

Basic Bible Study Themes, II

Heavenly Father, thank You that we can come and ask You to teach us, to help us in our understanding. We thank You for Your love and faithfulness to us, which is sure every day. We thank You we can trust You to be with us now, in Jesus' name. Amen.

In the previous lesson we started considering the *Basic Bible Studies*. I explained three introductory comments that Schaeffer made in the introduction to the studies. The first was his confidence in the system of teaching in the Bible. The Bible has unity. The second was that he had confidence that the system of biblical teaching answers the questions of our generation. The third was his sense of the need for prayer, both by the believer and the unbeliever as they approach the studies.

Then we considered some emphases in the lessons themselves. We began with some points that Schaeffer made about the person of God. The first point there, which took most of our time, was that God is truly personal. I explained an illustration that Schaeffer used repeatedly. God is both infinite and personal, whereas we as human beings are finite. At that point, we are distinct from God. Yet we are persons like God, because we are made in His image. The break comes at that point between humans and animals, plants, and machines—the rest of the created order. We are persons like God. The rest of created reality is not. This makes communication and many other aspects of personal fellowship with God possible.

We spent much of the time in the previous lesson discussing a point Dr. Schaeffer made about the Trinity. There is true personality within the Trinity. He would often use the expression “personality on the high order of Trinity.” I recommend that you listen to his taped sermon, “Before the Beginning,” which is about the Trinity before the creation of the world.

The second point, which I had only begun to make in the previous lesson, is that God is sovereign over creation, over history, and over our salvation. God creates not because He must but because He chooses to. He saves us not because He must but because He chooses to. I will read a short passage about each of these points. Schaeffer wrote, “God created all things of His own free will. He did not have to create.” Schaeffer’s point is that there is no necessity behind God that makes God do things. It is the same with our salvation. Schaeffer wrote in one of the studies on God’s grace, “As far as God’s holiness and justice are concerned, He owes us nothing but judgment. He has made us, and we have sinned. We are told by this verse [Romans 6:23] that in spite of this, because of His love, God has provided us with a way of approach to Him. It is not because God owes it to us. It is a gift based on His love.” The point he is making there is that God is not dependent on something outside Himself, and He is not caused to do things by something outside Himself. He is sovereign over our salvation. He saves because He wants to, not because He has to. That is important, because people often speak that way. It is as though God had to do something about the situation. The only thing that constrains God is His own character, to which He is always faithful. God is constrained by His love, His justice, His mercy, and His holiness, but not by anything outside Himself.

Schaeffer would also emphasize that God is sovereign over history. Schaeffer repeatedly used the expression, “There is no chance back of God.” What happens in this world happens under the hand of God. God is not surprised. That is another expression Schaeffer used. God is not surprised by what happens to us or anything that happens in history.

So the second major point is God's sovereignty over creation. As always, Schaeffer relates that truth to various apologetic points. It is not simply a doctrine in the abstract, but it is something that has an implication into this life and into the way one will answer the questions of the non-Christian. We are not living in a chance universe. We are living in a universe in which God is in control. God will not be surprised. Our salvation in the future is certain. Neither the devil nor human beings will come up with anything that will prevent God, take Him by surprise, or stop Him from bringing history to the resolution that He has in mind for it. Christ will certainly come back. It is a practical point. You can have confidence in God because He is sovereign. If He is not, then no one knows what will happen in the future. We cannot be sure we will be saved personally or that Christ will return to consummate His rule and establish His kingdom in fullness. There is no chance behind God.

Schaeffer stressed this because in much secular thinking in our society, life is ruled by chance. There is no absolute surety about the future. Everything is up for grabs. Where is history going? We do not know. Will our planet be destroyed by nuclear war or by a meteorite hitting it? People have no idea. The Christian knows, because God is sovereign over history.

The third point is a strong emphasis on creation *ex nihilo*. God created the universe out of nothing. In the *Basic Bible Studies*, in the second lesson on creation, Schaeffer makes this point several times. He says, "Before God created, He dwelt alone. God created out of nothing. He created by fiat. He spoke, and it was." The word "fiat" simply means "let there be," such as in "let there be light." God spoke, and it was.

This was another important point to Schaeffer in answering modern people who had to believe, in some form or another, that matter has existed eternally. Even the notion of the Big Bang requires the existence of matter before the bang. Matter was condensed into an infinitely tightly packed ball and then exploded to form the universe. If you deny the existence of God, then you must come up with the eternal existence of something else. Yet matter is clearly contingent, clearly dependent for its existence. As Scripture says, "God upholds the universe by the word of His power." This creates tremendous problems for the notion of matter in some eternal form.

