

Upper and Lower Story, I

Father, we thank You for today. We thank You for the loveliness of this time of year. We ask You to be with us now. We pray that as we think about the dilemma of our contemporaries You will give us wisdom and understanding. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

At the end of our last lesson we began to discuss what Schaeffer calls the upper and lower story. We talked about a diagram where the lower is reason that examines the world around us. On that basis we are not able to come up with any meaning or answers. Answers, significance, meaning, or hope has to be put in what he calls the upper story in the area of the irrational. I have chosen some examples for us to look at today. One that is interesting is Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. There is a scene where they have a family meal, and one of his uncles is a Jewish believer while one of his aunts is a radical skeptic. She attacks him for his faith, and in the end the discussion comes down to someone accusing the uncle of not being interested in truth. His response is, "If I have to choose between God and truth, I always choose God." That is clearly Woody Allen's understanding of faith. Any kind of religious faith can only be had at the expense of what is understood to be rationally true. Truth and faith are in two completely different categories.

That is what Schaeffer means by the upper and lower story. If we do not understand that this is where people are, we will not understand much about our culture. The difficulty we face is that whenever we start talking about Christianity or the hope we have as Christians, in the minds of our hearers we talk in the level of the upper story. To them, we do not talk about truth. We will not communicate to people until we understand that they hear us this way. Jesus spoke about people who hear and those who do not hear. They hear what you say, but they hear it in a different way from what you intended. If we use the normal religious words that they are accustomed to hearing, they do not understand us at all. Until we challenge them at the point that we talk about truth and not about faith in the sense that they understand it, we have not communicated at all to a modern person.

Let us look at some examples of the upper and lower story. First is an excerpt from Bertrand Russell's book, *Why I am Not a Christian*. Russell was one of the leading humanist philosophers of the twentieth century. He was a mathematician and a philosopher, and he was also a popular communicator of humanist beliefs and ideas. Notice the way he acknowledges the difficulty of the human condition. We will look at what he calls "Good Play," which is actually part of Mephistopheles telling Faustus the story of creation. It is presented as completely absurd with God present to destroy people and take delight in their suffering. God destroys man completely at the end, and He says, "I liked that play so much I will do it again." In other words, we will have another repeat of this meaningless existence. It is in that context that Bertrand Russell makes the statement,

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's

habitation henceforth be safely built. How, in such an alien and inhuman world, can so powerless a creature as Man preserve his aspirations untarnished?

Here he talks of the lower story. When we look at the world scientifically or rationally, we find a world that is purposeless and void of meaning. He says that we have come from something completely material that did not have our life pregnant in it or any knowledge that we were coming. We are purely accidental, and everything we think of as being unique about the human person is here by chance.

As Mono puts it in his book, *Chance and Necessity*, “our number came up on the Monte Carlo game.” All these wonderful things about our humanness will end with our death, and there is nothing to preserve. Everything that the race produces is also going to be destroyed. Science and reason present us with a life without any meaning where there is no significance, hope, purpose, or design. Then at the end Bertrand suddenly leaps upstairs. We have this completely meaningless foundation that science and reason give us no meaning at all. Suddenly on top of this we will build the soul’s habitation. We may name our foundation despair, but that is what we will build our building on. He tells you that he is going to preserve his aspirations. Suddenly all these aspirations that we know to be meaningless scientifically are going to be preserved. This is a very good illustration from a humanist of what Schaeffer speaks about.

We will build on the foundation of despair. This is something you will find over and over again as you read things written by people in our culture. Most people simply cannot cope with being in a situation that they acknowledge leads them to absurdity. You end up finding these wonderful statements like this, “Now we will preserve man’s aspirations untarnished.”

This problem of the upper and lower story is not specifically a Western cultural problem. I have done quite a bit of speaking in Eastern Europe, and they have the same problem there. They have had a different science and a different rationality in Marx, but Marxism is also completely materialistic. Marx says that man has arisen in a material universe. It too ends up in the same position. With Marxism you have an economic or political utopia built on this foundation. But people have not experienced that; they have experienced exactly the opposite. But utopia is really what is promised. You have the same analysis of the human condition, and you have a political resolution to it. The resolution is not realized, and it is not going to be realized.

