

## Part II

### THE CAUSE OF IT ALL

#### CHAPTER EIGHT

In the first six lessons of this study we have attempted to describe the storm of change that is sweeping over our culture. It is fundamentally a change in the whole frame-work of thought. Man no longer sees himself as a part of a universe made by God, in which there are absolutes such as truth and right (as over against falsehood and wrong). The result is a loss of any sense of meaning in human life. In this lesson we will seek to outline the course of this change.

#### *The Root Cause*

When our Lord was tempted by Satan, He said this: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God”! Man—as he was originally created by God—was to worship God and serve Him only. All that man thought and said and did was supposed to be under the control of the word of God. The temptation of Satan was therefore concentrated at this point. Satan aimed to get man to begin at some point to think autonomously. We use this term because it briefly and accurately states the root cause of all evil and vanity in this world. The word autonomous is a compound of two Greek words meaning self and law. Auto means self, nomos means law. Man becomes autonomous when he becomes a law unto himself. He makes his own mind—or heart—the source and standard of truth and right. It is clear, from Genesis 3, that this is what man’s original sin was. It was, in effect, a declaration of independence from God. It was (see Gen. 3:6 especially) man’s search for meaning of his own, in place of the (previous) dependence upon God’s revelation as the sole source and standard of meaning.

We do not mean to suggest that Adam, in paradise, had an express command of God to tell him, in detail, everything that he was to do. The way in which Adam named the animals (Gen. 2:19) seems to clearly refute this idea. No, man was never expected to function as a mere robot—with everything programmed like a machine is programmed. If that were so, man could not be called the image of God. The point is that man was required to function in a creative way (discovery, invention, artistic endeavor, etc.) within the guidelines of divinely revealed absolutes. He was, in other words, never to attempt to think, or say, or do anything without first being sure that the God-given absolutes were respected. And what were these absolutes? To name a few: man would say to himself, “I am a creature—I live in a universe created by God—all things are under His plan and control—His revealed word is the only safe and reliable guide.” The moment that man began to think, say, or do anything without regard to these absolutes, he was acting as if he was a law unto himself (or autonomous).

We say that man was acting *as if* he could be autonomous, because God is still sovereign over man despite man’s attempt to become a law unto himself. God alone is truly autonomous. He is a law unto Himself because He is not a creature. He is not responsible to someone greater than Himself. When Satan said that man could be as God (Gen. 3:5), he lying. Man can be like God while he remains God’s faithful image. Man can remain God’s true image only by living (as Jesus said) by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. When man declares his independence from God, he becomes Satan-like, rather than God-like, since it is Satan who originated the idea of the creature being autonomous. But even here, we must realize, it does not really “come off.” Even Satan cannot succeed. He will never escape the all-encompassing control of God. The master strategy of Satan—the “would-be” autonomous rival of God—fails. Even when Jesus is killed—and this was Satan’s boldest act of defiance—yet he accomplished only what “God’s hand and purpose had predestined to occur” (see Acts 2:23; 4:28).

God warned Adam against such a declaration of independence with these words: “From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). The words translated as “surely die” are interesting in the Hebrew. The sense is, literally, “dying you shall die.” The words did not mean that Adam would suddenly drop dead, and be buried, on the very same day in which he first sinned. What was meant was that death would begin to work. It would “set in.” And we see how this happened in the chapters that immediately follow in the book of Genesis. Adam feels shame. He accuses his wife. They are sent out of paradise. And, because of man’s position as head over all things under God, the whole world of nature feels the effects of the fall. Now there are thorns and thistles. The earth will yield its produce to man only with

much sweat and toil. The environment is no longer friendly to man. Now come calamities such as flood and famine. From this time forth man's existence is "hemmed in" by trouble and sorrow. This is the solemn message of Ecclesiastes 3:

"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—a time to give birth, and a time to die—a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted—a time to kill, and a time to heal—a time to tear down, and a time to build up—a time to weep, and a time to laugh.... He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end."

Observe that Solomon sees man's existence as firmly in the hands of a sovereign God. God has determined that these sorrows shall be man's portion, and man cannot escape them. Yet, because man was made in God's image, eternity—and the restless longing for eternal life—is always there within him. And so it is that man is miserable. He cannot escape from God, and yet (because of his wickedness) does not wish to return to Him.

### *The Working Out of This Principle*

It will be evident, by now, that there is nothing new in the present situation, in principle. History is a witness to the fact that man always comes to the same place of futility and despair when he tries to be a law unto himself. This was the situation (to give one example) in the ancient Roman Empire in the days of Paul the apostle. In Romans 1 he outlines the religious history of the gentile nations under Roman government. He explains how men "professing themselves to be wise...became fools" (vs. 22). "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie" (vs. 25), and "for this reason God gave them over to degrading passions, etc..." (vs. 26). Apostasy from God, as Paul shows in this chapter, results in the moral breakdown of life. In the end man's existence becomes vile and ugly. It was in the midst of this situation that the Christian Church was first planted by the Lord. Here God raised up a people who did seek, once again, to live by every word that proceeds from His mouth. Even the pagans took note of this Church. It became a proverb in that day that these Christians loved one another. They were different. They demonstrated the fact that life can be a thing of meaning and purpose. And so—amid the ruins of a dying empire—the ancient Church became a mighty force in the world. Great nations—and entire cultures—began to feel the impact of God-given absolutes. To an extent the ancient world was "Christianized." But then, as in the history of Israel in the Bible, there was a re-introduction of the fatal principle that always brings forth evil fruit. Already, in the fourth century, we begin to find in Christian thought the idea of another source of truth alongside the Word of God. This second source of "the absolutes" was called sacred tradition. This was really nothing but a new way of making men a law unto themselves. With this so-called sacred tradition put alongside the Bible, it was possible—again and again—to nullify the teaching of Scripture. So there came the rise of the papacy (the pope as supreme ruler of the Church) and the doctrine of Mary and the saints (as objects of devotion), etc.

