

*Death
in the
City*

FRANCIS A.
SCHAEFFER

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FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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Death in the City

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Contents

| | | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | Death in the City | 9 |
| 2 | The Loneliness of Man | 23 |
| 3 | The Message of Judgment | 33 |
| 4 | An Echo of the World | 47 |
| 5 | The Persistence of Compassion | 63 |
| 6 | The Significance of Man | 77 |
| 7 | The Man without the Bible | 89 |
| 8 | The Justice of God | 109 |
| 9 | The Universe and Two Chairs | 125 |
| | Notes | 145 |
| | Bibliography of Other Books | 147 |
| | General Index | 151 |
| | Scripture Index | 157 |

CHAPTER ONE

Death in the City

WE LIVE IN A POST-CHRISTIAN WORLD. What should be our perspective as individuals, as institutions, as orthodox Christians, as those who claim to be Bible-believing? How should we look at this post-Christian world and function as Christians in it?

This book will try to answer these questions. I will begin by asserting a proposition concerning the basic need of the orthodox church in our post-Christian world, and then I will consider that proposition in the biblical context of the books of Romans, Lamentations, and Jeremiah. Throughout we shall look at the situation we face in the modern world and the perspective we must have as Christians in that world.

First of all, I would like to set forth a proposition about reformation and revival. It will serve to focus our attention throughout the book. It is the basic need of the orthodox, evangelical church in our moment of history.

The church in our generation needs reformation, revival, and constructive revolution.

At times men think of the two words reformation and revival as standing in contrast one to the other, but this is a mistake. Both words are related to the word restore.

Reformation refers to a restoration to pure doctrine; revival refers to a restoration in the Christian's life. Reformation speaks of a return to the teachings of Scripture; revival speaks of a life brought into its proper relationship to the Holy Spirit.

The great moments of church history have come when these two restorations have simultaneously come into action so that the church has returned to pure doctrine and the lives of the Christians in the church have known the power of the Holy Spirit. There cannot be true revival unless there has been reformation; and reformation is not complete without revival.

Such a combination of reformation and revival would be revolutionary in our day—revolutionary in our individual lives as Christians, revolutionary not only in reference to the liberal church but constructively revolutionary in the evangelical, orthodox church as well.

May we be those who know the reality of both reformation and revival, so that this poor dark world may have an exhibition of a portion of the church returned to both pure doctrine and Spirit-filled life.

The latter portion of the first chapter of Romans speaks of man as he is, and two verses tell how he came to be in that position. Romans 1:21 states, "Because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their *reasoning*."^{*} It is important that we follow the

Greek here with the word *reasoning* and not “imagination” (as the King James Version renders it), because the emphasis is not on what our generation uses the word *imagination* to express, but on what it calls *reasoning*. What is involved here is men’s thinking, that which is cognitive, thought processes, comprehension. Thus, they “became vain in their *reasoning*, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:21–22). When the Scripture speaks of man being thus foolish, it does not mean he is foolish only religiously. Rather, it means that he has accepted a position that is intellectually foolish not only with regard to what the Bible says, but also to what exists—the universe and its form, and the mannishness of man. In turning away from God and the truth which He has given, man has thus become *foolishly* foolish in regard to what man is and what the universe is. He is left with a position with which he cannot live, and he is caught in a multitude of intellectual and personal tensions.

Such is the biblical position regarding man. And if we are going to begin to think of reformation and revival, we must have the same mentality God has concerning the position of man.

The Scripture tells us how man came into that situation: “Because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful”; therefore, they became foolish in their reasoning, in their comprehension, in their lives. This passage relates to the original fall, but it does not speak only about the original fall. It speaks of any period when men knew the truth and deliberately turned away from it.

Many periods of history could be described in this way. From the biblical viewpoint there was a time when the ancestors of the people of India knew the truth and turned away, a time when the ancestors of the people of Africa knew the truth and turned away. This is true of people anywhere who now do not know the truth. But if we are looking across the history of the world to see those times when men knew the truth and turned away, let us say emphatically that there is no exhibition of this anywhere in history so clearly—in such a short time—as in our own generation. We who live in the northern European culture, including America and Canada, have seen this verse carried out in our generation with desperate force. Men of our time knew the truth and yet turned away—turned away not only from the biblical truth, the religious truth of the Reformation, but turned away from the total culture built upon that truth, which included the balance of freedom and form which the Reformation brought forth in northern Europe in the state and in society, a balance which has never been known anywhere in the world before.

Having turned away from the knowledge given by God, man has now lost the whole Christian culture. In Europe, including England, it took many years—in the United States only a few decades. In the United States, in the short span from the twenties to the sixties, we saw a complete shift. Of course, in the United States in the twenties not everyone was a Christian, but in general there was a Christian consensus. Now that consensus is gone. Ours is a post-Christian world in which Christianity, not

only in the number of Christians but in cultural emphasis and cultural result, is now in the minority. To ask young people to maintain the status quo is folly. The status quo is no longer ours.

