

## **Living Before God in All of Life**

We were speaking in our class about the need to keep unity of thought. This is clearly one of the central emphases of Schaeffer's entire ministry. One might term it an insistence on living before God in all of life rather than having this split view of reality. That insistence on living before God in all of life obviously affected him on a personal level. We can see this in the way L'Abri was set up and the way as a ministry it was based on prayer and dependence on God. It also affected the way he tried to think about every issue that arose. Today I want to look at what he had to say on the issue of the environment, about ecology and pollution.

Schaeffer wrote his little book, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, in 1970, quite a long time before most Christians even began to think about this issue. In fact, this was before there was even much thinking about this in the general culture. This, I think, was simply an illustration of his desire to really live under the Word of God in every understanding. The way L'Abri was structured, people were free to raise any question at all. Nothing was off limits. Thus people could come, for example, and raise questions about the environment and the Christian's attitude toward the environment and not expect to be dismissed out of hand. I would say that even today with this issue of the environment, the response of most Christians is still to simply dismiss it because it is raised by people who are in the left-wing politically or people who are liberal in their understanding. And today in particular, this issue is dismissed by many Christians because the people who raise it are "New Age people" very often. For example, I know a pastor who got into enormous trouble because he was a member of the Sierra Club and Green Peace. These are both environmental organizations, and of course many of their members are touched by New Age ideas. But he was under enormous stress and experienced tremendous difficulty with his congregation, a fairly open congregation, simply because of this. I think we really need to learn a lesson from Schaeffer at this point. It is not enough to ask, "Who else is saying this? Oh, I do not like them or agree with them. Therefore I will not think about it" or to condemn something by association. Rather, we should try to examine the issue itself and ask, "What does Scripture have to say about this?" That is what Schaeffer attempted to do with this issue of the environment. He asked, "What does Scripture say about this?" because Scripture speaks to every area of life.

What is interesting, I think, when one reads *Pollution and the Death of Man*, is that Schaeffer recognized even in 1970, before the term "New Age" had become popular and before most Christians were aware that there was a growing influence of Eastern thought, that some of the people who were trying to resolve the problems of the environment were appealing to pantheism as the solution to the problem. And he recognized that they were criticizing Christianity as the cause of the problem. For example, the two people he writes about in particular in the book, Lynn White and Richard Meins, both see orthodox Christianity as the reason for the destruction done to nature and the earth. They feel it is the biblical teaching that man has dominion over nature that gives rise to the destruction of the environment. Lynn White writes (as quoted in the appendix of *Pollution and the Death of Man*), "In antiquity, every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to man but were very unlike man. Centaurs, fawns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." White suggests that all pagan religion has at its heart a kind of unity of man with nature and invests nature with a kind of spiritual reality and power and that this set a limit on the exploitation of nature. Christianity, he said, in denouncing that pagan animism, opened the door to the destruction of the environment.

There all kinds of things one could say in response to that. But I think one of the things that needs to be recognized and is not usually recognized by people who put forward this point of view—because it is often put forward—is that this kind of animism actually prevents any kind of development at all. I think I have spoken to you before about a friend of mine who works in Kenya. He is working among a people who will never do anything differently because they are terrified of offending the spirits of the trees, the ground, the water, their ancestors, and so on. They are bound in total subjection to nature. They have no understanding at all of the possibility of dominion over nature in any sense or the improvement of the human condition. But this idea that Christianity is the source of our environmental problems is very widespread today. And when Schaeffer pointed this out in 1970, it was before that criticism was being very widely made. But now you will find it made everywhere. If you read New Age literature, for example, that criticism is made over and over again.

Some friends of mine went to a conference on the environment at which the Dalai Lama and other people were speaking. The Christian representative there turned out to be a feminist deconstructionist theologian. Where everybody else, the Muslim, the Dalai Lama, the Hindu, and so on disclaimed any responsibility for the environmental crisis and suggested some ways forward, the Christian representative simply claimed responsibility. She said it was precisely because Christianity had proclaimed the God who is transcendent over nature that the door had been opened to the destruction of the environment. She then went on to say that in order to have any kind of answer to the environmental problems, Christianity needed to change its “metaphors.” Notice that she said Christianity needed to change its “metaphors,” not its truth, because she did not believe that even that traditional understanding of God was true in any sense but rather was simply an unhelpful metaphor. And now, she suggested, we need to find some new metaphors for God and our relationship with God that will enable us to have a constructive, rather than destructive, relationship to nature. But you will find, as I said earlier, in much New Age literature, the accusation that Christianity is really the cause of our problems in the environment. And only through accepting some form of pantheism, some form of complete identification of humanity with nature, will there be any kind of answer to this problem at all—only by accepting that identity of nature and the human race.

