

## **Infiltration of Evangelicalism, I**

In our last lesson we looked at some of the consequences or elements that go along with a neo-orthodox or existentialist position. I mentioned faith in faith rather than faith in God. Second, biblical language becomes a banner. You have a form of semantic mysticism where anything can be communicated, bought, sold, or pushed with the appeal to biblical language rather than the communication of biblical content. Third, faith has no contact with the cosmos and history. It is in a completely different realm. Fourth, faith is set over against reason as if the more irrational it is the more glorious. Fifth, it creates dialectical thinking where truth is not what matters in the sense of being antithetical to other statements. Rather, sincerity is what matters, and all religions are seen as having the truth. There is a move toward universalism.

I want to turn to how this mentality of what we have called Christian existentialism or neo-orthodoxy, Schaeffer's division of the lower and upper stories, can begin to affect evangelicalism. This was one of Schaeffer's great concerns. Throughout his later years, one of the things that worried him more than anything else was what he saw as the infiltration of evangelicalism by neo-orthodoxy and by what he called the existential methodology. That is the application of the methods of approach to Scripture of the existentialists to an evangelical position. That concern is evident in many of Schaeffer's tapes. I could recommend from our list dozens of tapes on that subject. And it is also evident in many of his books. He called this accommodation, which was one of his ways of expressing it. He spoke about the infiltration of the existentialists' methodology and accommodation. He saw accommodation to the world's spirit of our generation. It was a division of reality into two halves, the upper and lower story, faith against reason, and rationally and factually being able to see no meaning to life yet finding meaning in an upper story. He saw that as one of the primary marks of the spirit of the world in our age. That is why he was so deeply concerned about the infiltration of this idea into the evangelical camp. That is why he calls it accommodation. A point that he made again and again is that accommodation is never static. People do not accommodate just slightly and then stay still. They themselves move over time. Accommodation is a slippery slope, and once you have started down it, it is very difficult to stop. Not only does the individual slip a little further as time goes by, but also the next generation tends to slip very much further. This is the generation of those who were taught by those who have accommodated just a little bit. The generation of those who were taught always goes further than those who teach. A teacher may accommodate to this world, the spirit of this existential methodology just a tiny bit, but you can be quite sure the students will take that accommodation much further. They will be more consistent than their teacher.

Let me look at some areas that Schaeffer drew attention to where he saw the beginnings of accommodation within the evangelical camp. The first is what we might call the attack on propositional revelation. For example, on page 99 and 100 of *The Complete Works*, which is chapter two of *The God Who Is There*, Schaeffer talks about the biblical view that there is indeed propositional revelation from God. He writes, "In historic Christianity, a personal God creates man in His own image. In such a case there is nothing that would make it nonsense to consider that He would communicate to man in verbalized form. Why should God not communicate in verbalized form when He has made man a verbalizing being in his thoughts as well as in communication with other men? Having created man in His own image, why should He fail to communicate to that verbalizing being in such terms?" Schaeffer's point is that God Himself is a God who communicates. There is communication within the Trinity. He has made us as human persons in His likeness. We are like Him and made in His image. He has created us to communicate verbally with one another. Part of being human is possessing the gift of language. We mirror God's reality and nature in that kind of communication. God could communicate to

us in words, and the Bible can be regarded as the very Word of God, God's actual words to us as human beings. He says that this idea is not an impossible or nonsensical one. It is fundamental to the Bible's own claim for itself. This is the Word of God, the Word that God has spoken. Scripture expresses that about itself in many ways. This has come to us as if God had spoken directly to us. There are several examples in Scripture where God does speak directly. Think of the voice that comes from heaven to Jesus, saying, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him." God communicates directly in words here. God Himself inscribes the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone in words as His communication to the people of Israel and the human race.

Schaeffer's point is that, given who God is biblically and who we are as made in the image of God, the notion of propositional revelation and God revealing Himself in normal words, statements, and propositions is a completely acceptable idea. It is fundamental to any kind of solid view of the authority of Scripture. Schaeffer recognized that this would become attacked everywhere where there was accommodation to the spirit of the age and the existential methodology. There is a whole appendix about this at the back of *He is There and He is Not Silent*, which is page 345 in *The Complete Works*. I would encourage you to read that, because I think it is tremendously important. You will find it in many discussions about the nature of Scripture, either with people who are neo-orthodox themselves or with evangelicals who have been influenced by the neo-orthodox position.