In four decades (from the twenties to the sixties) the change came in *every portion* and in *every part* of life. If in the twenties you had distributed a questionnaire in a place like Columbus Circle in New York, you would have found that most of the people might not personally have been Christians, but they would at least have had an idea of what Christianity was. Trafalgar Square in London, about 1890, would have been the same. But if today you distributed a questionnaire in these places, you would find that most of the people you asked would have little or no concept of true Christianity. They would know the word *Christianity*, but for most, in one way or another, the concepts they have about it would be erroneous. When we begin to think of them and preach the gospel to them, we must begin with the thought that they have no clear knowledge of biblical Christianity. But it is more than this; the whole culture has shifted from Christian to post-Christian.

Do not take this lightly! It is a horrible thing for a man like myself to look back and see my country and my culture go down the drain in my own lifetime. It is a horrible thing that sixty years ago you could move across this country and almost everyone, even non-Christians, would have known what the gospel was. A horrible thing that forty to fifty years ago our culture was built on the Christian consensus, and now we are in an absolute minority.

As Christians in this period of history we are faced with some crucial questions, the first one being this: what should our perspective be as we acknowledge the post-Christian character of our culture?

Let us refer to Romans 1:21–22 again: “Because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their *reasoning*, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.” Romans 1:18 tells us the result of men turning away from and rebelling against the truth they know: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” Man is justly under the wrath of the God who really exists and who deals with men on the basis of His character; and if the justice of that wrath is obvious concerning any generation, it is our own.

There is only one perspective we can have of the post-Christian world of our generation: an understanding that our culture and our country is under the wrath of God. *Our* country is under the wrath of God! Northern European culture is under the wrath of God. It will not do to say how great we are. It will not do to say the United States is God’s country in some special way. It will not do to cover up the difference between the consensus today and the consensus of a Christian world. The last few generations have trampled upon the truth of the Reformation and all that those truths have brought forth. And we are under the wrath of God. This is the perspective we must have if we are going to

understand what reformation, revival, and a true constructive revolution will mean.

What, then, should be our message in such a world—to the world, to the church, and to ourselves?

We do not have to guess what God would say about this because there was a period of history, biblical history, which greatly parallels our day. That is the day of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah and the book of Lamentations show how God looks at a culture which knew Him and deliberately turned away. But this is not just the character of Jeremiah's day of apostasy. It's my day. It's your day. And if we are going to help our own generation, our perspective must be that of Jeremiah, that weeping prophet whom Rembrandt so magnificently pictured weeping over Jerusalem, who in the midst of his tears spoke without mitigating his message of judgment to a people who had had so much and yet turned away.

In Jeremiah 1:2–3, we are given the historic setting in which Jeremiah spoke.

To whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah, the son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, unto the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah king of Judah, unto the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month.

Here is Jeremiah rooted in history, during the reign of the last kings before the nation was carried into the Babylonian captivity.

The Bible puts its religious teaching in a historic setting. It is quite the opposite of the new theology and existential thought, quite the opposite of the twentieth century's reduction of religion to the "spiritual" and the subjective. Scripture relates true religion to space-time history which may be expressed in normal literary form. And that is important, because our generation takes the word *religion* and everything religious and turns it into something psychological or sociological.

The Bible also has another emphasis. Not all that occurs in space-time history is explainable on the basis of natural cause and effect—for example, economic, military, and psychological forces. Most modern men explain all of history this way, but the Bible does not. The Bible says that there is a true significant space-time history which God has made. Of course, history must be understood to be partially a product of the economic forces, of the flow of cultural thought, of military power, and so forth. If we had sufficient time to look at Jeremiah in detail, we would see various forces present: the great countries (Egypt on one side, Babylon on the other), tremendous external and internal forces. Still, history is not to be explained only on this basis. A holy and a loving God really exists, and He works into the significant history which exists. He works in history on the basis of His character; and when His people and their culture turn away from Him, He works in history in judgment.

We must understand that the "Christian culture" of Jeremiah's day was disintegrating into a "post-Christian culture." The holy God was dealing with that culture according to His character.

Historic results were not just a product of chance, nor merely of mechanical, economic, and psychological forces. It was God working into that history as His people turned away from Him.

In Lamentations 1:1, Jeremiah speaks of the city of Jerusalem: “How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!” Jerusalem, a city which used to be close to God, has been changed by the choice of significant men. They have turned away from Him when they knew Him, and now their city is under siege. There is death in the city.

Furthermore, in Lamentations 1:9, Jeremiah says with brilliant realism: “Her filthiness is in her skirts.” God’s betrothed—this people and their total culture—has become filthy in her skirts. She is filled with spiritual adultery, and God says, “Her filthiness is in her skirts; she remembereth not her last end.” This last phrase is tremendous: “She remembereth not her last [that is, her final] end.”

