

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

I could never fully integrate the message of Paul with that of Jesus. I understood that to confess Jesus as Lord, as Paul urged, was the initiation of a radical commitment. I had been reading and pondering the gospels and I knew that Jesus had said,

Why do you call me "Lord, Lord" and not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46).

Then Jesus followed with the Parable of the Two Builders, which clearly indicated that those who call Jesus "Lord," and who yet do not obey him, are in for a great surprise when the storm comes. The one who does not obey is the one who builds his house on the ground, without a foundation. Naturally, it collapses. So, in my heart I knew that a third step was essential: obey. The formula then becomes, "Believe, confess and obey." But when I sought confirmation from my brethren, both old and young, the answer was always the same: confession and faith are all the Lord requires for salvation; obedience enters in only as the basis of rewards in the hereafter. That was the way they had resolved the problem, but it never satisfied me. Evidence of my concern is the fact that my first sermon, delivered in June of 1948 at Toonigh Baptist Church a few miles north of Atlanta, Ga., was drawn from a text found not in Paul but in James:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

I entered Southern Seminary thinking that this issue would very soon find a resolution. It did not. It only became more intense and prominent as the seminary years progressed. The hard commandments of the Sermon on the Mount increasingly seemed tailor made to my central interests in the violence of Christendom that was World War II. But to my dismay, the Seminary faculty did nothing to relieve my growing concern. A typical response was to assure me that no one could keep those commandments. "They are only meant to convict us of sin so that we will trust in the blood of Jesus for forgiveness." I could never match those assurances with anything from the utterances of Jesus but found them contradicted on every hand.