So that will be the first issue to come under attack. Can we really say that this is the Word of God? Is it not rather simply human words that seek to express the inexpressible about God? In other words, people will attack the value of biblical language in terms of being an adequate vehicle for communication to human beings about God. Everywhere where there is the influence of neo-orthodoxy, this is something you will find. The value of language to communicate truth about God or from God to human beings will be set aside. If you were to study linguistics at university today, you would find a radically existentialist view being taught. Language is something that is basically completely subjective. Each person is a kind of island to himself or herself, and communication between one person and another or one culture and another is extremely difficult. If you begin with the assumption that there is no objective reality out there to which our language accords, then of course the notion of communication from God to man becomes very difficult. Beginning with what the Bible teaches about who God is, the notion of communication between us as human beings or from God to us is not difficult at all. That is one of the first things that will be attacked. There has been a whole series of books within the evangelical camp, attacking the value of language and the notion of propositional revelation.

Second, there will be a reluctance to equate the biblical text with the Word of God. In volume four of *The Complete Works* in *The Church Before the Watching World*, Schaeffer speaks about this issue on page 128. He says that the Bible will no longer be seen as the Word of God in any kind of formal sense. This is an issue that we will find in evangelical writing. Charles Craft, in *Christianity and Culture*, is very reluctant to say that the Bible actually is God's Word. For him, the Word of God stands somewhere behind the text. It is not actually in the text itself. It follows necessarily from his view of language that that is so. We cannot read the text and say, "Here I have before me the very words of the Lord." Rather what I have is something that may be regarded as containing or pointing to God's Word. Behind it stands God's Word, but now I have that in human expression. That is the second problem that will result from accommodation to the existential methodology.

Third, there will begin to be problems in the area of historicity, the question is whether or not the Bible can be regarded as historical revelation. On page 100 of *The Complete Works* in *The God Who is There*, Schaeffer speaks about this issue. He says, "God has set the revelation of the Bible in history. He did not give it, as He could have done, in the form of a theological textbook. Having set the revelation in

history, what sense, then, would it make for God to give us a revelation in which the history was wrong?" He goes on to point out that the Bible claims to tell us truth in the area of history as well. This is one of the unique things about the Bible. If you compare it with the Bhagavad Gita, it is not an historical revelation in the same sense at all. The Bible is something set in a time with particular people who we can find out about from other sources. These are people who really existed and lived at particular moments in history in a particular historical context, which is clearly revealed in the text. Other religious books often lack that historical dimension that we find in Scripture. Historicity, or being prepared to say that the Bible speaks truly with regard to history was, for Schaeffer, tremendously important. It was bound up with the whole nature of God's activity of salvation. Without history we have no Christ at all, because He came into this world at a moment in history for our salvation.

In *Escape from Reason*, which is page 257 in *The Complete Works*, Schaeffer quotes something from T. H. Huxley. He listened to him on tapes, and Schaeffer talks a lot about Grandfather Huxley, who was grandfather to Julian and Aldous Huxley. This Huxley was a close friend of Darwin's, and Schaeffer quotes what T. H. Huxley had to say about the church, history, and the early chapters of Genesis. Schaeffer says, "Huxley has proved to be a discerning prophet. In 1890 he made the statement that there would come a time when men would remove all content from faith and especially from the pre-Abrahamic Scriptural narrative (Genesis 1-11). Then [quoting Huxley], 'no longer in contact with fact of any kind, faith stands now and forever proudly inaccessible to the attacks of the infidel.'" Huxley was making a joke when he said that. He saw the pressure from the culture, forcing the church to say that biblical history was not real history, and particularly in Genesis 1-11 there was no real history. The point Huxley made in this quote is that if you say that the Bible is not true historically, there is no way in which the unbeliever can attack you. Your faith is completely impregnable if you do not call it true! Of course it is impregnable—that is his point.

