

Upper and Lower Story, II

Last time we discussed the whole question of religious existentialism. I used the two theological examples of David Friedrich Strauss from 1834 in his *Life of Jesus* and the modern example of Frances Young in *The Myth of God Incarnate*. We looked at the way she made her division of the trivial and the tragic, which is very parallel to what Schaeffer calls his lower and upper story.

As we go on to think about this, let us summarize some of the consequences of it. Frances Young says there is a kind of division, and the events of Jesus that are recorded in the Bible have to be regarded as not true and as falsehood. On the level of the trivial, or the lower level, which includes reason and understanding the universe in which we live, she has come to the conclusion that life has no meaning at all. For Young, meaning is put in the tragic level, which is what Schaeffer calls the upper story. For her, Christian faith is in that realm. In the bottom we have Jesus as a man, no different from any other human being who ever lived. He was not any more unique than you or me are unique from each other. This is what we know about Jesus historically. He was a human, just like you or me, and He was another human person. At the same time, Young can still talk about Jesus in the realm of faith. This is the Jesus who gives meaning to our lives, to whom we pray, who forgives our sins, and who promises us life. He is the one who provides purpose in my every day, to whom I go in trouble, and whom I praise for creation. Yet this is not a Jesus who she thinks literally exists or ever literally rose from the dead. This is in a quite separate religious realm.

I finished last time by pointing out that Young gives an illustration that is very helpful. She says that the Christian faith works like music. She gives the example of listening to Berlioz's Mass for the Dead, and she says, "Music has the power to convict me and terrify me even though I do not think for one moment there is actually going to be a judgment after death or a future life. Still the music moves me." She suggests that Christian faith, worship, and doctrine work in the same way. Just as we listen to music and are moved by it regardless of its content or truth, our Christian faith works in the same way. Schaeffer says elsewhere that Heidegger in his later years used to say, "Listen to the poet." Poetry moves us, too, and it appeals to us. It gives us a sense of meaning, and it excites us. That is what Young says: Jesus is like music to our ears. He has the power to comfort, move, and challenge us. That is fundamentally what religious existentialism is. It is a separation of Christianity from literal, factual, and actual truth. Yet there is an insistence that one can still have Christianity without that truth.

Let us summarize some of the consequences of this that Schaeffer calls attention to. The first is that once one has lost the foundation of historical Christianity, one has faith in faith. Faith is one of the most abused words in our culture today. Perhaps as Christians we should not use the word faith at all but ought to always substitute another word for faith. No words keep you safe, though. You have to understand that someone in this tradition who talks about faith does not speak about biblical faith. Biblical faith is trust in and commitment to the person of God, who we know exists. As Hebrews says, an individual must believe that God is and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. In other words, there must be an object to our faith. We have faith that Jesus died for our sins; we have faith in the person of Christ and His trustworthiness, that He rose again from the dead for us. Real Christian faith is faith in an object; it is faith in God. It is a response to who God is and what He has done. It is a response to what we know to be true about Him. It is because we are convinced that God exists, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that Jesus died for us to bear our judgment and rose again. It is because we know those things to be true that we believe in Him and have faith in Him. In the context of neo-orthodoxy or religious existentialism, faith is not really in an object. There is no necessary belief that God exists, that Jesus died for our sins in history, rose again, or was the Son of God. Faith therefore

is not really in the object of faith, which is God and the person of Christ. The faith is in faith itself, which is how Schaeffer describes it. We do not have faith in Jesus, but in the upper story it is faith in faith. It is faith itself that counts rather than the object of the faith.

I heard a liberal theologian on the radio in Britain on a call-in program. They discussed death and life after death, and he said, "Faith in Christ and the resurrection of Christ means to me that even though I know that death is the absolute end, I can still have faith." You may respond, "What was that? Does that make any sense?" In other words, he means that in the area of reason and rationality, we know that human beings are simply accidents. We are here by chance, and we have developed from the animals. Just as an animal dies and rots in the ground, so human beings will die, rot in the ground, and that is the end of us completely. There is no other dimension to human existence whatsoever. On the level of human rationality we know that. Human beings die, and when they die, that is it, and their lives have come to a total end. They are extinguished like the light of a candle. But we still have faith, and we may use the word "Jesus" or "resurrection" to explain it. We may preach lovely sermons at someone's funeral about Jesus and the resurrection. You see that it is not actually faith in the historical Christ or the resurrection of Christ. It is simply faith in faith itself. Somehow this faith that I have and to which I attach the name Jesus will enable me to cope with the reality of death to which there is actually no real solution.

