," and the theologian who talks about the resurrection as a thing of faith but not fact, is that the first is more honest than the second. If the new framework is valid, then Christianity cannot possibly be true (in the old meaning of the word true). If Christianity is true (that is, if what the Bible says happened really did happen), then the new framework is false. And the whole history of modern theology demonstrates that when we once abandon the biblical framework—God, creation, etc.—we end up in complete despair. Is it not despair when theologians admit that they can no longer talk about God?

### Questions:

1. Why is it necessary to also consider the Church in this survey?
2. What is the relationship between faith and fact in the old framework?
3. What is the relationship between these in the new?
4. Why does Barth say the Scriptures are not to be identified with the Word of God?
5. Why does Barth speak of a "wall" in the Scriptures?
6. Why does Bultmann say "the resurrection is not an event of past history"?
7. What does the word myth mean in Bultmann's thinking?
8. Is the resurrection upper or lower story in the thinking of these new theology people? Why?
9. Why do they insist that faith cannot rest on fact?
10. Why is Robinson more consistent?
11. What do the "death of God" theologians mean by that phrase?
12. Why does Schaeffer listen carefully when he hears someone speak of "Jesus"?
13. Why should people not be surprised when some Protestant denominations come out in favor of what used to be considered as sin?
14. Why are the Ten Commandments little more than the opinion of Moses to many today?
15. Why have some so-called theologians called for silence (no more "God talk," in other words)?

### Projects:

1. Find an article on the Christian religion in *Reader's Digest* and be prepared to show (by quotation from it) whether or not it is "new framework" in outlook.
2. Listen to a radio sermon. Make an outline of it. Be able to show the class which framework it reflects (if it is a mixture, show this too).