Schaeffer used to say, such as in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, or in his tapes, "Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions," that, theoretically, someone could put forward the idea that originally there was what he called "nothing nothing." Then something happened. The idea would be that there was a point when there was nothing at all, and then matter came into existence. He said that is theoretically possible, but it is difficult to imagine anybody holding to such an idea, because it clearly seems to suggest bringing a rabbit out of a hat where there was no rabbit before. Yet somebody has started putting this idea forward, because there are some clear problems in both the areas of physics and philosophy in the notion of the eternally existent matter. The idea has been put forward that originally there was nothing, and out of that nothing something came.

The fourth point in the *Basic Bible Studies* is to make a careful distinction between the God revealed in Scripture and the God of pantheism. Schaeffer did not refer to pantheism directly in the studies. Yet he made the point. In writing about God's creation of the heavenly beings, of the angels, and the heavenly hosts, he says, "They are not an extension of Himself, nor a part of Himself. He created them." His point was that everything that God created is distinct from Him. It is separate from Him in the sense of having a separate existence. It is certainly an existence that is dependent on God. God upholds the universe by the word of His power. Paul said in Colossians 1, "In Christ, all things subsist." The universe would not hold together if God did not uphold it by His powerful word. He is the source of its life, not only originally but also in an ongoing sense. The point Schaeffer makes, however, is that even though God created everything and upholds it, in its being it is distinct from Him. What Schaeffer was trying to do

was make it clear that the biblical teaching is quite distinct from any form of pantheism, from any suggestion that somehow this universe or human beings or angels are somehow an extension of God, a part of God. If you read anything by people in the New Age, that pantheistic idea that God and people, that God and the universe, are all intertwined together is prevalent. As in Hinduism, that idea is fundamental. Ultimately, God is not distinct from His creation. Schaeffer makes this point because He wants to show the radically different nature of Christianity from any kind of pantheistic religion.

Why is that important? One of the consequences of pantheism is that God has no definition. We cannot say God is like this but not like that, because everything is somehow related to God. It then becomes impossible to say that this is the true God and that is a false god. If every person is somehow part of God, an extension of God, and if everything that exists is somehow part of an extension of God, then we have to somehow say that everybody's god is equally valid. It is one of the difficult things if you ever have a discussion with somebody in the New Age movement. Getting them to define what they mean is difficult. They will try to embrace you, saying, "We believe those things, too. All paths lead to God. We have different ways of expressing this, but God is beyond definition." So the attempt will be made to embrace Christianity.

What other problems are there with pantheism? If God and the universe are one, or if the universe, human beings, and the heavenly hosts are somehow extensions of God, then we have to say that everything that exists manifests God to us, both good and evil. God will be both good and evil, which you see clearly in Hinduism. God is presented as both light and darkness, as life and death, as cruelty and compassion. Both good and evil are somehow a manifestation of God.

One of the things you will find in New Age teaching is the criticism of Christianity for being too defining, for restricting only a part of reality to being divine. The New Age people will say Christians have made God rational and masculine, but God is emotional and feminine and everything. They say we need to restore the balance, because everything is expressive of God equally. It becomes impossible to talk about sin or any kind of moral distinction if everything is an extension of God.

In New Age thinking, it is also not possible to talk about the uniqueness of the human person or the significance of human beings. If everything I do is just a dream of God, which is how someone in the New Age might communicate it, then what significance do I have as a person? You may remember the song by the Beatles that says, "I am you, and you are me." That was after they had been to India, sitting at the feet of one of the gurus. When I was in India two years ago, we went to Rishikesh. There is a huge temple there. It was built with money given by the Beatles after their trip to India. They were trying to express these ideas in some of their songs. Some their songs on their later records communicate these ideas.

Another consequence of saying I am an extension of God is that I can justify anything at all. Anything I do I can say has divine authority. So in some ways, this destroys the significance of individuals. Yet in other ways it enables the individual to assume tremendous authority by saying that what I say, what I think, what I do is God's work.

I will give you a practical illustration of this. You may remember Charles Manson and his trial for the appalling murder of Sharon Tate, the wife of the filmmaker Roman Polanski. She was pregnant at the time of her murder and the murder of some other people in their home. Charles Manson had some of his disciples do this. He claimed to be the voice of God. He was not coming from the perspective of someone who was deluded, but as someone who believed he was the extension of God in this pantheistic sense. He claimed to have divine authority in what he did. He certainly had tremendous power over his

followers, because a girl who was one of his followers came to our branch of L'Abri and was converted there. Another one went to the Swiss branch and was converted there. It was amazing in talking to these people how deeply rooted this idea was in them. Everything he said must be right because we are all an extension of God. Somehow they thought that he was more God than they were. That is how these things go. The guru becomes the voice of God, the one in whom God's voice is speaking particularly powerfully.