That is the first thing that this does, which makes it tremendously important that you listen carefully to what someone says. You must not too quickly say that someone can preach a wonderful sermon about Christ. You need to ask what the content is, how he defines his terms, and what he really means by faith. Does he actually talk about the faith that the Bible speaks about? Faith in faith is what is taught in so many liberal churches today. It is no surprise, then, that if you tell most non-Christians that you are a Christian who has faith, they will say, "You have faith, and that is nice for you. I do not have faith." Every non-Christian around us assumes that by faith we mean that despite all appearances we still have "faith." Even though life is hopeless, we have faith. Non-Christians have absolutely no notion that we mean faith in an objective event and person. They think we just have faith, as though we have caught the measles. They have not caught "the measles," so they cannot have it or they do not need it at the present time. That is how non-Christians hear you if you talk about faith. You have to challenge that when you talk about faith. Perhaps you could use the word "trust" instead to explain what you mean. Faith itself means nothing to the people around us. You have to get through that barrier if you want to communicate with people.

The second consequence of this existential view of the Christian faith is that biblical language becomes a banner. Schaeffer speaks about semantic mysticism. Biblical words become simply a banner to which we can attach almost anything. Schaeffer says in *The God Who is There* on page 59 of volume one, "The phrase 'Jesus Christ' has become a contentless banner which can be carried in any direction for sociological purposes." He means that the name of Jesus still has power in our culture and memories that it evokes. In a situation where you have removed the biblical content from the name Jesus Christ, it can become a rallying cry for any cause.

Let us think of some examples of where the name of Jesus Christ has been used as a banner to attract or influence people. With people who pushed for the extension of civil rights, Jesus became one of the banners of that movement. Jesus is a person who treated everybody with dignity. There may be elements of truth in the appeal, but there is no necessary commitment to the person of Christ or to all that the New Testament has to say about Him. His name becomes a rallying cry for people who are concerned for the extension of civil rights. One might say, quite properly, that His name could be appealed to in that

context, but it is used like a flag. We will wave this flag, and it will arouse people's interest. It will cause them to emotionally respond, and then we will use it for our cause.

The political right in the United States at the moment has certainly done this. There are some real Christians in the political right, but those who are not real Christians also appeal to Christ, Scripture, and God. They do this to make you a political conservative and to preserve traditional values. It becomes a rallying cry, and without any question there was completely unscrupulous use of that by some politicians in the last elections. There was an appeal to the conservative wing of the church with the use of biblical words, language, and ideas without any commitment whatsoever to stand for those things when they were elected into office. Some Christians realized that they have been a little burned, and the political process has actually manipulated them.

Another example is of Jessie Jackson. I do not know where he stands personally with regard to Christian faith, but he knows very well that the black community still has far more familiarity with the biblical message than most of the white community does. There is much more respect for the Bible and the person of Christ in the black community than there is in the white middle class or working class. They have a far greater respect still, and Jessie Jackson knows that by using that language he is able to have a tremendously powerful effect on his hearers. Whether he is committed to it or not is another question, but he is a clever politician. President Nixon used to do the same thing, looking at the opposite end of the political spectrum. He constantly talked about prayer, God, His Word, and Christ, but if you look at his own personal convictions, they do not seem to be particularly Christian. I think he would acknowledge that, but he did not hesitate to use the language in his speeches to appeal to people. There are a lot of examples like this, and we tread on dangerous ground even mentioning some of them.

Let me suggest another example of using Christ as a banner in a completely different way. Supermarkets use the name of Jesus all the time during Christmas so that you will buy things. If you go into any supermarket in the six weeks leading up to Christmas, you will hear Christmas carols being soothingly played over the loud speaker. Their purpose is to get you into a festive mood to spend more money. It makes you feel good. You hear about this good and encouraging message, so you go and buy more. You are encouraged to buy so that you can give to people, too. Giving is a very good thing, but there is no doubt that those carols are played for that reason. They are not usually the most wonderful renderings of the biblical message in music. They are usually the most sentimental renderings possible, and they are the most soothing, as they work into your subconscious and affect you. I am not cynical, but it is just the marketing reality in the society in which we live. The name of Jesus is used to make you buy things.