Everywhere I went in Eastern Europe, people struggled with the same thing, and they know that their lives have no meaning. I do not think it is just true there either. If you ask why there was a sudden rise of fundamentalist Islam in the Arab world, the answer is because secularism from the West had such a powerful impact on the Islamic world. That is why it was not simply a reaction to the Shah of Iran. There has been plenty of corruption and injustice in countries all over the world, including Muslim countries, for thousands of years. It was not that suddenly everyone became so upset and they did not want to have any more corruption, though that was one of the popular appeals. There was something much deeper going on, which was the recognition by the Muslims themselves that the modern worldview that came with Western secularism put them in this category, too. Modern knowledge, the revolution of the Enlightenment, science, and rationality actually destroy the foundation for society. It reduces Islam, like Christianity, to something that is purely in an upper story area. Islam has claimed to be true, as Christianity claims to be true. The leaders saw that they were losing their people to secularism, not just to Western materialism. They spoke against materialism, and they continue to speak against it, but it is much deeper than that. There is a very powerful feeling that the faith is being lost or reduced to an abstraction without any foundation.

The same thing is true in India where there has been something of a revival of Hinduism. Forty years ago you could not have predicted this. It is not as powerful as the revival of Islam, but it has happened to some degree. I think it is a reaction to secularism. A friend of mine from L'Abri went to speak in South Africa, and he was taken out to a little town out in the bush. He was hundreds of miles from the nearest big city. He was taken into a crowded schoolroom, and there were all kinds of young people there. He said it was just like talking to a group of young people in Holland. You look at the clothes they wear and the places they live, and you can tell they are in the bush. They receive the same education, though. Western ideas are everywhere in the world. I met people in India who have read far more modern Western philosophy than I have. They are deeply influenced by it, and you find that anywhere you go.

We live in a world where knowledge is indivisible. People look at the West and say that they want our material prosperity. But what comes with it is Western people, Western books, and Western ideas. They are completely secular, and they destroy. Schaeffer has some interesting tapes on modern science. He talks about the difference between modern science and what he calls modern-modern science. Science as it is taught in our culture is a science that is secular. It is anti-supernatural, and it is rationalistic, not just rational. That is the perspective from which it is taught.

Everywhere in the world that Western businesses go, Western education also goes. The ideas that go with it are the ideas that destroy meaning and significance and create rootlessness. When we export our technology, science, economic system, and economic benefits to other parts of the world, other things go with them. One thing is the reduction of man to a machine, which is not a necessary part of technology or of our economic system. It is a fundamental part of our technology and economic understanding in the West today. Man is simply a machine. We do not just take machines somewhere else or have the ability to use them. We take the ideas that underlie our society without even realizing it. Go anywhere in the world, and you will see the same films.

Five years ago I went to Poland, which is a country that is still supposed to be completely anti-Western. You cannot buy English or American newspapers anywhere, *Time*, *Newsweek*, or anything like that. If people wanted to read them they would have to go into the American embassy to read them. But everyone watched films like *Klute* with Jane Fonda on television. It was striking to see that, because it is a film that expresses the message of rationalism, secularism, and humanism very powerfully. That is what is taught in the schools, too. We are in a situation where these ideas affect the whole world. It is the same when we come to theology.

