

Basic Bible Study Themes, IV

Last time we discussed Schaeffer's emphasis on the abnormality of our life here and now. I spoke about what he called the five-pointed curse. He talks about this in the section on the Fall in *Genesis in Space and Time*. There you will find the same emphasis spelled out in great detail. The other place you might look is in a series of two lectures by Schaeffer called "The Problem of Evil and the God of Love." Those two lectures are a review of the book by John Hick, who is a very well known liberal theologian in Britain. He is also one of the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Those three sources, the sermon "The Five-Pointed Curse," *Genesis in Space and Time*, and those lectures on the problem of evil and the God of love will give you more information on Schaeffer's view of the abnormality of our lives here in the present.

Another way Schaeffer describes that abnormality is to speak about the three deaths that sinful human beings have to endure. This is from the Bible study on glorification of the resurrection number 23. He says, "Man's fall into sin involved the complete man, body and soul. Because man sinned, three deaths came upon him." The first death is spiritual death—that is, separation from God. It came immediately. The second is physical death or the death of the body, which we usually speak of as death. The third is eternal death at the final judgment. That was another way he used to describe our situation now. We, as sinful human beings, are subject to three deaths, all of which Christ overcomes.

As we think about this issue of abnormality, it is a very fundamental one in terms of apologetics. It is important not just for apologetics but also for any kind of care for people who suffer. Whether you are a pastor or just a fellow believer who comes alongside someone who struggles with a difficulty, it is tremendously important that you understand biblical teaching in this area. It is a great loss to our ability to be able to help people if we do not understand it. We have very little to say to people who suffer unless we understand that abnormality. That is why the Scripture encourages us to weep with those who weep. There really is something to weep about. Rather than tell them that everything is fine, we are to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. We are also to rejoice with those who have something to rejoice about.

The third area I want to speak about is Schaeffer's teaching on salvation. Let me draw several points out from that. For each of these issues of God Himself, human beings, sin, and salvation, I have not summarized all that Schaeffer speaks about in these Bible studies. I have just picked out some topics that are central to understanding all of his teaching. They became major themes in the rest of his work from this point onward. I will also point out particular issues that he draws attention to in a slightly different way than usual.

The first point under the topic of salvation is that in the work of Christ when Christ dies for us, God's holiness is not compromised. Let me read what Schaeffer says about this in the fourth study on God's grace. There are several studies on the grace of God, and this is study number four on page 22. He comments on Philippians 2:7-8, "How can the Holy God say 'whosoever' to sinners? God cannot just overlook our sin, because He is holy. If He did that, no moral absolute would exist. We can come to God through grace because Christ worked for us. His finished work is His death upon the cross." Again on Romans 3:24-26 he writes, "Because Christ died in substitution, God remains righteous. There is a moral absolute, and yet we do not need to come under His judgment." I do not know if you understand what Schaeffer gets at here.

A student asked me the other day why it was necessary for Christ to die in order for us to be saved. He wanted to know why His death was necessary. This is what Schaeffer emphasizes here. If God were simply to forgive our sin, then His holiness would be compromised. As Schaeffer expresses it, there would be no moral absolute. His point is that one of the answers we have to the non-Christian in our generation is that a Christian worldview or biblical Christianity teaches that there is indeed a moral absolute in the universe. One of the problems our whole generation struggles with is whether there is a basis for distinguishing between good and evil. How can I say that good is good and that evil is evil? If it is just the decision of the individual, which is what so many people in our culture think, then we cannot talk about moral absolutes. They think that good and evil is just a matter of personal choice, as the whole abortion movement puts it. It is a matter of personal privacy. If this were the case, then we cannot say that there is indeed a moral absolute in the universe anywhere. There are only these individual choices. They do not tell us what is truly good or evil. They just tell us what individuals have to think at this particular moment.

The other alternative that our culture puts forward is what Schaeffer used to call sociological law or the rule by the 51 percent. The majority tell us what is right and wrong. Perhaps you have heard me quote William Golding before when I spoke about humanism in my course, *Outreach to Contemporary Culture*. He says, "If God is dead, good and evil is decided by majority vote." That is what Schaeffer meant by sociological law. In a democracy, the law comes down in the end to what the majority think. Whatever the majority of the people think, that will be right. Good and evil is decided by majority vote.

