1 Ancient Rome

There is a flow to history and culture. This flow is rooted and has its wellspring in the thoughts of people. People are unique in the inner life of the mind—what they are in their thought world determines how they act. This is true of their value systems and it is true of their creativity. It is true of their corporate actions, such as political decisions, and it is true of their personal lives. The results of their thought world flow through their fingers or from their tongues into the external world. This is true of Michelangelo's chisel, and it is true of a dictator's sword.

People have presuppositions, and they will live more consistently on the basis of these presuppositions than even they themselves may realize. By *presuppositions* we mean the basic way an individual looks at life, his basic world view, the grid through which he sees the world. Presuppositions rest upon that which a person considers to be the truth of what exists. People's presuppositions lay a grid for all they bring forth into the external world. Their presuppositions also provide the basis for their values and therefore the basis for their decisions.

"As a man thinketh, so is he," is really most profound. An individual is not just the product of the forces around him. He has a mind, an inner world. Then, having thought, a person can bring forth actions into the external world and thus influence it. People are apt to look at the outer theater of action, forgetting the actor

who "lives in the mind" and who therefore is the true actor in the external world. The inner thought world determines the outward action.

Most people catch their presuppositions from their family and surrounding society the way a child catches measles. But people with more understanding realize that their presuppositions should be chosen after a careful consideration of what world view is true. When all is done, when all the alternatives have been explored, "not many men are in the room"—that is, although world views have many variations, there are not many basic world views or basic presuppositions. These basic options will become obvious as we look at the flow of the past.

To understand where we are in today's world—in our intellectual ideas and in our cultural and political lives—we must trace three lines in history, namely, the philosophic, the scientific, and the religious. The philosophic seeks intellectual answers to the basic questions of life. The scientific has two parts: first, the makeup of the physical universe and then the practical application of what it discovers in technology. The direction in which science will move is set by the philosophic world view of the scientists. People's religious views also determine the direction of their individual lives and of their society.

As we try to learn lessons about the primary dilemmas which we now face, by looking at the past and considering its flow, we could begin with the Greeks, or even before the Greeks. We could go back to the three great ancient river cultures: the Euphrates, the Indus, and the Nile. However, we will begin with the Romans (and with the Greek influence behind them), because Roman civilization is the direct ancestor of the modern Western world. From the first conquests of the Roman Republic down to our own day, Roman law and political ideas have had a strong influence on the European scene and the entire Western world. Wherever Western civilization has gone, it has been marked by the Romans.

In many ways Rome was great, but it had no real answers to the basic problems that all humanity faces. Much of Roman thought and culture was shaped by Greek thinking, especially after Greece came under Roman rule in 146 B.C. The Greeks tried first to build their society upon the city-state, that is, the *polis*. The city-state,

both in theory and fact, was comprised of all those who were accepted as citizens. All values had meaning in reference to the *polis*. Thus, when Socrates (469?–399 B.C.) had to choose between death and exile from that which gave him meaning, he chose death. But the *polis* failed since it proved to be an insufficient base upon which to build a society.

The Greeks and later the Romans also tried to build society upon their gods. But these gods were not big enough because they were finite, limited. Even all their gods put together were not infinite. Actually, the gods in Greek and Roman thinking were like men and women larger than life, but not basically different from human men and women. As one example among thousands, we can think of the statue of Hercules, standing inebriated and urinating. Hercules was the patron god of Herculaneum which was destroyed at the same time as Pompeii. The gods were amplified humanity, not divinity. Like the Greeks, the Romans had no infinite god. This being so, they had no sufficient reference point intellectually; that is, they did not have anything big enough or permanent enough to which to relate either their thinking or their living. Consequently, their value system was not strong enough to bear the strains of life, either individual or political. All their gods put together could not give them a sufficient base for life, morals, values, and final decisions. These gods depended on the society which had made them, and when this society collapsed the gods tumbled with it. Thus, the Greek and Roman experiments in social harmony (which rested on an elitist republic) ultimately failed.

