

Basic Bible Study Themes, I

In this lesson we will start considering Schaeffer's work, *Basic Bible Studies*. This was not the first work published. It was published by Tyndale House in the United States in 1972, and it was published in England in 1973. Yet it had been written many years before. I could not find anything about its origins in any of Edith's books, so I asked her about it when she was here for a visit recently. Her response was that the studies were originally written for an individual with whom Francis Schaeffer was meeting who was converted and then was growing as a Christian as they went through these studies together. That was in the middle or late 1950s. The studies were then duplicated by hand many times. At first, as many carbon copies as possible were made on a typewriter. I remember when my wife was the secretary there in 1967. She was still doing that kind of thing, making 10 carbon copies on the typewriter that grew fainter as they went down. After a while, by the early 1960s, they had one of the old duplicators that you put ink on and wound around. They were always breaking down.

Eventually L'Abri had the *Basic Bible Studies* printed sometime in the mid 1960s for internal use. They were for the use of people staying at the Swiss branch of L'Abri and in Holland. They were also sold to people who were coming through and wanted to take them to other people. They were not published until 1972 by an outside publisher, but in a sense they were the earliest book that reached printed form.

I think it will be helpful to consider several things that come out in the *Basic Bible Studies*. There are several themes that became dominant themes in Francis Schaeffer's teaching as the years went by. The first three things are from the introduction to these Bible studies. The first is a confidence in the system of doctrine or teaching that is found in the Bible. By that he did not simply mean that the Bible is a unity, that there is a system of doctrine in it that we can discover. What he clearly meant was that the Bible has a system of thought, ideas, or teaching that answers the questions that people ask. In other words, there is a system, a unity, of teaching that fits the reality that is out there and that everyone inhabits.

The second point is closely related to the first. The Bible has answers to the questions of our own generation. It is not a book that was simply written many years ago. It is God's Word, and therefore it has answers to the questions of today. Schaeffer wrote, "Studied in this way," by which he meant as a unit, as a book that contains a system of ideas and teachings, "The Bible will be seen to have many things to say in answer to the questions that men are asking in our generation about the meaning and purpose of life. It tells us who man is, man's purpose, the source of man's problems, and the solution to those problems." That was the second point. Schaeffer saw the Bible as a book that was not simply one to preach sermons from to help Christians grow, but it is also a book that answers the questions of every human being. It answers the questions that our generation is asking 2000 or 3000 years after much of it was written.

The third point is Schaeffer's emphasis on prayer as you study. There is an interesting note at the end of the introduction in which he says, "It would be my advice that each time you do these studies you speak to God and ask Him to give you understanding through the use of the Bible and the study together." He suggests this to the unbeliever too. He wrote, "If someone pursues these studies who does not believe that God exists, I would suggest that you say aloud in the quietness of your room, 'O God, if there is a God, I want to know whether You exist, and I ask You to make me willing to bow before You if You do exist.'" Schaeffer would often say that to unbelievers. I heard him say that kind of thing many times to people in the context of discussions, and I know he said that to many individuals he was speaking to.

They should cry out to God and ask Him to help them as they are thinking through their questions, even if they were not sure of His existence.

Why did he say that? Was it because he felt that God has an obligation to listen to the prayers of unbelievers? That was clearly not the reason. He would say it to people, as he said it in the introduction to the Bible studies, because he knew that only God can save people. People do have hard hearts. It is necessary for God to enable somebody to become willing to bow before Him. That is one reason why he emphasized this. The other was that he was confident that God delights to save people. God has no delight in the death of the wicked. He loved to quote that passage of Scripture. God delights to save people, and He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Therefore even though He is under no obligation to listen to the prayer of the unbeliever, God is merciful and gracious.

Those three points are from the introduction. They were basic to much of what he said later on as well. Moving to the studies themselves, people notice that the comments that come after each text are quite brief. The comments are a challenge to people to read the Bible for themselves as a source of truth. That is what is expressed strongly in them. Schaeffer gives a text to read and then only makes a short comment on it. Yet if you start looking at those comments together, you realize there is an enormous amount of information communicated in them. He was challenging people to see for themselves what that system of truth is that Scripture declares. It does answer the questions that people ask.

Let me draw attention to some points that come up repeatedly. I will not work through the entire book, but I will pick out some things that are emphasized clearly in Schaeffer's teaching. With regard to God Himself, I want to make several points. The first is the emphasis that God is personal. Schaeffer refers to several verses that stress the infinity and power of God and the infinite power of God, but the strongest emphasis in the section on God is that God is personal. Schaeffer makes the following comment on John 3:16, "God not only thinks and acts, God feels. Love is an emotion. Thus the God who exists is personal. He thinks, acts, and feels, three distinguishing marks of personality. He is not an impersonal force, nor an all-inclusive everything. He is personal. When He speaks to us, He says, 'I,' and we can answer Him, 'You.'"