How can someone who is a moral pantheist speak to somebody like Manson and say, "You are wrong?" It is difficult. There is a fine book dealing with this issue by R. C. Zaehner called *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*. He makes the point that you cannot say to somebody who does terrible evil in the name of God that he is wrong. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is one of Hinduism's most holy books, there is an interesting discussion of this point. It is a discussion between Lord Krishna and Arjuna about whether we as human beings should be involved in the battle for good against evil. The answer given is yes, you must be, because that is so basic to our humanity. Yet the answer is also given that you should do it as if you were not doing it. In other words, do it with a kind of attachment, because in the end it does not matter. You see in that discussion a real tension at the heart of Hinduism or any form of pantheism.

Since people are created in the image of God and have God's Law written on their hearts, they recognize that there is a difference between good and evil. This is true for the pantheist as much as anyone else. Whether he acknowledges the personal God, who is a holy, righteous, and just, or not, he is still made by Him and has His Law written on his heart. He knows that good is good and evil is evil. He knows that good is right to do. Yet there is an acknowledgment by the pantheist at the same time that, even though we do this, we recognize that in the end it will have no meaning. In the end it really does not matter, because there is no distinction. Ultimately the face of God is both good and evil. It is Kali with skulls around her neck as well as the giver of life. It becomes tied up with the worship of every force that is in nature. You find this in paganism in its most obvious forms. If you are going to worship nature, and if you have said that everything is an extension of God, then you must end up worshiping death as well as life and darkness as well as light.

When I went to visit Vishal Mangalwadi in India, the day I arrived there was an article in the paper about a child being sacrificed at the building of a dam. It is like when you read about Manasseh in the Old Testament, offering his children to Molech or at the building of the city of Jericho or when he built his fortifications. Vishal said to me that even though it was not commonly reported, it happens every time there is a major road-building, dam-building, or bridge-building project. A child is sacrificed. We have some friends who are working in Nepal at the moment. They are in a remote village in which the men of the village went to the top of the mountain and prayed that the Lord of Darkness would come to rule their village. You may ask why, yet one can also ask, "Why not?"

This is the point that Schaeffer makes. The Scripture sees God as radically distinct from His creation. We look at the creation, and we cannot identify it with the nature of God. When I see death and destruction, I cannot say, "This is the hand of God." It is not an expression of God. God is revealed in His creation. His power and divine nature are revealed in creation, but they are not part of it. Creation is not part of Him. It is important to be able to say that.

Later on in Schaeffer's writing, he repeatedly refers to the part of the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo that shows the creation of Adam by God. Schaeffer makes the point that their fingers are not touching each other. God has created Adam, and Adam is distinct from Him. Adam is not bound up with God as an extension of Him. He has his own separate, significant life.

That brings us to a second area of points that Schaeffer makes, and these concern human beings and our life. The first point I want to make is Schaeffer's stress on human beings as made in the image of God. That became a fundamental and central part of his apologetic. He wrote in his study on God and Man in *Basic Bible Studies*, "Man was made in God's image. This is man's glory, and it is this which sets him off from other creatures. What does it mean that man is made in God's image? Well, among other things, it certainly means this: man is moral. This means he can make moral choices. Also, man is rational. This means that he can think. It also means that man is creative. We find that everywhere. Men make works of art. It is also the reason why man loves." One could also add man's dominion over nature and creation, which Genesis 1 spells out. This was the first point Schaeffer made about human beings. We are unique. We are distinct from the rest of creation. Since we are personal like God, we are made to think like God, love like God, and reflect God's holy character. We are made to distinguish between good and evil. We are made to be creative. This became a central part of his apologetic.

What is the importance of this to a Christian's apologetic? It gives us individual significance. It enables us to be able to affirm all those things that we experience as a fundamental part of our humanity. We love people rather than merely having biological urges. We distinguish between good and evil. We think. We are rational. We can reflect on a situation that faces us and decide what course of action to take. Or we may think for thinking's sake. We use language. We communicate not only with signs and sounds, but we also use language, with its tremendous possibility for self-revelation, self-disclosure, and ordering creation. We are made to choose. We are made to have significance, to be responsible for what we do. We are creative, and we are made to reflect the creativity of God. He created the universe out of nothing. His artistic imagination is beyond our wildest dreams, but He has made us to be like Him to create also. We cannot create universes out of nothing, except in our imagination. We create by using the bits and pieces of God's creation and putting them together in new ways. We are created to be like God. All these things that are so much a fundamental part of our every moment's experience of human life have their foundation in something solid, which is that we have been made like God, who is Himself personal. We are made like Him.

