

## Chapter One

# From Athens and Jerusalem

**A**n American bomber with a crew of seven men took off from an air base in North Africa during World War II, to drop its payload of bombs over Naples, Italy. When the mission was complete, the plane and its crew headed for home base, but never arrived. For many years the fate of the *Lady Be Good* remained a mystery. It was thought the plane had run out of fuel, and crashed in the Mediterranean Sea. But in reality, it had plenty of fuel. Enough to fly 442 miles past its destination to where it was found 17 years later, ditched in the Sahara desert.

What happened? On that night, an unusually strong tail wind caused the bomber and its crew to reach the coast of North Africa hours ahead of schedule. When their flight instruments indicated they had flown far enough, they just could not believe it. They assumed it was simply impossible to fly that great a distance in so short a time. Coming to the conclusion the enemy was jamming their instruments, or the instruments were just malfunctioning, the officer in charge made a decision to continue. It was a decision that cost the crew their lives.

Our circumstances may not seem as dramatic as that of the bomber's crew, but the principle is the same for us as it was for them: behind important decisions are some even more important underlying assumptions.

This book is about the assumptions we make, and how those assumptions affect our lives. Assumptions mold our way of thinking, shape our values, and direct the decisions that lie behind our actions and attitudes. They affect decisions on how we relate to others, and with

whom we spend our time. Decisions on how we vote, as well as decisions on how we dress. Moral decisions. Marriage decisions. Retirement decisions. You name it. They're all based on underlying assumptions.

The amazing thing is, the "assumption" part of our decision-making process is usually the part that gets the least examination. Often, it's the part we don't think much about at all. It's the part we take for granted. We accept it as a "given" because it just doesn't seem possible it could be any other way, like the bomber crew who believed it just was not possible for a plane to fly that far that fast, and went on to draw deadly conclusions.

Few of us take the time to question our assumptions. Yet they have a tremendous effect upon the way we live and act. What's more, we continue to live and act in certain ways until such time we become convinced our assumptions are in need of a change. But once our assumptions are corrected, the change of course comes easily.

We often underestimate the importance of unspoken assumptions behind the spoken words and visible actions of those around us. Like an iceberg floating in the ocean with just ten percent visible above the waves and ninety percent below the surface, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that the words we hear and read, and the actions of others that we see, are first shaped by invisible thoughts, deep in the unseen world of the heart.

It's easy to see how an individual's assumptions can affect the decisions he or she makes. But assumptions not only affect individuals, they also affect whole societies.

Some years ago an American couple was traveling through a remote part of South Africa when they came across an unusual sight. Before them lay a village with the most remarkable architecture. Each and every hut was exactly the same. Not only were they all round, with a pointed top, but each one was mathematically identical to the very inch, without the slightest variation.

The travelers came upon a family building a new hut. Here again, the dimensions of the house were exactly that of their neighbors'. Why? There was a reason. You see, this particular tribe held to a basic assumption that it was morally wrong for one man to have more than another. Hence, every man's home was equal in size and shape, no matter how

many people needed to live there. This cultural assumption was so strongly held that anyone who made a larger hut could be expelled from the tribe, or perhaps murdered. The assumption affected much more than their building codes. It permeated their entire way of life, and explained why even their clothing was not hung in public to dry.

What about our own society? Are there some deeply-held, taken-for-granted assumptions which directly influence and guide the way we think, live, work and play? The answer is yes.

Cultural assumptions are like the ground-level foundation of a house, a very important part of the home, but not often visited. When was the last time you crawled under your house to look at the foundation? Maybe you've never seen the foundation of your home. You just assume it is there, doing what it is supposed to be doing – holding up the house.

What we want to do in this book is to get out our flashlights and go under the crawl space of our culture, so to speak, and take a second look (or maybe even a first look) at what beliefs are holding it up. Our purpose is to discover why we act the way we do, and why other people act the way they do. We will find that people act differently because their thoughts are rooted in different assumptions, causing them to view the world through different windows. If we look closely enough, we will discover there is a reason behind the actions and attitudes of people we read about in the newspaper, talk to on the phone, and, most importantly, see in the mirror. And if we are going to be wise in our understanding of the times in which we live, we must get down to the assumption level of human behavior.