Let us look at some theological examples of the upper and lower story. We will not understand modern theology, and that is part of our problem. We communicate to those who have also heard church people say that there is nothing that stands together between faith and reason. They have heard that the two are opposed to each other. The first example is from David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, which was written in 1834. It may surprise you when you read this, because you may think that neo-orthodoxy or existential theology is a twentieth-century phenomenon. But it is very interesting to see what he has to say. On page 122 he says,

The new point of view which must take the place of the ones indicated above is the mythical. This theory is not brought to bear on the Gospel history for the first time; it has long been applied to particular parts of that history. It is here only extended to its entire compass. It is not by any means meant that the whole history of Jesus is to be represented as mythical, but that only every part of it is to be subjected to a critical examination to ascertain whether it has not some mixture of the mythical. The exegesis of the ancient church set out from a double proposition. First the Gospels contained a history; second this history was a supernatural one. Rationalism

rejected the later of these presuppositions but only to cling the more tenaciously to the former, maintaining that these books present unadulterated though only natural history. Science cannot rest satisfied with this half measure. The other presupposition also must be relinquished. And the inquiry must first be made whether in fact, and to what extent, the ground on which we stand in the Gospels is in any way historical.

He says we will systematically subject the New Testament and the history of Jesus to the recognition that it is not historical but rather mythical. It is not just some events like the transfiguration or walking on the water that were considered mythical. Up until Strauss's time, people examined only certain events in the life of Jesus and said that they must be mythical. Basically the rest of the New Testament was still considered to be an historical message. But Strauss wanted to subject the New Testament to a radical, thoroughgoing criticism for the first time.

Two paragraphs later he says, "The author is aware that the essence of the Christian faith is perfectly independent of his criticism. The supernatural birth of Christ, His miracles, His resurrection and ascension remain eternal truths whatever doubts may be cast on their reality as historical facts. The certainty of this can alone give calmness and dignity to our critical work." That is an amazing statement from 1834. I sometimes think that we should never use the word "faith" in our moment in history because of the misunderstanding that it immediately arouses in everyone's mind. You have to use other words or explain what you mean every time you use it. Strauss says that if we subject the New Testament to a rationalistic, scientific, or historical understanding, we are left having to say that this is unhistorical. Much of it, perhaps all of it, is mythical. We cast doubt on the historicity and actuality of any of the events in the New Testament. This includes the birth, resurrection, miracles, ascension, and transfiguration of Christ. He concludes that these events did not occur. At the same time, he says that even though they did not occur, they remain eternal truths.

Up in the realm of faith there are still eternal truths. In the lower story we have to say that Christ was not born of a virgin, Christ did not do miracles, and He was not raised from the dead. But in the upper story we can still say that Christ was born of a virgin, He rose from the dead, and He did miracles. We will maintain these things are eternal truths. They are completely independent of the criticism even though we have radical doubts about their reality as historic fact. Those are his words. On the next page he says,

The results of the inquiry which we have now brought to a close have apparently annihilated the greatest and most valuable part of that which the Christian has been wont to believe concerning his Savior Jesus, have uprooted all the animating motives which he has gathered from his faith, and withered all his consolations. The boundless store of truth and life, which for 18 centuries has been the nourishment of humanity, seems irretrievably laid waste, the most sublime leveled with the dust, God divested of His grace, man of his dignity, and the tie between heaven and earth broken. Piety turns away with horror from so fearful an act of desecration. Thus, at the conclusion of the criticism of the history of Jesus there presents itself this problem: to reestablish dogmatically that which has been destroyed critically.

These things will still be eternal truths even though they have been destroyed critically.

The other theological example of the upper and lower story is a much more recent one. It is from 1977 and *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The author is Frances Young, who teaches theology in England. We will read her personal testimony. Let me point out several things. She says, "This sense that the story of Jesus Christ provides the key to life, the answer to man's moral idealism, and above all a revelation of divine involvement in the suffering of the world has been mediated to us through the faith of generations

committed to the church and through the witness of the New Testament.” Her beginning point is that we are here in the community of the church and its historical traditions. We are nourished by the Christian faith expressed in community and in the New Testament. She describes the kind of world in which she considers the early church to have lived. She says,

The early church lived in a world in which supernatural causation was accepted without question. Divine visitance (i.e., God coming into the world) is not unexpected, because there is an assumption that God can act into the world that He has made. Such assumptions, however, have become foreign to our situation. In the Western world, both popular culture and the culture of the intelligencia has come to be dominated by the human and natural sciences to such an extent that supernatural causation or intervention in the affairs of this world has become, for the majority of people, simply incredible. [...] There is no room for God as a causal factor in our international, industrial, or personal lives. Statistical probabilities, natural patterns of cause and effect, are presupposed in sociology, in psychology, in medicine and genetics, as well as the natural sciences. History is to be explained in terms of politics and personalities or economics and power structures. Heavenly powers have given away to earthly forces.