That is the first emphasis, which is that God is personal. That is not usually the comment you get on John 3:16. He would have many other things to say on John 3:16, which is a point he makes in the introduction as well, but he did not attempt to speak about everything that is said in all these verses. He was rather trying to draw out particular points.

Later in the same study he draws attention to the communication and love that exist between the members of the Godhead before the world was made. This is a comment on Genesis 1:26 and John 17:24. He said, "Communication and love existed between the persons of the Trinity before the creation." What is the point he was making? It is a point that he made at much greater length over the years. There is an outstanding sermon of his called "Before the Beginning," which is about the Trinity before God created the universe. The point that he emphasizes in that sermon, as he does here, is that we are living in a personal universe. Our generation has spoken of reality as impersonal, whether it is the New Age and the influence of the ideas of Hinduism and Buddhism or whether it is the scientific materialism of the West, which sees matter as ultimate. Those views, which shape our culture, arrayed against Christianity, ultimately see the universe as impersonal. They say we are living in an impersonal universe. It is one of the great cries of the existentialist. Schaeffer is speaking against that. He is saying that even before anything else existed there was personality, true personality. It was shown in the relationship between the members of the Trinity. The Father and the Son and the Spirit loved each other

before the world was made, and they communicated with each other before the world was made. We are living in a personal universe.

This became one of the central points in his apologetic over the years. Schaeffer referred to the passage in Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17 in which Jesus spoke about the love with which the Father loved Him before the world was made. There are many other passages of Scripture that speak in a similar way. Even when Schaeffer prepared these simple Bible studies for someone, he was always thinking of the apologetic force of any particular part of the biblical message or the biblical system of truth that answers the questions of our generation. One of the big problems of the whole of twentieth-century thinking is that it sees the beginning of everything as impersonal. The whole of Western materialism, whether it is scientific materialism or the dialectic materialism of the Marxists, says that ultimately matter exists. It says there was once a dense ball of matter and then there was the Big Bang. There is no God or personal being who created this universe. We are living in a purely physical, material universe. The East says the same thing, such as in Hinduism. There is spirit, but that spirit is ultimately impersonal. If you look at the teaching of the New Age, that idea comes across powerfully. There is no belief in a personal God with particular attributes and characteristics. God is beyond definition.

Why is that a problem? Schaeffer developed this point at great length in his later books, especially *The God Who Is There* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. His point was if you say there was an impersonal beginning, among other things, you have no explanation for the personality of human beings. This has been one of the problems that twentieth-century thinkers have struggled with. How do we give any value to the human person if there was an impersonal beginning? There are several things that people have tried to do. Some will simply deny that human beings are personal. They will say we are just machines. Human beings are just like complicated computers, and that is all a human being is. There is nothing else about you apart from complex chemistry. You are only a bag of water and some chemicals mixed together, and you happen to have this form that has developed over time. To speak about love in human relationships, to speak about real communication using words and language between people, to speak about moral significance such that it makes a difference whether I do good or evil, or to speak about creativity or choice is meaningless if I am purely matter. All the things we think of as being precious to our human life simply do not exist.

That is a common theme of much of twentieth-century Western thought. There is no freedom and dignity to the human person at all. In other words, there is no personality. Human beings are machines, even if they are complex machines. Perry London, an American psychotherapist, used that image. The human brain is like a digital analysis computer. It is extremely complex, but in the end, anything that anyone does is totally predictable. If we knew enough about a person, either about their genetic makeup or their environmental conditioning, we could tell you everything they will ever do in every circumstance that ever faced them. There is no person there. There is simply a machine. Mortimer Adler wrote a book called *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*. Arthur Koestler used to speak about "the ghost in the machine." They were dealing with this question. Is there something in man that is different? Many people have answered, "No, there is not. There is nothing different at all. People are just machines." That is a terrible thing to say.

If you read Schaeffer, you will notice that he gives many examples of people he spoke to who took this position that human beings are simply machines. I remember a discussion we had at Greatham once. There was a young fellow who took this position, and he was sitting there with his girlfriend. They were obviously deeply in love. We were having this discussion about what a human being is. He was saying there was no such thing as personality. We are just products of our environment and genetics, and that is all there is. We pushed him gently along, and eventually I asked him, "What is going on between you

and your fiancé? Is this just sexual pheromones? Is that all there is here? Is this just a matter of chemistry and nothing else?" He understood well what I was saying. I tried to say it gently and not harshly. He said, "Yes." You could see the effect it had on his fiancé. She was horrified. I am sure she had a word with him about it later. Yet it really shook him up, and it really shook her up, too. You want to try to get somebody to see that the things that we value as human beings, which we take for granted, which are part of our common humanity, cannot be true if we are living in an impersonal universe. They have no reality to them.

