
THE NEW REALITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF WORSHIP

BY MICHAEL CARD

One would think that having written a book on a subject like the life of Simon Peter, I would be ready to move on to something else. But I find that I am never finished with a subject until it is finished with me. And so it is with the life of this fascinating man. The new categories I discovered in his life keep reorganizing my world, keep calling me to see life in a new light.

I have described Simon Peter as a bridge between two worlds; the indescribable world of having present a perfect Leader and the struggling world of being led by numerous and decidedly imperfect leaders. Peter was the man Jesus chose to bridge those disparate worlds.

His life can be seen as a powerful parable. Each chapter in the gospels is filled with meaning that goes far beyond the superficial story, that reveals that Peter's life, like your life and mine, is a parable.

- The two great confessions of Peter, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, are parables of the costliness of coming to faith in Jesus, that it is more a struggle than a picnic on a green lawn. (Mt. 16:16ff, Jn.6:53-71)
- The denials of Peter tells us that though we fail, Jesus is still the God who is for us, is the God who will still give His life for us even having witnessed our failures and denials. (Lk.22:61)

In addition to this parabolic character and the notion that he served as a bridge, I continue to see Simon as one of the first (perhaps *the* first) to face the dilemma of moving from the old world, where having faith meant waiting, to the new world, where having faith means following. I have spoken before in terms of the "New Reality" versus the "Old." (see earlier article "A New Reality.")

In the old reality, forces like death and gravity reigned. But as the new begins to break in, it is Peter who, by Jesus' power, is the first to defy gravity and walk on the water (Mt.14:22-31) and defeat death and raise the dead Dorcas. (Acts 9:36-42) In the old reality, faith is revealed only in terms of prosperity and "blessing." In the new, faith is known and recognized (like Jesus) by weakness and scars. And so Peter is beaten and imprisoned and rejoices because of it all. (I Pet. 4:12f) In the old reality our position was completely based on our faithfulness. In the new, praise God, it is based on His faithfulness to us.

The more I meditate on this New Reality, the more I realize how thoroughly I remain rooted in the old. When Larry Crabb wrote a book describing these two worlds, (*The Pressure's Off*,

There's a New Way to Live) I discovered after reading it that I could retell his description of the old world but was still incapable of saying what the new was all about! I simply still lacked the language to describe this indescribable new world. When faced with decisions I still react as if the old reality is all there as. I live and act (and my guess is so do you) as if the new still only exists on the pages of the gospels and not as if it has come off the page and made itself really real in the Incarnation of Jesus.

The New Reality has come! That, in essence, is the Good News of the Gospel. The old is passing away, behold all things have become new. (II Cor. 5:17) And so, I am coming to understand through the example of Peter, that this new reality demands a new response, a new language. At the same time, I sadly discover that I have lost this radical new language with which I need to respond. The old reality is spoken primarily in syllables of fear. I obey because I fear the punishment promised in the Commandments. Walter Brueggemann deftly refers to this as "Torah obedience."

So I looked in the gospels for the new language of the New Reality and was not surprised to have found it spoken, perhaps for the first time, in the story of Peter. You know the story as well as I. Matthew gives us the fullest account in 14:22-31.

Jesus has sent the Twelve back across the lake in the midst of a wind storm. This is not the demonic shaking of Mark 4 that almost killed them all. From shore, as He is praying, Jesus sees them trying to row against the wind. Aerodynamics (like death and gravity) is still a part of the old reality!

About three o'clock, Jesus walks out on the lake to be with His disciples. It seems He cannot bear them being all alone in a struggle, so His heart leads Him out on the lake. They are, of course, terrified. "It's a ghost!" they scream through dry and exhausted lips.

And then the remarkable idea occurs to Simon. If Jesus will only authorize him to do so, he will walk on the water to be close to Him. Jesus agrees and issues the authoritative word, without which Peter knows he could never attempt this impossible feat. And then it happens, we have a glimpse into the miraculous New Reality where gravity becomes merely conditional. Peter becomes the first of the disciples to perform a miracle in this radically new context. But that is not the end of the story, is it?

The deeper truth is, Peter needs to sink more than he needs to walk, which is to say if he is ever to understand what walking on the water meant, he must feel the old force of gravity pulling him down to the bottom of the lake. He must learn that the heart of the new reality is not miracles. The heart of the new reality is to be found only in the hand of Jesus.

Peter finds Jesus' hand in the midst of the storm of his "old reality" fear or perhaps we should say the hand finds him! He is pulled up out of the water, having had a sort of baptism into the new world of what it means to walk with Christ. Together, hand in hand, the two of them walk back to the illusion of the safety of the boat. And then it happens! Have you ever seen it?

Up till this point in Matthew, Jesus has been worshipped by the pagan Magi, the leper and the ruler of the synagogue, never until this amazing moment, have the disciples worshipped Him. But now, together again in the boat, the language of the New Reality begins to flow. The language of the New Reality is worship. Peter calls out in doubt to Jesus, "if it's you." He screams in fear, "Save me!" In the midst of the old reality all our words come from doubt and fear. In communion with Jesus, even if the storm continues to rage, our proper language is worship. *✠*