The name of Jesus may be used to get you to accept a new morality. The Metropolitan Community Church uses the name of Jesus to encourage people to be homosexual. That is the homosexual church, which claims to be evangelical. Jesus' name is used there as the one who accepted everybody. He accepts us, too, they say. We had an interesting personal example of this when one of my boys ran into someone while he was out one evening. He did not know this fellow, but we kept getting telephone calls from him every day. He was another teenager and always asked to speak to either of my two eldest sons, and he wanted to get together with him. They did not know him at all, but eventually he acknowledged to them on the phone that he was homosexual. That is why he wanted to contact them. This is quite an alarming thing for you as a parent, and some of you will have to deal with this later on! One of my sons replied to this young man, "We are Christians, and we do not believe that homosexuality is right." He replied, "Oh, it is fine. I go to a church that says that Jesus accepts everybody, no matter what they do. You do not have to be worried about that." He went to the Metropolitan Community Church. At that point my 17-year-old did not know quite what to do, so he just put the phone down. Jesus' name and the biblical language is used as a banner for all kinds of different political, social, moral, and even

commercial uses in our society. The way it works is not necessarily because of the content that is created but because of the symbolic power of His name in this culture.

A third consequence of this kind of approach to Christianity is that it is a faith that has no contact with what Schaeffer calls the cosmos, which is the universe or science. It also has no contact with history. Frances Young's illustration of the trivial and the tragic puts science and history down in the level of the trivial, which is an area of reason, and faith is up in the trivial. It is a faith that has no contact with the universe that science studies or with history.

A fourth consequence is that faith is set over against reason. If you read neo-orthodox theologians, they seem to delight in opposing faith and reason. The more irrational the faith is, the greater the faith. The great virtue of faith is that it is unreasonable. What is so unbiblical is then turned into a value so that faith and reason are set totally against each other. "Precisely because I have no reasons, my faith is even greater." You will hear real Christians speak that way sometimes, but we should not say that kind of thing. The Bible never speaks that way or says that faith has increased in its value the less reason you have. That is not what Scripture says at all. It is not opposed to reason in any kind of way, and it does not become more precious the more irrational it is. It is a very perverted way of thinking biblically.

Fifth, another element of the existential approach to Christianity is dialectical thinking. Truth and falsehood are not opposed to each other. Truth and its opposite, which is not falsehood but another kind of truth, work together to form a new truth. We will look more at this later in terms of dialectical thinking. An inevitable consequence of this kind of approach to Christianity is to say that what really matters is the sincerity of people rather than the truth to which they are committed. All religions will be seen to have truth. Religions may make completely opposing statements and claims. If you look at Christianity and Islam, at several fundamental points they are in complete opposition. One example is with regard to the person of Christ. One acknowledges Him as the second person of the Trinity and as God, but the other rejects that completely. In existential Christianity, one does not talk about the falsehood of other religions.

There is a very interesting statement in *The Myth of God Incarnate* that says the only religion that is now unacceptable in the twentieth century is evangelical Christianity. That is because it claims to be the only truth, and therefore it is completely unacceptable. All religions are good, all religions are paths to God, and all religions have truth except evangelical Christianity! That is what that statement means. He dismisses it not by giving any attention to the actual claims of evangelical Christianity but by saying it is provincial and tribal. It makes God the God of the Christian West as opposed to the God of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or whatever it happens to be. We must believe in a God who is the God of everybody and everything. It is provincial to deny it, so you get an explicit universalism that says everyone is saved and has the truth. You see this spelled out very clearly in the documents of Vatican Council II. In those documents, all religions are regarded as having part of the truth, and everyone is really a Christian underneath.

Let us talk about what we should do when we are faced with the fact that people with all sorts of radically differing positions use the name of Jesus Christ as a banner. Do we have to change our language and not refer to Him at all? We cannot stop referring to Him, but we need to learn to be careful and to very carefully define what we mean when we use His name. We really need to know that these things do not communicate to people any longer. Whether we use the language of the cross, which is very precious to us, or speak about Christ and His virgin birth, most people who hear us do not hear what we mean by those things. We have to find creative ways to express what we think and will actually get through the barrier. It challenges us to really think carefully about how we express ourselves so that,

when we preach or talk to people individually, we always define what we say against the misunderstandings.