In the early church there was no division of God and the world. There was an assumption without question that God created this world and that He acts into it. The early church lived in a world of supernatural causation. We talked earlier that now when we export our sciences, whether it is sociology, psychology, anthropology, biology, chemistry, or physics, what goes with them is this understanding of the world. In our modern world we now have simply earthly forces. That is the reality in which we live. There is no longer any room for divine causation. God has, to all effects and purposes, been blanked out completely. Her question is “What is faith in Jesus Christ going to mean in this cultural environment?” Frances Young is a person whose life is shaped by “Christianity.” She says,

The present climate is alien to the whole Christian position as traditionally conceived. Yet many of us remain Christian believers. Looking back over the years, we decry God’s care for us in the remarkable coincidences and creative chances of our lives. When faced with difficulties or crises, we naturally turn to prayer. We offer thanks in moments of joy. Sunday by Sunday we take ourselves to a place where the presence of other believers will assist us in praising and worshipping God. We confess our sins, accept forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. We battle against evil and suffering in the power of the Lord. We offer intercessions for the sick and pray about situations of political conflict and war. None of these activities can be regarded as rational insofar as they appear inconsistent with our fundamental assumptions about the world in which we live.

She means that we cannot believe in a God who relates to this world. The things she mentioned appear to be irrational. They are completely inconsistent with our assumptions about the world. She says, “How can we go on living in this way? Are we all schizophrenics?” Later she suggests her answer, and she borrows a phrase from Arthur Kessler. We have the upper and lower story again as she speaks about the trivial plane and the tragic plane.

When we turn from day-to-day events to contemplate at a deep level the significance of human life, we operate with different models. In reflecting upon man’s nature and destiny, especially as it is explored in literature and drama, we accept categories of truth to which we would assign no literal, factual, or scientific meaning. The Christian believer lives in more than one dimension. In trying to understand the world in which he lives, he finds himself obliged to use different, apparently incompatible, models. [...] We work with, one, the scientific model, which finds

explanations of phenomena, behavior, and events in terms of natural causes, and, two, with mythological or symbolic models, which represent the religious and spiritual dimension of our experience. [...] This kind of truth is communicated, even conceived, in dramatic, poetic forms. [...] Salvation and atonement are the core of the Christian message. From the experience of suffering, sin, decay, and abnormality, there is a constituent part of the world that would make belief in God impossible without a Calvary scent of religious myth. [...] Without the religious dimension, life would be senseless and endurance of its cruelty pointless.

In the tragic or the upper story, we accept truths that have no literal, factual, or scientific meaning. Frances Young says that poetry, the novel, drama, and music all speak to us in the upper story. That is where the arts speak to us. She talks about poetic truth and mythological truth rather than literal fact. She says that life is senseless and cruel. That is what we really and literally know to be truth. A Calvary-scented religious myth is her description of the work of Christ. That is what enables me to keep on going. Later she gives an illustration of how it works. She compares it to a piece of music, “Berlioz’s *Grande Messe des morts* (Grand Mass for the Dead) convicts and terrifies even though I no longer accept as literal the picture of a heavenly assize, a heavenly judgment after death.” Christian truths are now all in the area of music. Going to church is like listening to music. Music moves you; you do not have to think about its meaning. You are simply moved by it. Berlioz’s music may convict you or terrify you. Music does that to you, because it is very powerful. The Christian message works in the same way, without having to be true in any kind of literal, factual, scientific, or historical sense. She has done what Strauss says needs to be done. The whole Christian faith is reestablished up in the area of dogmatics though even down below we know it is actually not true. She says quite literally it is impossible to believe that Jesus is God. She says that is a completely meaningless statement, and we should not attempt to talk that way. That is a totally irrational idea. God is in the upstairs, and Jesus is in the downstairs. To say that Jesus equals God is to confuse myth with fact. There was someone called Jesus who lived, but to say that He is God tries to bring the two together. We cannot anymore or ever again bring the two together. There is no possibility at all of doing so.