The third alternative is that those in power will tell us what is right. We could summarize that by saying might is right. None of these give us a moral absolute or a sure foundation for being able to say that murder is always and everywhere wrong, that adultery, rape, and homosexuality are always and everywhere wrong, that lying and stealing are wrong. Once God is removed on any of these views from our understanding of reality, there is no basis on which to say there are moral certainties or absolutes in this universe. That is why Schaeffer stresses this here. God is indeed holy and righteous. His righteousness is never compromised, and He never looks on sin and excuses it. He is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all, as the Scripture puts it. He dwells in unapproachable light. He is never tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone else. His character is perfect, and that perfection of God's character enables us to say that this is a moral universe. It is a universe in which there really is a difference between good and evil. It means that God cannot, without being false to Himself, simply excuse, pass by, overlook, or forgive sin. He cannot just say, "That is all right. It does not matter." Christ comes and bears the judgment for our sin. God's character is not compromised, and yet we are forgiven and may be saved. There is still a moral absolute. God is still a holy and righteous God. He is both just, because sin is always punished, and the justifier of the person who believes in Jesus.

Schaeffer had so many contacts with unbelievers all the time that he always thought about presenting the Christian message to the unbeliever. He saw the great strength that Christianity has at this point. It provides us with a solid foundation to be able to say what is good or bad and right or wrong, and it will never change. When Schaeffer thinks about the work of Christ here, he relates it to that issue. There is still a moral absolute. John Dunn, the poet, sums it up in a very beautiful way in one of his poems. He says, "Kings pardon, but He bore our punishment."

That brings us to point number two, which is Schaeffer's emphasis on history. Let me read one section on page 24 of the study on God's grace. Schaeffer comments on Genesis 22:1-18, which is the account of Abraham's offering of Isaac. This is one of his favorite parts of Scripture. He says, "Here we have a clear picture in space, time, and history of the coming Messiah and His substitutionary work." That is one of the first times I found him using that particular expression "space, time, and history." It became

one of his favorite expressions. He spoke about Christ coming in space, time, and history. This was a central emphasis in all of his teaching. In a day like ours, people think of Christianity as simply something religious. This is your religion that you happen to have, and someone else has his or her religion. I am a Buddhist, you are a Hindu, he is Muslim, and that person is a Christian. It is all a matter of personal faith, choice, and need. There is a complete loss of any sense of objective truth. Schaeffer saw the need to constantly emphasize that what the Bible tells us actually took place in space, time, and history. If you ever speak about the incarnation, the birth of Christ, the resurrection, or about any part of Scripture, you need to say this. You do not need to use the words “space, time, and history,” but you have to get the idea across to people. They do not expect it, and it does not touch them unless you emphasize and draw attention to it. What we talk about is historical truth. It took place in this reality here. That is what Schaeffer means by space. It was here on this earth and in this world that we live in day by day. It took place in our time, in this history that we live through moment by moment. It took place in real history.

Schaeffer emphasized history particularly because in neo-orthodox theology there is no emphasis on history at all. There are many churches you could go to this Christmas or Easter where you would hear wonderful sermons on the birth of Christ and the events surrounding His birth. You would hear about the angels, the wise men, and the shepherds. At Easter you would hear a wonderful sermon on the death of Christ and even the resurrection of Christ given by people who do not believe that those things actually happened in history. You think, “What a wonderful message,” but you need to ask what they did not say. Many of them will not emphasize the fact that these things took place in space, time, and history.

Some of you have probably heard before about Karl Henry, who interviewed Karl Barth with some other reporters on one occasion. He was the first editor of *Christianity Today* when that magazine started back in the 1950s. He asked Barth, “If there had been a camera at the empty tomb, what would it have recorded?” He wanted to ask if Barth believed that the resurrection was an event that took place in real history. Could it be recorded and shown on our evening news on television stations today? Karl Barth’s response to him was intriguing. He said, “What did you say? Did you say you were the editor of *Christianity Yesterday*?” He did not answer the question. Karl Henry replied, “Christianity yesterday, today, and forever.” This was also a very clever response. He was not prepared to address the question directly. He would not say if the resurrection took place in real history that could be recorded on a camera and presented on the evening news as an actual fact that occurred in this reality.