The one answer is to say that they have no reality to them at all. The other is the answer of the existentialist. Sylvia Plath, the American poet, called them "tricks of radiance." They are an illusion. That is the existentialist position. They do not have any reality, but we experience them. They do not have any final meaning, but they are what give any meaning to our life at all.

This is related to something else Schaeffer often talked about, "the line of despair," which we will talk more about later. On the level of reason, of science, of what we can know, we have to say that human beings are machines. There is no reality to love, morality, significance, creativity, or language or anything else. In the area of experience, however, even though we know it is illusory, we do experience love, moral notions, and personal significance, and we hang on to them because they are what enable us to keep going. There is a moving poem by Sylvia Plath in which she uses the expression that these are "tricks of radiance." She eventually committed suicide after attempting many times. It was because of this dilemma. She ends her poem by saying, "The wait has begun again, the long wait for the angel, for that rare, random descent." In other words, most of the time she knows perfectly well that her life is completely meaningless. Human personality does not exist. Occasionally, however, there is what she calls a miracle, or trick of radiance, in which she senses that she means something, that her life means something, that these things really matter.

What Schaeffer meant was that if we look at what the Bible has to say, it tells us that we are not living in an impersonal universe at all. So this problem does not exist. We are rather living in a personal universe. God's personality is not something made in our image. The non-Christian will often say, "You have made God in your image," but it is exactly the other way around. God has always been personal. Personality is at home in the universe. Before the creation of the world, there was the Father, Son, and Spirit. Schaeffer said later on that personality existed at the high order of Trinity. The Father and Son and Spirit loved each other and communicated with each other before the world was made. In other words, love, communication, choice, thinking, planning, and acting are not things that we hope are true of human existence. They really are true of human existence because they find their home, their source, in God Himself.

Schaeffer does not spell out the point in this context. He goes into much more detail in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* and *The God Who Is There*. It is a profound point. The most basic experience we have of being human is meaningful because we are living in God's universe and God is a personal God. Human beings really do love each other because they are made in the image of the God who loves and who loved before the world was made or anything else existed. What is original in the universe is not a dense ball of matter, but a personal triune God.

Schaeffer would include individuality within personality. There are three distinct members of the Trinity. They are all equally God, but they are individual. They are distinct from each other. They have their uniqueness. Schaeffer would say the same thing about human beings. We are created in the image of God, not only in the sense that we love like God, that we are moral like God, that we have significance like God, that we are rational like God, that we think like God, that we choose like God,

that we create like God, that we communicate like God, but also in the sense that we are personal in that we are individuals. Each of us is unique. That is also reflected in our humanity as the image of God.

The second point of emphasis of Schaeffer in this section is that God is sovereign over creation, history, and salvation. Schaeffer comments on Revelation 4:11 and Ephesians 1:11, saying, “God created all things of His own free will. He did not have to create. Before creation, the triune God stood complete, and there was love and communication between the persons of the Trinity.” He returns to that idea repeatedly.

His point is that God did not have to create. God sovereignly and freely chose to create. Another way he would express this later was to say that there is nothing in back of God. There is no determinism behind God. There is no inexorable law in the universe that says God has to do one thing or another. God is not controlled by anything except Himself. There is not anything behind God. God created because He freely chose to. He did not have to create.

This relates to the idea of personality as well. Schaeffer would make the point later on that in any system or worldview that believes in only one God, in rigid monotheism, God would lose His personality. Let me explain that, because it relates to this idea that there is nothing in back of God and God not having to create. If God is only one, how can we say that love, communication, or personality are really true of God Himself? Who does He love? Who does He have to communicate with? Nobody. He is not able to love or communicate until He creates somebody to love or communicate with. You may know the poem, “God’s Trombones.” In it God says He was lonely so He decided to create man and woman, Adam and Eve, in order to have somebody to love and talk to. That is nonsense according to the Bible. God does not create because He must in order to fulfill His personality or to love somebody or have somebody to communicate with. God creates because He wants to.

Schaeffer’s point is an interesting one. In Islam, for example, in which there is a rigid monotheism, the personality of God will always disappear. That is true. Allah is not compassionate. Allah is not loving. He is totally arbitrary. Love and compassion are not fundamental to His being. He tends to become a distant figure. We may worship Him. We may be in awe of Him. Yet we cannot love Him as our Father. That is something that is unique to Christianity. We can have a personal relationship with God because He is truly personal in Himself, not just in relation to us. If it is only in relationship to us, then it is not fundamental to who He is. It would be only drawn out by His creation. It would not be necessary to Him. That is why in Islam God is distant and cold, because He is only one. Muhammad rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, but He lost the possibility of a truly personal relationship with God. You have fear as the dominant feature and awe rather than love and compassion.