A person like Frances Young goes to church and preaches. If you heard her preach or give a lecture, she would speak about the death of Christ, the resurrection, and the ascension. She would challenge you to faith and tell you that you will face the judgment of God. She would even tell you to repent of your sin, believe in Christ, and be saved. She would also encourage you to pray. But you do not hear the Christian message at all. It is a religion that has nothing whatsoever that has to do with the Christianity that is in the New Testament. Precisely because we live in an age where even people in the church use biblical language and the biblical message that way, it becomes absolutely imperative that we really make it clear what we say. We do not talk about myth, and we do not talk about poetic truth, dramatic truth, or analogical truth. We mean that Jesus equals God, to put it in Young’s terms. We mean that there is no division between the trivial and tragic level. We talk about something historically and rationally true. In our Reformed tradition, if we start speaking against reason, you have to understand how people hear you. They hear you as saying that Christianity is irrational. They do not hear you say that human reason is affected by sin. If we ever talk about reason and faith being opposed to each other, we are foolish, because we simply do not understand where our culture is. We will not communicate to anyone if we do that.

In our churches we might actually live in this divided way, and sadly, there is a profound element of this. I encourage you to read Schaeffer’s essay, “The Universe in Two Chairs.” He deals with the issue of what kind of universe we live in. Do we sit in the materialist chair, in the sense of living in a world where we do not believe any longer in supernatural causation? Christianity might be something we just do on Sunday mornings, in our bedchamber in the evening when we pray for 10 minutes, or when we

open our Bibles. The rest of the time we carry on with a radical split between our lives. There are a lot of people, even those in evangelical churches, who have never thought of putting the two together. They have no notion that we talk about truth. So we have to keep saying it over and over again in all kinds of ways. We have to get through the barrier that that is the culture in which we live. When Christians talk about the sacred and the secular, they do not just reflect a pietistic tradition that devalues much of life. They mean something much more profound: ordinary, everyday life is in a completely different category from spiritual life.

You have two different things coming together when people use the term “world.” You have a pietistic tradition that has devalued obedience in the whole of life and regarded ministry or evangelism as the only really important thing. That is one tradition that people mean when they talk of the sacred, the secular, and the worldly. Everything is considered to be worldly. In our day it is a much more dangerous thing to say because it speaks right into this idea that puts the religious life into a completely separate category from ordinary life. In the New Testament there is no division between them. There is only one kind of life and that is life that is lived before God. Whether it is Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday, in the market place or a church building, God does not care. We live before God and are called to worship, obey, and trust Him in the whole of life. There are no categories to it, but we live in a culture and a religious context where these two are put in separate categories. We have to attack that all the time in our own hearts and minds and in all of our churches. If we do not attack it when we communicate the Gospel, we actually have not preached it.

You probably have all met people who went through a “religious phase” in the late 1960s and became part of the Jesus Movement. Many of them were “Christians” for a year or two. They had been on drugs for a year or two, and they were “Christians” for a year or two, and then they had nothing more to do with it. They had their religious phase. Before, drugs had been their upper story experience or maybe political idealism. They were against the Vietnam War, the bomb, and political corruption. Then for a while faith became the thing that they had. A great mass of them would not be found dead near a church today. No one ever suggested to most of them that faith is truth and these actually stand together. There is no division like this, and without that being challenged, those people just drifted away. It was a patch they went through, an experience they had that bore no relationship to truth at all. That is not true of all of it; I know people who became Christians in the Jesus Movement who came to an understanding that Christianity is really true. Their lives have been wholly transformed, and they are still faithfully committed. Sadly, much of it was simply what you could call an upper story movement that bore no lasting fruit.