The second thing is that we must avoid the temptation to use Jesus' name as a banner for our causes even if they are right causes. If we have some issue that we are committed to, we must not just get people's interest by flaunting the name of Christ in it. We must make sure the issue is really presented. For example, as we stand up and speak about the pro-life issue, it is quite right for us to say we are followers of Christ or Christians for life. There is nothing wrong with that. However, whenever we speak, we must make it quite clear why we are for life. We believe that human life begins at conception and human beings have real value because they are made by God. We are not just bits of developed flotsome and jetsome in the universe. We are not just animals, but we are persons made in the image of God. We need to spell out what that means. Whenever we have any kind of public possibility, which we ought to seek to speak about the abortion issue, we must deal with the real issues. We should not use words from the other side as banner words either. Saying, "There is a load of secular humanists and radical feminists who are against life." It does not help anyone to speak like that. We have just used words as banners, either to attract people or to repel them.

Sadly, there is very little real discussion going on by Christians, and we need to actually communicate what we think and why we think it. There are some people who will say that because we use the name of Christ it attracts them. Increasingly, however, the great majority of people are not attracted by His name any longer. It communicates some of the wrong things to them, such as being obscure, out of touch with the times, and against concern for the individual person. It comes across as being against letting the individual have control over their right, alleging life, and legislating morality for everyone else. Those are all the connotations they have come to by use of our names and words. We are not going to win that particular issue until we convince people that human life is valuable and deserves the protection of the law. Our banners will not convince them of that. You have not won a discussion or argument or changed a person's mind by using banners. You have simply made those who already agree with you encouraged and comforted by the banner. And those who do not agree with you have rejected you because of the banner. You have not advanced one jot. We have to learn to communicate beyond the banner. We have the danger of not communicating to people at all unless we define ourselves, and we also have to avoid using our words as a banner ourselves. That is equally illegitimate.

Throughout American history, there has been a series of great awakenings. Let us talk about whether or not there might still be the possibility for such a great change in American society. My prayer and my hope is that we have a real possibility for an awakening in this generation. That is what I long for in this society, and I believe it is possible. Obviously it is up to God, so I cannot say whether it will happen or not for sure. I think unless the church understands where it is, it cannot happen. Until we realize that we have to communicate in a new way, we will simply miss people. I think our culture here is ripe for a great awakening. There seems to be a growing awareness all around us in our society of the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of this culture.

There was a very fine article by Cal Thomas in *The Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* a couple of weeks ago in which he spoke about the beginning of this century and how the politicians of that time were filled with corruption. They were very self-serving and feathered their own nests. He paralleled it to today, the present budget talks, and the disgraceful way in which congress in particular deals with so many issues of inappropriate spending. People pour the money of the taxpayers into these projects without any concern whatsoever for any kind of proper accounting. People are simply concerned for re-election for themselves and making enormous amounts of money out of the electoral system. He said that is the way it was in 1900, and we had a congress and senate then like many of our congressmen and senators today.

He said that is what this culture deserves right now because that is the way the people are. They have no sense of responsibility, either, and most people are only out for themselves. He says it was in that context that the last great awakening occurred in the early part of the 1900s. People became sick of their own sin, selfishness, and corruption. He said that is what we need today.

I see a growing number of people in our culture who realize that we are spiritually and morally bankrupt, which is one of the reasons for the growth of the New Age movement. A lot of it is because the church does not say the right things in the right way. If we did, it would be the church that grows instead of the New Age movement. I think it is possible to have another great awakening. I am not a pessimist at all, and I do not think we are in a situation where the church will shrink and shrink. In England, the church has turned around, and there has been a turning of the tide in the last five or six years. There have been several books with that kind of title. Live churches everywhere have started growing, and not just in ones and twos. The growth has been substantial, but I do not think that has happened in the United States yet.