In the days of Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.), Rome turned to an authoritarian system centered in Caesar himself. Before the days of Caesar, the senate could not keep order. Armed gangs terrorized the city of Rome and the normal processes of government were disrupted as rivals fought for power. Self-interest became more significant than social interest, however sophisticated the trappings. Thus, in desperation the people accepted authoritarian government. As Plutarch (A.D. 50?–120) put it in *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans,* the Romans made Caesar dictator for life "in the hope that the government of a single person would give them time to breathe after so many civil wars and calamities. This was indeed

a tyranny avowed, since his power now was not only absolute, but perpetual, too."

After Caesar's death, Octavian (63 B.C.–A.D. 14), later called Caesar Augustus, grandnephew of Caesar, came to power. He had become Caesar's son by adoption. The great Roman poet Virgil (70–19 B.C.) was a friend of Augustus and he wrote the *Aeneid* with the object of showing that Augustus was a divinely appointed leader and that Rome's mission was to bring peace and civilization to the world. Because Augustus established peace externally and internally and because he kept the outward forms of constitutionality, Romans of every class were ready to allow him total power in order to restore and assure the functioning of the political system, business, and the affairs of daily life. After 12 B.C. he became the head of the state religion, taking the title *Pontifex Maximus* and urging everyone to worship the "spirit of Rome and the genius of the emperor." Later this became obligatory for all the people of the Empire, and later still, the emperors ruled as gods. Augustus tried to legislate morals and family life; subsequent emperors tried impressive legal reforms and welfare programs. But a human god is a poor foundation and Rome fell.

It is important to realize what a difference a people's world view makes in their strength as they are exposed to the pressure of life. That it was the Christians who were able to resist religious mixtures, syncretism, and the effects of the weaknesses of Roman culture speaks of the strength of the Christian world view. This strength rested on God's being an infinite-personal God and his speaking in the Old Testament, in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and in the gradually growing New Testament. He had spoken in ways people could understand. Thus the Christians not only had knowledge about the universe and mankind that people cannot find out by themselves, but they had absolute, universal values by which to live and by which to judge the society and the political state in which they lived. And they had grounds for the basic dignity and value of the individual as unique in being made in the image of God.

Perhaps no one has presented more vividly to our generation the inner weakness of imperial Rome than has Fellini (1920–) in his film *Satyricon*. He reminds us that the classical world is not to

be romanticized, but that it was both cruel and decadent as it came to the logical conclusion of its world view.

A culture or an individual with a weak base can stand only when the pressure on it is not too great. As an illustration, let us think of a Roman bridge. The Romans built little humpbacked bridges over many of the streams of Europe. People and wagons went over these structures safely for centuries, for two millennia. But if people today drove heavily loaded trucks over these bridges, they would break. It is this way with the lives and value systems of individuals and cultures when they have nothing stronger to build on than their own limitedness, their own finiteness. They can stand when pressures are not too great, but when pressures mount, if *then* they do not have a sufficient base, they crash—just as a Roman bridge would cave in under the weight of a modern six-wheeled truck. Culture and the freedoms of people are fragile. Without a sufficient base, when such pressures come only time is needed—and often not a great deal of time—before there is a collapse.

The Roman Empire was great in size and military strength. It reached out over much of the known world. Its roads led over all of Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. The monument to Caesar Augustus at Turbi (just above modern Monte Carlo) marks the fact that he opened the roads above the Mediterranean and defeated the proud Gauls. In one direction of Roman expansion the Roman legions passed the Roman city Augusta Praetoria in northern Italy which today is called Aosta, crossed the Alps, and came down the Rhone Valley in Switzerland past the peaks of the Dents du Midi to that place which is now Vevey. For a time the Helvetians, who were Celtic and the principal inhabitants of what is now Switzerland, held them in check and made the proud Romans pass under the yoke. The Swiss painter Charles Gleyre (1806–1874), in a painting which now hangs in the art museum in Lausanne, has shown the conquered Roman soldiers, hands tied behind their backs, bending to pass under a low yoke. All this, however, was temporary. Not much could hold back the Roman legions, neither difficult terrain nor enemy armies. After the Romans had passed what is now St. Maurice and the peaks of the Dents du Midi, and as they flowed around Lake Geneva to modern Vevey,