For Schaeffer, this was a very important issue that he hammered away at. It is essential for us as Christians to hold on to the historical nature of Genesis 1-11, particularly because that section of Scripture answers our most basic questions about who we are as human beings and the nature of reality. It gives us the origin of the universe and ourselves, it defines what our human nature is, and it tells us the origin of the dilemma in which we find ourselves. We live in a sinful world, and Genesis 1-11 tells us where that came from. It also gives us those original promises of God to bring about redemption. Schaeffer saw very clearly that evangelicals began to drift away from affirming the historical nature of the biblical text and particularly the historical nature of those early chapters of Genesis. He gives the example of Neibuhr and the Fall on page 126 in *Escape From Reason*. Neibuhr said that the Fall in Genesis 3 is simply a description of our condition now, not a description of something that happened in the past. If you take that position, you have no answer to the problem of evil at all. God becomes responsible for sin in the world and for the abnormality of the world. If Genesis 3 simply describes the way we are rather than what happened at a point in time where God's good creation was destroyed by human beings, then we have nothing whatsoever to say in the area of whether God is or is not responsible for evil and the brokenness, suffering, and pain of our human existence.

I always remember a fellow who came to stay with us at the English L'Abri. He was not a Christian, and he said to me one evening in exasperation, "I cannot believe you people! On the one hand there seems to be a really serious and sophisticated attempt to deal earnestly and extremely well with most difficult and philosophical questions that all human beings ask. At the same time there is this great naiveté about the early chapters of Genesis. How can you possibly hold both of these things together?" He was implying that nobody in this century believed in the early chapters of Genesis any longer. My response to him was that the two are absolutely related together. The only way I was able to answer his questions about who

we are as human beings and the problem of evil is by taking Genesis 1-11 seriously. If I did not, I would not even attempt to answer his questions in those areas. At that point we really began to communicate.

The point that Schaeffer goes on to make is that in the evangelical community, more and more sections of Scripture begin to be regarded as what he called culturally conditioned. In volume four of *The Complete Works in The Great Evangelical Disaster*, he speaks about this. He says, "Those weakening the Bible in the area of history do so by saying these things in the Bible are culturally oriented. That is, in places where the Bible speaks of history, it only shows forth views held by the culture and the day in which that portion of the Bible was written. For example, when Genesis and Paul affirm, as they clearly do, that Eve came from Adam, this is said to be only borrowed from the general cultural views of the day in which these books were written. Thus, not just the first 11 chapters of Genesis, but the New Testament is seen to be relative instead of absolute."

Let me give an illustration of this. One British evangelical writer named John Goldingay says people in the Bible, including Christ, always speak from what he calls the phenomenological viewpoint. He means that Jesus simply spoke from within the culture of His day. Therefore what He says in any area is not necessarily to be taken as the truth. Instead it tells us about the culture in which He lived.

An example he gives is where Jesus quotes from Psalm 110. Psalm 110 is one of the Messianic psalms, and it is very commonly quoted and referred to in the New Testament. It says, "The LORD says to my Lord, sit at my right hand." This is also the psalm that goes on to speak about the Messiah as a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. This passage is quoted various times in the New Testament. It is quoted by Jesus Himself in Matthew 22:41: "While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 'What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?' 'The son of David,' they replied. He said to them, 'How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him "Lord"? For he says, "The LORD says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." If then David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?'" Goldingay applies the phenomenological principle to this passage of Scripture. He says, "Jesus, for the purposes of discourse with the Jews, is accepting the notion, one, that David wrote Psalm 110, two, that Psalm 110 was a Messianic psalm, prophesying that there would be a Messiah, and, thirdly, that the Messiah was descended from David. These are simply the views of the culture in which Jesus was speaking, which He accommodates to." He might call that Jesus' cultural orientation, accommodation to the day, or Jesus speaking from within His moment, from this phenomenological perspective. He goes on, "In actual fact, we know that Psalm 110 was not written by David. It was written very much later, sometime after the fourth century BC. Secondly, we know that this was not a psalm about a messiah originally. It was a psalm for the enthronement of a king of Judah." In other words, Jesus cannot be understood to claim that David spoke these words or that David really expected a messiah in this kind of way at that time.