Now, I think there are several responses one can make to that and that Schaeffer makes in the course of his book. One is that if you declare that everything is one, you have no basis at all to make any final distinction between human beings and nature. Clearly you lose the possibility of being able to regard human beings as distinct in any way. It is interesting that people have consciously moved in that direction. If you read anything by Peter Singer, who is the major thinker behind the animal liberation movement, he accuses Christians and others who affirm the uniqueness of the human race of speciesism. That is the new word of the animal liberation movement. We are no longer guilty simply of class distinction, racism, chauvinism, and so on, but now we are guilty of speciesism if we speak of the superiority or the uniqueness of the human race in any way. This leads Singer to the view, quite naturally, that healthy dogs and pigs have more value than handicapped children and that handicapped children should simply be disposed of as we would dispose of a handicapped pig or dog. This also leads him to the view that we should not be bothered about famine problems in Ethiopia or elsewhere because there are plenty of human beings. We should be devoting our energies to saving snails or whales or anything else that may be in danger of extinction, but the human race certainly is not. Thus we should not really concern ourselves with problems of famines or anything like that. Thus if you adopt a pantheistic view, that there is a fundamental unity between the human race and nature, you are left without being able to make any basis for final distinction between people and nature or giving them any more respect.

The second problem of a pantheistic approach to nature as if this were the answer to environmental problems, to recognize that from a pantheistic view there is no basis for speaking about abnormality in nature. There is no notion of an historical fall that has changed nature. Nature as it is now is expressive of God. It may sound pleasant to say that nature is perfectly good and fine—and this leads, in fact, to all kinds of romanticism in some writings. I remember reading an essay, for example, in *National Geographic* several years ago that suggested that there was not one single case in history of wolves or any other animals like that ever attacking human beings and that this was just stories. The same essay suggested that there was no historical evidence either that there had ever been any human cannibalism. You can end up with a kind of extraordinary lack of realism about the problems that are in nature and the cruelty there is in nature, a sort of romanticism about nature itself.

But there is a much more fundamental problem. That is, if nature in its present form is identified with God, it has to be seen as normal, as divine in everything that it does. Take, for example, the possibility of an earthquake. How can I fight an earthquake? Why should I resist an earthquake? Why should I consider an earthquake as something to be feared if in fact nature is divine, if God is expressed in human beings, trees, animals, plants, the sky, and in the functions of nature? Can I regard an earthquake as in any way wrong? Death, whether the death of an individual or the destruction of massive parts of the environment, let us say by an earthquake, or the reordering of them, would simply be an expression of divinity in nature. That is the issue, of course, that Albert Camus wrestles with in his book, *The Plague*—how can one fight against the plague if in fact everything that is is simply of God or of the will of God? The plague itself becomes the way God expresses Himself at this moment in time.

So pantheism gives one no basis whatsoever to declare that anything that takes place in nature is wrong, whether it is forest fires, earthquakes, tidal waves, tornadoes, or whatever. It is very interesting that at the very end of Shirley MacLaine's book, *Out on a Limb*, she actually expresses this. She is flying in an airplane, and the airplane is being buffeted by a tremendous storm. She says that at first she was terrified. But then she thought, "Well, what if it does crash? I am part of the storm, the storm and I are one. I will just carry on in another form. Ultimately, fundamentally, the storm and I are not distinct in any way. I do not need, therefore, to fear the storm. If I die, if the plane crashes, nature will just carry on. I will carry on, simply in a different form, another aspect of nature." Now, I do not think Shirley MacLaine then thinks that through to think what that would mean in practice. But that idea of recognizing everything that is as normal is an inevitable consequence of any kind of pantheistic thinking.

It has been asked, would we have had earthquakes and tornadoes if there had not been a fall? That is a difficult question to answer. Certainly the Scripture teaches us that the whole of nature has changed because of the Fall. That is very clear. You can think of Paul's statement in Romans 8. He says that the whole creation is subjected to vanity now because of human sin. What exactly that means, I think, is difficult to say. I do not think it is appropriate, as some creationists have done, to suggest that the death of animals is a consequence of the Fall. I do not think that necessarily follows as well. This is because the word "death" in Scripture is used primarily and fundamentally of human beings. Its primary meaning is our alienation from God, a part of which has its consequence in physical death for us. Thus the physical death of human beings is certainly a consequence of the Fall. But the heart of death, biblically, is separation from God. That is why the Scripture speaks about the second death, which is not another form of physical dying but is permanent alienation from God. I think it is inappropriate to take what death means for human beings and then to say that the death of anything else in nature is necessarily a consequence of the Fall. Clearly, trees and plants die as a part of their natural cycle. Trees drop their leaves in the fall, and annual flowers die and drop their seeds. I do not think anyone would regard that as unnatural or abnormal. Nor do I see that it is necessary to regard the death of animals as abnormal or

unnatural. They were not created for an eternal relationship with God, as human beings were. Human beings are physical, spiritual creatures created for eternity, eternally knowing, loving, and enjoying God. Animals are not created for the same kind of relationship with God. To read into Genesis 3 the death of animals as a result of the Fall is going far beyond the evidence that is there.