If God is only one, then who did He have to love and communicate with before creation? Nobody. It inevitably follows that love and communication are only expressed, if at all, when something is created. In other words, for multiple eons, God existed without communication, without expression, without love. You must conclude from that that it is not fundamental to who He is. That is why in any monotheistic religion God becomes cold and distant the more consistency there is. You can move in a mystical direction, in which God becomes completely impersonal, which you see in Sufism in Islam. You end up with a kind of Hindu mysticism. Or you will have a hard God, whose justice, whose judgment, whose arbitrariness becomes dominant. The Islamic view of salvation is of people walking across a rope bridge over an abyss and God knocking people off into that abyss. You also end up with a rigid determinism. There is no personal relationship between the individual and God that can change things. Everything becomes rigidly determined. So your response to anything that happens is “It is the

will of Allah.” There is not a personal God whom you can appeal to and say, “Lord, You know what is happening here. Deliver me from this situation.”

Let me describe this in another way. In Christianity, we have a God who is truly personal. There is a relationship of love, communication, language, thinking, and planning together between the members of the Trinity from all eternity. The Bible clearly expresses that. The Trinity chooses to create. They create together. Creation is said to be the work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in various parts of Scripture. We do not have time to go into a basic Bible study, but you know the passages I am referring to. There is Hebrews 1, Colossians 1, and John 1 that speak about Christ, for example, as the Creator of the universe. They do their work together. They think it out together. They plan it together. They choose together, and they do it. They are deciding. There is love expressed between them. The Son delights to honor the Father, to bring glory to the Father. He offers Himself to be the salvation for human beings. The Father loves to honor and bring glory to the Son. That is why Jesus prays to the Father, “Father, glorify me with the glory we had before the world was made.” There is a personal relationship between them in which there is a delight to honor each other and serve each other. The Son is eternally the Son. He did not become the Son when He became incarnate. There is an eternal relationship of Fatherhood and Sonship between the Father and the Son. Thus there is individuality. There are three unique persons relating together before anything was made.

We have said some profound things about who God is. When I come to God, I know that God is truly personal, that love is foundational to His character. Significance is fundamental to who He is. The Father, Son, and Spirit have chosen to do things together this way rather than that way. They have decided. I know that communication is fundamental to who God is. There has been communication between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever. When I come to God and try to communicate with Him, I am not communicating with a God who is in Himself silent. That is where Schaeffer got the title for his book, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Speaking and communication are fundamental to who God is. That is both in the sense of communication between individuals within the Trinity and in the sense of revealing Himself to others. It is all bound up together. I come to a God whom I know is like this in His very being. It is so different from the whole of modern theology, liberal theology. That says God cannot be named, cannot be known, and is totally transcendent. He is completely different, and therefore trying to name God is like trying to name the whirlwind. That is not the way the Bible speaks about God. God is a personal being who can be known, who has these characteristics. We can communicate with Him.

There was an image that Schaeffer used to use frequently. We speak of God as infinite and personal. When we think about ourselves as human beings, between ourselves and God there is an absolute barrier on the side of God’s infinity. We are finite. God knows everything. He rules over everything. He is the Creator of everything. Nothing is hidden from Him at all. He has infinite power, wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and goodness, as the Westminster Confession and Catechisms say. We, however, are finite. We are limited. We do not see into the future at all unless God tells us. We have come into being at a point in time. We are very tiny. We are not like God at all in that regard.

On the side of personality, we are the same as God. That is what it means to be made in the image of God. On the side of personality, as Schaeffer would say repeatedly, the barrier is at a different point. God is infinite and personal. We are like God on the side of personality. We love like Him. We are made to choose like Him, to have significance, to create, to use language, and so on. Here the barrier comes between us and animals, plants, and what Schaeffer used to call atoms, or machines, the purely mechanical things. There is an absolute barrier between us and the rest of created reality. We are really

like God. What this means is that God can indeed be known, among other things, because we are really like Him.

If you look at the whole of Neo-orthodox theology, it basically says that God cannot be known. Karl Barth says that basically the barrier between God and humans is absolute. God is infinite. We are finite. God is transcendent. We are here in this non-transcendent world. How can we know God? Can God speak to us in language? No, because language is a human thing. God is completely beyond all that. God is the unknowable, the transcendent God.

If as Scripture tells us, on the other hand, that God is personal, then there is no barrier between human beings and God on the level of our being. We have been created to have fellowship with God, to speak to Him, to know Him, to love Him, and to be like Him. The barrier between us and God is a different one. It is sin. It is a moral problem. If you get rid of the personality of God, if God is either the personal spirit of the New Age, or if He is the rigidly monotheistic God of Islam, then you have a God with whom a personal relationship is really impossible. You do not have real communication. We do not have real significance before Him because of who He is in Himself. This is a fundamental question in terms of trying to understand what Schaeffer was talking about. It was basic to everything he said in many different contexts.