That is how this phenomenological principle is applied to the biblical text. The biblical writers are seen to speak within the perspective of their day, and therefore their statements cannot be used to say that it is historical truth. You can do that with anything. James Dunn, in *New Testament Interpretation*, says that Paul, when he writes his Adam Christology in Romans, does not tell us anything historical. He simply uses a cultural perspective or understanding to communicate to us about Jesus Christ. You could say the same with Jesus' statements about Noah and the flood, Jonah, or any of those kinds of statements.

The fundamental problem with this is that it is difficult to know where to draw the line. Howard Marshall himself, in a lecture I heard him give, said that the angels and demons in the New Testament could not be taken as literally existing. He said that Jesus spoke about angels and demons simply because He lived in a moment in which people believed that angels and demons exist. The angels and

demons actually came into the thinking of the Jews during the time of the exile. They came from the Persians and the Babylonians into the Jewish theology. They were not there before. He says when we read the New Testament and see Jesus being tempted by Satan or hear Him speak about angels, we must see the angels as simply symbols for the power and love of God and the demons as symbols for the powers of evil in the world. Howard Marshall is an evangelical theologian who takes that further, to actually apply to something much bigger. It makes you ask, "Why stop there?" The radical liberal would go much further, and he would say, "When Paul speaks about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he simply speaks as a Pharisee. He speaks from the phenomenological perspective and from the viewpoint of his culture. He does not intend for us to think for a moment that the resurrection actually took place. He speaks about the resurrection because as a Pharisee that was the way he expressed himself. He does not say anything in the area of history." Everything then gets put up into some kind of upper story.

Sadly, evangelical Christianity is widely affected by this kind of accommodation. For example, the book *Evangelicalism, The Coming Generation*, is written by an evangelical sociologist named James Davidson Hunter. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) and teaches at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. He went out and did research in many evangelical colleges and seminaries, interviewing the students about what they believed about the nature of the Bible, its truthfulness in various areas, morality, and other issues. It is very distressing to read that book, because you see a dramatic slippage in terms of the nature of the biblical text, how much of it one can regard as true, what kind of morality there is, and what theology one ought to have. It is not just on minor issues but on quite serious issues, too. I would recommend that book to you. When he wrote that book just a couple years ago, it was extremely well received by the secular press, because he aimed it in two directions. He aimed it at his secular colleagues in the world of sociology to encourage them to take evangelical scholarship and the evangelical world more seriously rather than just dismiss it out of hand. They responded that way. He also aimed it at the evangelical world to ask them if they understood where they were headed at the present time if they looked at their educational establishments. It was received with a great deal of distress and criticism among evangelicals. Instead of being alarmed and pausing to think about what was being taught in colleges and universities, people were very upset. They said he was crying wolf, it was not true, and it could not be real. Other evangelicals very heavily criticized him, but I think it is because he touched a sore point. Sadly, Schaeffer's fear is a very real one. That is why *The Great Evangelical Disaster* was his last book. He had a burning passion to get that book written and published before he died, because he was so concerned about what was happening in the evangelical world and about the dramatic shift in ideas.

Let me give one illustration of this. I remember reading a book 20 years ago by a North American evangelical who attacked the notion of propositional revelation. I remember giving a lecture in which I asked questions about this guy's ideas. People said that I was being unnecessarily alarmed about what he said. He also said a lot of exciting things about the nature of biblical language. But I just heard last week that this particular man now argues for what is called inclusive language. He says that we all ought to be calling God "mother." That is quite a movement in one person's own life in a few short years. In other words, he says all the language in Scripture about God is simply cultural language. Therefore we ought to have inclusive liturgies and biblical text where we say, "Our mother, who art in heaven." This is someone who, 20 years ago, was just beginning to question the notion of propositional revelation. He did not at all make it clear what he meant by that in terms of where it would go.