If you have grown up in a Christian context, you may think that I labor an unnecessary point here. But if you have not, you will understand that people outside the church do not think of the story of Christmas and Easter as true historically. My parents were non-believers, and I grew up going to church every Sunday as a child. I went to Sunday school every week, but no one ever suggested to me that these things were true events in history. It was a completely new idea when, as a university student, I came face to face with genuine Christianity for the first time. To hear that this was actually history that we were talking about was radically new. There are a lot of people out there who do not know that that is what we speak about. You always need to emphasize this. We talk about something that happened in real history.

There are all sorts of different ways to express this. You do not have to use Schaeffer’s words “space, time, and history.” That was his favorite expression, but you need to communicate it. If you hear someone preaching in your own church at Christmas, Easter, or any other event from the life of Christ or the Bible, and they do not emphasize that it is historical, they have not preached the Gospel today. Schaeffer constantly preached Luther’s statement, “If I preach the Word of God with the loudest voice

in the clearest way at every point except that where it is under attack, I have not preached it faithfully.” If you do not emphasize that it is real history, you have not preached the Gospel today. You just offer people another content-less religious experience, as Schaeffer called it. That is what many people have in many churches: content-less religious experiences that have no relationship to something that God has actually done in the past.

You will find this emphasis throughout Schaeffer’s writing and all of his tapes. Even when someone was baptized, he had five questions that he asked people. One of those questions was “Do you believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who was born into this world in space, time, and history, became a man, died in space, time, and history, and rose again in history?” He saw it as absolutely fundamental to communicate that to people, not just once but over and over again. If you watch the film *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, the fifth film has as its central theme that the biblical message is an historical message. You see the man wandering around the different parts of Israel speaking about Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Paul. He makes this point over and over again.

The third issue is Schaeffer’s emphasis on what he called the empty hands of faith. We come to Christ with the empty hands of faith. It is not a new expression with Schaeffer; it was just one of his favorite expressions. He used it when he described what faith is in our response to the work that Christ has accomplished on our behalf. He comments in John 3:15-16 in study four, “If we accept Jesus as our Savior, then on the basis of Christ’s finished work, which we accept by faith alone, we have God’s promise of an eternal life. Faith is the empty hand which accepts the gift.” He constantly used that particular expression. The other expression that he used is what he called faith plus nothing. If you start listening to any of his sermons, you will hear him using that expression over and over again. In lesson 12 on page 49 he says, “Salvation is obtained by faith in Christ plus nothing.” On page 51 he says, “The instrument by which we accept the free gift is faith. Faith has a double significance. It is believing God’s promises, and it is the empty hand which accepts the gift.” He goes on to add, “The empty hand accepts the gift without trying to add humanistic, religious, or moral good works to it.”

I want to draw attention to that as well. These were three expressions that he used over and over again when talking about faith. We come to God to believe in what Christ has accomplished for us by His perfect life, His death as our substitute, and His resurrection. The empty hands of faith are that we come before God with nothing to offer Him whatsoever. We simply receive what He gives us. Many times Schaeffer said, “We do not have faith in faith.” It is not our faith that justifies us. Faith is an empty hand that accepts the gift of justification through Christ. It is not the power or strength of my faith itself that is the issue, but faith as an empty hand receives the gift that God gives. The other expression I mentioned was faith plus nothing.

The third expression is this about humanistic works, “The empty hand accepts the gift without trying to add humanistic, religious, or moral good works to it.” Over and over again he said that thinking that I have to earn a relationship with God or that I have something to offer to God was humanistic. His point is that it is humanistic to believe in God, that Christ is the Son of God, and that He died in history and rose again for us and then to still think you offer something to God for your salvation. It is just as humanistic to believe that as the humanist who does not believe in God at all. That is the point he tries to make. It is just as much an offense to God to think you can offer Him something for your salvation as it is to reject Him altogether. Let me draw attention to this in a couple of other places as well. In Lesson five he comments on page 24 on Adam and Eve and God’s provision of the animal skins to cover them after the fall. He says, “This was an immediate picture that the way man could come to God now that he had sinned was not by the humanistic works of his own righteousness but by that which God would provide through the death of the coming Messiah.” Again on page 26 he comments on Romans 4:6-8

about David and says, “David is clearly said to have been saved not of works but by faith. No man has ever been saved by his own humanistic works.” Schaeffer constantly used that expression. He spoke of Roman Catholicism as a form of humanism because of its emphasis on the work of Mary and the saints in addition to the work of Christ. Mary is called co-Redemptrix and comediator. Catholics make prayers to the saints, and there is emphasis on good works. Often in discussions, Schaeffer called Catholicism a form of humanism. You will see that in some of his writings as well. It is an affront to God to say we can earn in any way our relationship with Him.