#### **CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS: WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?**

The bride and groom stand before the altar as the minister asks, "What token do you give as a symbol of your love?" "This ring," comes the reply. On cue, the ring bearer steps forward to present the golden band. The groom reaches over, takes the ring with one hand, holds the left hand of his bride with the other, and ever so gently slips the eternal circle over her delicate third finger. It is easy to understand why people wear wedding rings. Besides being a reminder of one's vows, and a symbol of one's love, the presence of the wedding band also tells oth-

ers a man or a woman is spoken for. But why is the ring worn on the left hand? And why the third finger? If you research the matter, you will discover the custom goes back to the Romans. They believed a small artery, called *vena amoris*, or the “vein of love,” ran from the third finger to the heart. It was felt wearing a ring on this finger joined the hearts of the couple in their destiny. The left hand was selected because it was closer to the heart.

Cultural habits don’t just come out of nowhere. Even if the people who practice them have forgotten why they do it, you can be sure their customs had a starting point in history. Although cultural habits often change over time, they do have original roots. For those of us who live in what is known as the “Western” world, our cultural roots go back primarily to two historic starting points: the ancient Greeks and the ancient Hebrews. This is not to say we couldn’t go back further. But in this book, we will focus primarily on the Hebrews and the Greeks because they have so strongly impacted our Western ways of thinking, right up to the present hour.

Since the fifth century B.C., Greek ways of thinking have infiltrated Europe and the Western world. Even the Romans took most of their cultural cues from the Greeks who came before them. It was the Greeks who first laid in place certain cornerstones of Western culture, shaping our ground rules for philosophy, science, politics, and education, as well as competitive sports and the creative arts.

Culturally speaking, we are swimming in Greek soup, surrounded and immersed in ways of seeing and doing which date back to ideas planted and cultivated over a period of about three hundred years (600-300 B.C.) by such thinkers as Thales, Anaximander, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others who left their fingerprints unquestionably behind, as we’ll see clearly in later chapters.

As for the ancient Hebrews, their imprint upon the West is deep and far-reaching as well. Our concepts of morality, law, and ethics are unmistakably rooted in the Bible, which is a distinctly Hebrew book. Justice, virtue, right and wrong, good and evil—such terms carry particular meanings to Westerners because of definitions going back to Moses and Mt. Sinai, and underscored throughout the entire Scripture, including the New Testament, which is Hebraic writing as well.

To say the Bible is "Hebraic," both Old Testament and New, is to say its human authors (with the exception of Luke) were Jewish through and through. The Bible was written by sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who grew up, lived, and died in a peculiar culture having unique customs and assumptions which set them dramatically apart from their neighbors in a host of ways. Hebraic thought patterns were radically different from those of the Greeks. So much so, the ancient Hebrews would not tolerate the study of Greek philosophy in their schools.

In the Talmud, the collection of ancient writings of rabbis which provides the basis of authority for orthodox Judaism, we are told of a young man who wanted to study "Greek wisdom." He went to his uncle, a rabbi, with his request. The uncle reminded him of Joshua 1:8, which speaks of meditating on God's Word day and night. "Go then," said the wise rabbi, "and find a time that is neither day or night, and learn then Greek wisdom." (Menachot 99b).

This story illustrates the seriousness of the conflict between Greek and Hebrew thought. It produced a difference of culture so strong the early historian Tertullian asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" The implied answer, of course, was "Nothing." Culturally speaking, the Hebrews were swimming in a much different kind of soup than Socrates. The Bible reflects this difference from cover to cover.

There is another sense, however, in which we can rightly say the Bible is not a Hebrew book at all. Its actual author is neither Hebrew nor Greek, but God Himself. This is why we often refer to it as "God's Word," in recognition of the source of the Scripture's inspiration. In an ultimate sense, then, the Bible is not the product of any culture, Jewish or otherwise. But what we must clearly understand is, although God did inspire the Scriptures, He did not bypass the human vessels through which the message came. In a very practical way, God chose to communicate His message via human language and thought as spoken and understood by the everyday people with whom He wanted to communicate. People who lived in a particular culture, who understood certain ways of thought, and subscribed to certain customs. In other words, the Bible did not come *from* Hebraic culture, it came *through* it.

The fact that God chose a particular group of people through which to communicate His Word does not lessen the truth of divine inspira-