A fourth consequence that Schaeffer stresses will result from accommodation is the drift from accepting that the Bible says anything in the area of what Schaeffer calls the cosmos. There is a denial that the Bible makes any statements that apply to science. In particular, this has to do with the question of the origin of life, the universe, and human existence. Schaeffer's words on Genesis 1-11 are particularly

appropriate, and they come from page 100 in *The God Who is There* in volume one of *The Complete Works*. He says, “God has also set man in the universe, which the Scriptures themselves say speaks of this God. What sense would it make for God to give His in the book that was wrong concerning the universe? It is plain that from the viewpoint of the Scriptures there is a unity over the whole field of knowledge. God has spoken, in a linguistic propositional form, truth concerning Himself, truth concerning man, truth concerning history, and truth concerning the universe.” What the Bible says about the world must be seen to be true. Where we begin to see the existential methodology infiltrating the evangelical camp, there will be a reluctance to acknowledge that the Bible speaks at all in the areas in which science touches.

I remember we had a leading evangelical physicist in England who coined the phrase “complementarity.” He used this to describe what he saw to be the relationship between the Bible and science. He said that Genesis speaks theologically, and science speaks scientifically. The two do not touch the same issues, but they are simply complementary truths. Schaeffer’s response to that was that he had heard this thing before from the existentialists. They said that there were two different levels of truth. Some might reply that he was simply being an alarmist. They might say, “Clearly Genesis 1-11 is not a scientific textbook and should not be read as such.” Schaeffer would have agreed that it is not a scientific textbook, and it does not set out to be one. But it does speak in the area of the cosmos and its origin. It speaks in ways that cannot be set aside or dismissed as a different kind of truth. He speaks about this in *The Great Evangelical Disaster* on page 336 and says people make a dichotomy or divide the Bible into two halves. Quoting someone else, Schaeffer says, “The inerrancy of Scripture must not be understood to mean that ‘the Bible is making statements about such non-revelational matters as geology, meteorology, cosmology, botany, astrology, or geography.’” The person Schaeffer quoted said that the Bible speaks in a completely different area from science, and it says nothing that touches those areas.

We have to consider what this means in practice. It might seem to be harmless as long as the person stays in his or her laboratory and accepts what secular science says in this area but holds on to his or her faith. Unfortunately, it begins to affect things, though. Take, for example, the neuro-physicist who coined the “complementarity” phrase in England. Later I was involved in a series of discussions with the Christian Medical Fellowship in England over the issue of abortion. Those who were pro-abortion brought this man forward as the primary thinker to say that the Bible had nothing whatsoever to say with regard to the issue of life in the womb. He said we must regard all the statements in the psalms and elsewhere in Scripture as purely theological statements about God’s relationship with people. God knew David would be His before he was born, but the Scriptures tell us nothing scientifically about the nature of life in the womb. These speak into completely different areas. He went on to argue that, from a scientific point of view, there is no difference between a fetus and human hair. The one can be cut off just as easily as the other can be cut off. His point was that nothing the Bible says about life before birth can be regarded as having any force when we discuss the issue of whether abortion is right or wrong. We are completely in the hands of science at that point. He would argue that to say that human beings are the image of God had no bearing whatsoever on how we value the unborn baby. From a scientific point of view, we can only regard people as human when they start using language, making choices, and expressing love. Our theological statement that human beings are made in the image of God cannot be applied to a fetus in the womb.

That is one example of how this kind of view is applied. Another example is of how you slip from one generation to the next. We had a girl come to stay with us whose father was a leading evangelical scientist. This guy was a physicist in the area of astrophysics. She came to us and said her dad thinks that Genesis makes no statements whatsoever in the area of science. It simply speaks within the

perspective of its culture. It tells stories that were part of the coinage of the Middle East. It does not make statements about truth in the area of the cosmos at all. She said that if she understands her father correctly, then it is completely consistent for her to say that what Paul says about the substitutionary atonement is also cultural. When Paul describes Jesus as dying as a substitute for our sins, he simply speaks as a Pharisee and a Jew. It is not necessary at all to understand the death of Christ in that way. That is simply a cultural perspective. She saw that as being perfectly consistent with her father's position, though he would not have agreed. At that point he was solidly committed to substitutionary atonement. She saw the two things as being absolutely related to each other.

One has to say that she was correct. If you start playing fast and loose with one section of the biblical text, there is no way you can stand against someone applying that same fastness and looseness in some other area. That is the fourth area, denying that the Bible makes statements that must be regarded as true in the area of science as well as history.