Two factors are involved. She has forgotten what her end will be if she turns from God; but, even more fundamental, she has forgotten her purpose as a nation—she has forgotten her relationship to God. She has forgotten what was recorded in the Pentateuch, that the chief end is to love God. She has forgotten her purpose as the people of God. She has even forgotten the purpose of man. For man is not just a chance configuration of atoms in the slipstream of meaningless chance history. No. Man, made in the image of God, has a purpose—to be in relationship to the God who is there. And whether it is in Jeremiah’s day, or in our own recent generations, the effect is

the same. Man forgets his purpose, and thus he forgets who he is and what life means.

It was my generation and the generation that preceded me that forgot. The younger generation is not primarily to be blamed. Those who are struggling today, those who are far away and doing what is completely contrary to the Christian conscience, are not to be blamed first. It is my generation and the generation that preceded me who turned away. Today we are left largely not only with a religion and a church without meaning, but we are left with a culture without meaning. Man *himself* is dead.

Jeremiah says this of God's people who turned away in his day: "Her filthiness is in her skirts; she remembereth not her last end; therefore, she came down wonderfully, she had no comforter" (Lamentations 1:9). Because the Jewish nation did not remember the purpose of its existence, it came down wonderfully. The people could not find a comforter.

What marks our own generation? It is the fact that modern man thinks there is nobody home in the universe. *Nobody* to love man, nobody to comfort him, even while he seeks desperately to find comfort in the limited, finite, horizontal relationships of life. But it doesn't go—in his art, in his music, or any other place. In his literature, in his drama, it doesn't go. In the sexual act, in human relationships, he finds only the devastatingly sterile and the ugly.

The Jews had tried Egypt, they had tried Babylon; but there was no comfort, for the true Comforter was gone. In hedonism, in pornography, and in much else our generation has tried a

thousand Egypts and a thousand Babylons. But men have come down wonderfully because they have forgotten who man is and what his final purpose is. The true Comforter is gone.

But in Lamentations 1:11, Jeremiah continues: "All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for meat to relieve the soul." "To relieve the soul" may be translated, "to make the soul come again." In a city under siege, these Jews were physically starving; they were giving everything for bread.

Today most men in America are not physically starving. In fact, most Americans are suffocating in the stench of a completely affluent society. But no matter what their philosophic and intellectual system is, men, being made in the image of God, have human hungers that need to be satisfied. To some, the major need is intellectual; they must have answers. So they look into existential philosophy, linguistic analysis, and other non-Christian philosophies. But there is no final answer there. Other people have a deep longing for beauty. So they try to produce beauty out of their own fallenness and self-expression of fallenness. But the final answer and true comfort are not there.

Some hunger for beauty. Some hunger for answers. Still others are hungry for moral realities. Many modern sociologists, for example, are troubled by the lack of a firm basis for moral and social form. How is man to find firm categories to distinguish social good from social evil? They try relativism, the concept of social contract, and various types of totalitarianism, and comfort slips through their fingers.

And many men are hungry for love, for God has made man to love. So our generation has turned to sex as a fulfillment of the need for love in the human heart. But it doesn't work; sex, separated from humanness, is not love. So man cries out, "I am starving."

The hand of God is down into our culture in judgment, and men are hungry. Unlike Zeus, whom men imagined hurling down great thunderbolts, *God has turned away in judgment as our generation turned away from Him, and He is allowing cause and effect to take its course in history.*

God can bring His judgment in one of two ways: either by direct intervention in history or by the turning of the wheels of history. Often it is the peripheral blessings flowing from the gospel which when freed from the Christian base then become the things of judgment in the next generation. Consider freedom, for example. It is the results of the Reformation in the northern European world which have given us a balance of form and freedom in the area of the state and society, freedom for women, freedom for children, and freedom in the area of the state under law. And yet, when once we are away from the Christian base, it is this very freedom, now as freedom without form, that brings a judgment upon us in the turning wheels of history.

As the wheels of history turn, our generation feels, as Proust said, the "dust of death" upon everything. And as man feels the transitoriness of the present life, he tries either to elongate it or, through all kinds of strange and devious devices, to give hope for life after death. Thus, for example, we find a strange thing:

men who are naturalists and yet seek seances with those who have died. In men like Ingmar Bergman we find a denial of the existence of God but an interest in demonology.

As the Jews of Jeremiah's day were hungry for bread and had no comforter, our post-Christian world is hungry in state and society and in the individual longings of the heart, for it too has turned in our own day from the only sufficient Comforter.

Therefore, if we are going to understand anything about reformation, revival, and real constructive revolution in our own hearts and in the evangelical church, if we are going to start thinking about it and praying for it, we must be realistic. The place to begin is to understand that you and I live in a post-Christian world. Because man has turned from God, there are hungers on every side; there is death in the *polis*, there is death in the city!