One of the great problems in the thinking of twentieth-century people is that there is no basis to affirm the significance of human beings. There is no basis to affirm love. There is no basis to affirm morality. There is no basis for affirming individual significance. There is no basis for affirming the value of language. If man is seen as only a product of time and chance, if we have only come from the machine, if we are only related downward from the atom, then all that we think of as human, such as love and morals, must be seen as an illusion. They have no reality. They have no foundation in the universe.

If you have read any theater of the absurd or seen any films presenting an absurdist position, then you will realize that is the problem they are struggling with. I would encourage you to see the film *Blowup*. Schaeffer used to use this film as an illustration. You will find it used in several of his books. The film *Blowup* was advertised as "Love without meaning, murder without guilt." That was on posters everywhere. The maker of that film knew very well what he was saying. In a universe in which there is no God, where we have just come about by chance, there is no meaning to love. We cannot speak about murder and say that it produces real guilt or that it is really wrong. Woody Allen's movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors* deals with the same issues, particularly in the area of morality. The major event in that film is a murder. The whole film is about whether murder really is wrong, whether there is any justice in the universe, and whether there is any true guilt. There are several discussions about it in the film. The man who commits the murder does not get caught. His life goes on successfully. You can see the tremendous tension in Woody Allen as he wrestles with the issue. He puts it bluntly: if there is no God, then murder does not incur guilt. It is only something you do. "Might is right" would be another way to express it. Love and morals and everything else get ruled out. That is the point that Schaeffer makes.

Those things that demonstrate the difference in man have their root in the fact that we are made in the image of the personal God. This point is made frequently in Schaeffer's writing.

I encourage you, when you watch movies and read books, to try to notice what they are really saying. There has recently been a revival of Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. One of the major themes of that play is that human life has no meaning at all. There is nothing we can hope for. The people in the play have longings and hopes, human hopes, but there is nothing objective in the universe that can give those hopes a peg to hang on to. They are simply a kind of illusion. The hopes enable them to keep waiting, but there is no certainty whatsoever that there is anything objective in relation to their waiting.

If you go to some of the most modern art exhibitions, you will find that there is nothing objective to relate to. If you ask, "What is this painting?" or "What is this sculpture?" the artist will respond, "That is up to you." He or she is saying in a clear way that there is no communication between people because there is nothing that can objectively be known. Every person is an island to himself. There is nothing we can really say to one another.

There are several issues related to this. One is whether there is any real communication between people, or whether there is any real foundation for those things that we regard as human. Another is the issue of what authority there is. Some modern music deals with that issue, and the authority in the end is with the individual. Whatever I feel is right because I feel it.

We will return to this point in a later lesson. As we think about Schaeffer's work, his emphasis on the importance of the image of God is one of the major themes of all of his apologetic work. It is because so many people in our generation are lost as human beings. It is not just that "they are harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," which they certainly are and therefore we should have compassion on them, but they are harassed and helpless because they do not even know who they are. They have lost any solid mooring for knowing what it is to be a human person. They do not know whether they can give any meaning to their human existence at all.

Woody Allen is one of the best expounders of this position. In his film *Sleeper*, for example, he says that the only things he believes in are sex and death, because there is nothing else to believe in at all. Those are two of the constant themes of all of his films. There is nothing else that is certain to him. He carefully says "sex" instead of "love." He understands that he experiences love, which is evident in all of his films, which are always about his relationships with women, and many of them reflect his own life, such as *Annie Hall*. He always longs for love and desperately needs it. He senses so acutely the aloneness of people and their desperate need for human relationships. If you do not believe in God and therefore do not have a secure relationship with Him, then you are totally dependent on relationships with other people to give you some kind of meaning. He realizes that quite powerfully, so he always longs for love and looks for love. The films are about his relationships with different people and the love they give him. Often they end in disappointment. He knows all the while that he does not have any foundation for love. That is why, when he is asked the question directly whether he believes in God, he says no, but that he only believes in sex and death. He knows that there is reality in a sexual relationship. Even if I cannot find a basis for talking about love, about a real commitment between people, which seems such an evanescent thing, sex does take place. Yet then he even makes a joke about that. He says, "Perhaps I believe in death a little more, because after sex you feel nauseous and as far as I know after death you do not." He always makes jokes about himself in everything he says. That is the only thing that makes his films bearable. At the same time as he sets out the human dilemma so acutely and painfully, he makes it funny at the same time. That makes you enabled to watch the films without being completely destroyed by them.