The fourth emphasis I want to draw attention to is that sanctification is also by faith. This was one of the issues that Schaeffer rediscovered for himself during that time of his spiritual crisis when he questioned everything in the Christian faith. He started all over again and discovered that sanctification is not by human effort; it is by faith just as is justification. Let me read a couple of passages where Schaeffer draws attention to this. He comments on 1 John 5:3-5 and says, “The victory that overcomes the world is our faith. It is not that the ground of our victory is our faith in sanctification as in justification. The only ground is the perfect finished work of Christ.” *True Spirituality* as a book and all the tapes that went with it, covering the same material, has that as the emphasis. The theme of the book is what the finished work of Christ means for my life today. It is not just what it means for when I became a Christian in justification, but it is important to know what it means now. What does the work of Christ mean for the present life? The whole of that book is a study on that issue of the effect of Christ’s work on my life in the present. The victory that overcomes the world day by day for the Christian is our faith. He says, “For my daily walk as a Christian, I must, by God’s grace, rest in faith upon my present relationship with God every moment of my life. I must see that I cannot keep God’s law in my own strength. For my justification, I must have rested in faith in Christ as my Savior. In sanctification, moment by moment, I must throw myself upon the fact of my present relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit. Through faith I lay hold of this relationship for this one moment. All of life is only a succession of moments, one moment at a time. Thus by God’s grace His commandments are not grievous, and by God’s grace I may have spiritual power, and the Lord will be my song.” His point is that we cannot grow as Christians just by deciding that we will grow by our efforts and obedience. We will only grow as we rest. We put out the empty hands of faith, not just in conversion, but also in sanctification. This needs to happen every moment of our life. It is another way of expressing Paul’s emphasis in 2 Corinthians when he says, “When I am weak, then I am strong. I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” It is when we realize how weak and totally incapable we are of doing what God wants us to do—of being truly righteous, of taking care of the people He sends our way, and of fulfilling the calling that He gives us—that we learn to cry out and trust in Him. We then ask for His power, help, and grace. This was a very important point to Schaeffer.

Schaeffer saw in so much of his own background personally, but also in the whole movement from which he came, a tremendous emphasis on what he called active activity. Someone else might call it activism. He saw Christians running around working for God and doing their thing for God. This is something we can all easily fall into. We run around, thinking we please God and that we have something to offer Him now. Schaeffer speaks against that and says that if we do that, it is another form of legalism. A term that he used over and over again later on is what he called active passivity as opposed to active activity. The latter is working in your own strength, getting on, and living the Christian life. By active passivity, Schaeffer meant offering ourselves to God in faith. The image that he used over and over again is that of Mary when the angel came to her and told her that she had been chosen to bear the Lord’s Messiah. She says, “I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be according to Your will.” He used that illustration for the whole of the Christian life. That is what we have to do every moment of our lives. We need to offer ourselves to God, which is the active part of active passivity. We

are passive in the sense that we are dependent on what God can do through us. I need His power to work in me. I need the power of the Spirit and the righteousness of Christ. It is active in the sense of actively, moment by moment, putting faith in God.

He distinguishes it very carefully from the kind of resignation that you see in a writer like Watchman Nee. There are two sermons where he talks about this, and let me mention them both. They are from *True Spirituality*. One is called "In the Spirit's Power," and the other is called "The Fruitful Bride." Just as with Mary offering herself to God, God can produce His work through us as we yield ourselves to Him as a bride yields herself to her husband (he loved to use that image of the bride, which is a thoroughly biblical image). Every moment of our lives, we are to offer ourselves to God and yield ourselves to Him for Him to do His work in us.

Let me refer to another passage where he makes this same point. On page 59 of lesson 15, "The New Relationship," Schaeffer comments on Philippians 1:11 and says, "The fruit we should bring forth after we are Christians must be by Christ working in and through us." Only by abiding in Him, trusting in Him, and yielding ourselves to Him will there be a qualitatively different life for the Christian. Otherwise it is just activism. Some people found that emphasis in his teaching really difficult. When he came to the United States after that period of crisis and gave those sermons for the first time all over the country, some people found it wonderfully refreshing. Other people did not like this emphasis very much, though. It caused quite a division in terms of response to what he said.