Finally—in what we now call "the dark ages"—things became almost as bad as they were before in the pagan Roman Empire. And the unfaithful Church was often the source of the abominations that came. Then, in the mercy of a sovereign God, men were raised up who threw off the yoke of human authority. Once again the Church went back to the Bible as the only infallible Word of God. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others—but especially Calvin—wanted to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God and by this only. So there came the greatest advance in all of history since the time of the apostles. One need only visit the nations of the world which have felt the impact of the Protestant Reformation to see the contrast as over against those which have not. The effects in these nations have spread through the whole culture. The time came, in such a nation as our own, when the whole society was nourished and guided to a considerable extent by the absolutes of the Bible. It is our conviction that all that is great and noble in our national heritage ultimately traces back to this source.

But then—hard on the heels of the Reformation—came the so-called "Enlightenment." In the passing of time the basic principle of the Enlightenment has come more and more to the forefront. And what is this principle? It is that in some areas of human endeavor the word of God is not needed. It is, in other words, just a new and up-to-date version of the old autonomous man idea. When Charles Darwin wrote his famous book entitled *The Origin of Species*, it was an instant "sell out." The reason was that already at that time more and more thinking was becoming autonomous again. At first it was imagined that men could work in some areas (for example, scientific investigation) without dependence on the Bible, while at the same time holding the Bible in reverence in things of religion. The result was that an area was marked out in which man was a law unto himself, and God

was excluded. As time passed, this area became steadily larger, and the area of religion became more and more restricted. Darwin's book was a welcome relief, as it were, because it seemed to open up the vista of a unified world and life view in which the word of God was no longer seen as necessary at all. Since Darwin's time the tide has risen steadily so that even many churches today have accepted the new framework of thinking. (The new framework of thinking is, of course, new in form only—not in principle. ) The following quotation from Deitrich Bonhoeffer will indicate something of the present situation.

“The movement beginning about the thirteenth century... towards the autonomy of man (under which head I place the discovery of the laws by which the world moves and manages in science, social and political affairs, art, ethics, and religion) has in our time reached a certain completion. Man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis. In questions concerning science, art, and even ethics, this has become an understood thing which one scarcely dares to tilt at any more. But in the last hundred years or so it has been increasingly true of religious questions also: it is becoming evident that everything gets along without “God” and just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, what we call “God” is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground.... There is no longer any need for God as a working hypothesis, whether in morals, politics, or science.”

The man who wrote the above quoted words was executed by Adolph Hitler's order. He lived, in other words, in the midst of the horrible evidence that apostate thinking leads to moral chaos. How tragic it is that he did not see—or was unwilling to challenge—the whole concept of the autonomous man. It was this that lay at the root of the evil he was fighting against when he joined the plot to overthrow Hitler. Professor B. B. Warfield was a champion of the Bible as man's only infallible rule. He summed the issue up this way: “We cannot be supernaturalistic in patches of our thinking and naturalistic in substance.... We cannot be supernaturalistic with regard to what occurred two thousand years ago in Palestine, and simply naturalistic with regard to what occurs to day in our hearts.... It is only he who heartily believes in the supernaturalism of salvation who is not fatally handicapped in meeting the assaults of that anti-supernaturalistic world-view which flaunts it-self so triumphantly about us. Conceal it from ourselves as we may, defeat here lies athwart the path of all half-hearted schemes and compromising constructions.”

### Questions:

1. What is the root cause of the rise of “new frame work” thinking?
2. What does “autonomous” mean?
3. What evidence do you find in Genesis 2 to show that man was not created to function as a robot?
4. Is man actually autonomous? Explain.
5. How does Scripture show that no creature can succeed in escaping from God's sovereign control?
6. How do you understand the phrase, “you shall surely die,” in Genesis 2:17?
7. How many items in the quoted portion of Ecclesiastes 3 remind you of things that we have seen in earlier parts of this study?
8. Why is the unbeliever doomed to frustration?
9. Read Romans 1:16-32 and note at least two parallels with our situation today.
10. Why did the early Church make so great an impact on ancient Roman society?
11. In what form did the old principle of human autonomy come in to weaken the Church?
12. What was the result?
13. What was the most important principle of the Protestant Reformation?
14. What was the result (of the impact of this principle)?
15. What has brought about the decline of Western culture and the Church of the Reformation?
16. Why was Darwin's book so eagerly purchased?
17. In your own words, in a sentence, what is Bonhoeffer saying?
18. In your own words, in a sentence, what is Warfield saying?

### Projects:

1. Analyze Psalm 2, and be prepared to explain it to the class with reference to this lesson.
2. Explain to the class why it is right for God to be autonomous, but wrong for man.
3. Find a magazine article on science and relate it to this lesson in a classroom report.