Someone showed me some statistics the other day from the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which is supposed to be the fastest-growing denomination in the United States at the present time. When you actually look at the figures, we are not growing very fast, which means that everyone else is hardly growing at all. The Kirk of the Hills here in Saint Louis was in the list of the top 15 PCA churches in this nation in terms of its growth in the last year. That is wonderful, because it is by no means one of the biggest churches. It has some genuine outreach to non-Christians who are actually being converted. Many of the churches that are much bigger than that have much fewer numbers of new Christians coming in. As I have said before, much of the growth we have at the moment is from disenchanted liberals and Roman Catholics. In most of our churches, that is where most of the growth is coming from. People also move into the PCA from other evangelical churches. There are only a handful of people who are genuinely and completely non-Christian who are converted and come into the church. There are some of these people, and the Kirk is a good example of that. They have had a substantial number of converts in this last year, and one can thank God in particular for the ministry of John Atkins there. That is the great passion of his heart, and he is very gifted at reaching out to people. It is unusual, though, and there are just small signs of it.

To use a biblical image, it is like a cloud in a man's hand at the moment. Where there is a church like that and individuals within the church who really see this as important and know how to communicate to non-Christians, there is beginning to be a real growth of people turning to the Gospel. There is a flood of people out there, and the field in America is white to the harvest, if we actually proclaimed the Gospel in a way that communicated to people rather than using our religious words as banners. People do not understand that and do not respond to it.

A book called *Megatrends 2000* predicted that there would be a dramatic spiritual growth in the United States by the year 2000. It will include the contentless religious experience, which is what New Age is, and the growth of fundamentalism, because of people's need for a sense of authority. Supposedly the churches in the middle would disappear. The liberal churches are losing numbers dramatically all over the place. They have been for 10 years, and it will happen much faster. The people from within them might come to evangelical faith. In our churches in Saint Louis, a substantial number of people have moved from liberal churches into evangelical churches in the recent past. The Catholic Church is losing people in dramatic numbers, too. It is partly hidden by the tremendous influx of Hispanic people. There is a constant influx of Hispanic Catholics who bolster the numbers, but in actual fact, Catholic churches are declining dramatically in numbers everywhere the United States. This is apart from those communities where there are masses of Hispanic people coming in. Those churches that are not

committed to God's Word have lost people everywhere because they are not seen to have a message that speaks the truth to people, answers their needs, or provides them a basis on which to live in this modern society. The New Age offers a spirituality that makes absolutely no demands on people but gives them the illusion of religious comfort. It makes no demands whatsoever in terms of personal discipleship commitment or radical obedience. The New Age movement will certainly grow; it is not a phenomenon that is only here temporarily. It is here for a long time because it is the alternative. People are sick to death of materialism. Everybody loves comfortable, practical, and monetary materialism, but it is not sufficient by itself. They realize they need something else, and the New Age offers them a lovely combination of being able to still have rich tastes and have spirituality at the same time. That will grow everywhere more and more, and it will lead to a tremendous increase in spiritualism, occult practice, and explicit Satanism. When people become open to spirituality without content, form, or limits, then the door is opened for a tremendous influx of evil precisely because there is no understanding of good, evil, the righteousness of God, or the judgment due to sin. That openness to spirituality can lead to things getting worse than they were before. Instead of the one devil of practical materialism, some people will be possessed by real devils through their openness to any kind of spirituality in the New Age.

I think there is a tremendous door here for genuine Christianity. We must be aware that people are desperately in need of a moral authority, foundation, and anchor in which to hold their lives and the lives of their children. We must be sure when we communicate the Gospel to them that we do not communicate it simply as something that will give them morals without communicating the real message of Christianity. We are talking about truth that will require a radical allegiance by this person and a radical change of the way they think. Sadly, within evangelicalism, we are still in the position of using our words, church life, worship, and faith as a banner that attracts people and gives an authority. But we do not really challenge them in terms of who they are and where their hearts are actually committed. As a result, we have churches with a lot of people who are actually deeply secular in terms of their practical lifestyle of materialism and moral values, and they are also secular in the way they think. This is the danger we face. If we do not really challenge people, we will communicate another form of semantic mysticism. People will think that their lives have meaning and they have moral values, but they may not be true Christians. You can tell whether they are genuinely converted if their lives and lifestyles change and they are no longer idolaters. We need to be aware that, without careful communication, even if we say all the right things, if we do not say them in the right way, we just offer to people another contentless religious experience. And we must be very careful not to do that.