I would say for all of you that you will realize the truth of this when you find yourself in situations that are too big for you to handle. I spoke to a student today who now has a job in one of the churches in addition to his studies. He is also starting a family, and he said to me, "I remember you saying this in Church Government last semester, but now for the first time I really understand it. I find myself every day in a situation where I simply cannot handle what is in front of me. For the first time I am learning something about living by the grace and power of God and living by faith, moment by moment, rather than living on the basis of my abilities academically, with regard to work, as a husband, and as a father. I am simply inadequate." This was such a fundamental emphasis for the Schaeffers. Unless a grain of wheat is prepared to die and fall into the ground, it will not bear fruit. They used that over and over again as an image of the Christian life. Until you get to the point of saying that you cannot do it, you do not begin to understand anything about what God is able to accomplish in and through us.

That brings me to a fifth point, which is Schaeffer's emphasis on the present relationship we have with all three members of the Trinity. When I heard him preach on this it was the first time I had ever heard a Christian speak about it. I cannot ever recall hearing a sermon on that subject since I heard him speak about it. I think it is something that would be affirmed in every theology book and we would all say yes to. But this was an essential part of his understanding of the Christian life. As believers, we now have a relationship with all three members of the Trinity. Let me read three passages where he draws attention to this. One is in the very first study on page 14 where he comments on 2 Corinthians 13:14, which is the most common benediction. He says, "The work of each of the three persons is important to us. Jesus died to save us, the Father draws us to Himself and loves us, and the Holy Spirit deals with us." Later on he says on page 61 in lesson 16, on the new relationship with God, "This new relationship with the triune God is then the second of the blessings of salvation, justification being the first. This new relationship we have with God is threefold: God the Father is the Christian's father, the only begotten Son of God is our Savior and Lord, our prophet, priest and king. We are identified and united with Him. The Holy Spirit lives in us and deals with us. He communicates to us the manifold benefits of redemption." Schaeffer constantly emphasized this point on the threefold relationship we have with the members of the Trinity every day of our lives. He says this threefold relationship is a present fact. He

must refer to it more than a dozen times in these studies: “I have a present vital relationship with each of the three persons of the Trinity every moment of my life, and that is what I rest upon as I grow as a believer.” It is a present vital relationship with our Father, Redeemer, and with the Spirit who dwells within me.

Schaeffer, in *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, has a section on the importance of the active obedience of Christ. Let me talk about if there is any connection between that and what I have emphasized here about active passivity. When Schaeffer emphasized the active obedience of Christ, he kept on drawing attention to that. If you listen to the sermons from *True Spirituality* or read the book, you will see how important this became to Schaeffer. He felt that while this is acknowledged in our theology, that Christ lived a perfect life and was actively obedient to the Father, the importance of it is very neglected in the teaching of our churches. All our emphasis is placed on the death of Christ very often. That is what most Christians think. They say that God saved them because His Son bore God’s judgment. Of course that is true, but the point Schaeffer makes when he talks about active obedience is that we are equally saved by the perfection of Christ’s life; His active obedience as the Son saves us, too. There is a connection between this and what he calls active passivity, because a fundamental part of the Son’s work was willingly offering Himself to the Father. By active obedience his reference is to both that element of the Son saying, “Not my will but Yours be done,” offering Himself up to the Father for the Father to do His work, and His death on the cross. He drew a parallel between that and the Christian’s active passivity. We should give ourselves up to God for His will to be done. Schaeffer primarily emphasizes the perfection of Christ’s life. His death cannot be understood without that. Christ not only died for us, but He was able to die for us because He is perfect. Everywhere that we have been disobedient, He lived a perfect life in our place. His life is equally a substitution for ours, not only His death.

That is why Schaeffer emphasized that so strongly. He wanted to draw out of that the importance of that for our lives in the present. Just as Christ once lived a perfect life in my place, as I abide in Him, He is able to continue to do that in me now. He lived once as my substitute and was obedient at every point where I am disobedient and resisted temptation at every point where I gave in. He was perfect in word, heart, thought, and deed where I have not been. But now as I put my faith in Him, that obedience that He expressed so perfectly in His life, by His Spirit’s power, He will express in my life now. Schaeffer related the two.