But with regard to earthquakes and tornadoes and things, I think we would have to say that something that destructive that clearly would have destroyed people and their environment must be a consequence of the Fall. Nature itself has clearly been damaged. Now, I cannot spell out what that means exactly, because Scripture does not. I do not think it is possible to imagine, for example, the kind of earthquake that took place in San Francisco recently or that took place here in Saint Louis in the early 1800s when the river flowed backward for two or three days. It was an enormous earthquake. If we had one like that now, every building would be totally destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people would die. One clearly cannot imagine something like that having that kind of effect on humanity taking place before the Fall. But I think we have to be careful not to go beyond the data that Scripture gives us in terms of saying what those consequences are. We do not know what un-fallen nature would be like, because we have never seen it. What we do know is what Isaiah looks forward to at the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, that there will no longer be any hurt or destruction, that humanity will be completely safe on the earth. That is what he looks forward to.

I think we have to say that everything in terms of the relationships of animals with one another has changed. There are now animals that kill simply for pleasure. I do not regard the death of animals as a result of the Fall, but certainly the violence there is in nature now—what Schaeffer calls “nature red in tooth and claw” in *Pollution and the Death of Man*—I think we have to see this as a consequence of the Fall. And C. S. Lewis is very interesting on this issue. If you read his book, *Out of the Silent Planet*, there he has a nature that has power and force in it, and even death among animals, but in an un-fallen context.

I think one of the other problems one gets in this movement toward either pagan animism or pantheism is a kind of romanticism about the past. I have read several articles, for example, that describe how Native Americans, American Indians, had a completely harmonious relationship with nature here on the North American continent. And it was only as people came from Europe with a Christian understanding of nature that such damage was wreaked on the environment. It is suggested that Indians lived for thousands of years in total harmony with nature here, and it was only when the Europeans came that animal species began to be destroyed, like the buffalo and the passenger pigeon, for example. Now, of course, there is no way one would want to defend the destruction of passenger pigeons or buffaloes. However, there is no doubt that Native Americans had previously destroyed many, many species. There are vast pits of animal bones from animals that that became extinct very long ago that are marked with human weapons, spear cuts, etc. It just simply is romantic and naïve to suggest that any human beings have ever lived in total harmony with nature. Human beings themselves are sinful, and that is expressed in man’s relationship with nature, just as it is in our relationship with one another.

Now, let us go on to look at what Scripture has to say about our relationship with nature. I will summarize some of the points Schaeffer makes but also pull them together to put them into some sort of orderly form and add a few points that he does not make explicitly but that are implicit in his argument.

First, let us look at God’s relationship to nature biblically. I want to make several points here. First of all, God is clearly spoken of as the creator of everything, of the heavens and earth and everything in them. And everything that exists declares that it has indeed been created. You can think of the words of Psalm 19 or Romans 1:20. Scripture uniformly speaks of the world, the whole world, everything in

nature, as created by the word of God. God brought it into being by speaking it into being. Second, God sustains everything in existence. We do not live in a clockwork universe that simply runs by itself. Christ upholds the universe by the word of His power. Without God's constant sustaining, things would fall apart; He orders them and upholds them. What are called the laws of nature are simply descriptions of the way God Himself upholds created reality. Third, God declares that His creation is good. You can think of the repeated words of Genesis 1. And this is true before humanity is created. In other words, nature or creation has its own value independently of human beings. God delights in nature for its own sake. It does not have value simply because it is useful to us; rather, it has value in and of itself as part of God's creation. God delights in His creation and cares for it. You can think of repeated statements in Psalms, such as Psalm 104, and in the New Testament, where Jesus speaks of how God cares for sparrows and for the lilies of the field.

Fourth, there is now a curse, a judgment on the earth, on nature because of human sin. That judgment takes two forms biblically. There is a general judgment so that the whole of creation is under a curse—is subjected to vanity, as Paul expresses it in Romans 8:20-22—because of the original sin. But there are also explicit, ongoing, particular judgments of God that affect nature because of human sin. You can think, for example, of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which turned that whole area into a salty plain on which almost nothing could grow or live. The flood would be another example.

Fifth, God has made a covenant between Himself and all of created reality. When you read the account of the covenant in Genesis 9:12-17, it is very important to notice that it is not only a covenant between God, Noah, and his descendants. The text repeatedly states that God has made a covenant between Himself and all of life, the whole of life, every creature that lives in the sea and on the earth and that flies in the air. God has made His covenant with all of nature, not only with the human race, the covenant that He will never again destroy the world during this age. And the rainbow, then, is the sign of that covenant. This, then, is still God's world after the Fall. He still cares for it, and He has a covenant with it.

The sixth point is that there will be a restoration one day of nature, of creation. We look forward to a day when the curse will be removed from nature. The work of Christ, the redemption of Christ, applies not only to humanity, but also to our environment, to nature itself. That is very important to notice. If God has such a concern for nature around us, in terms of caring for it, making a covenant with it, and promising its ultimate redemption, that should say something to us, too, about the way we should care for nature. Our redemption now ought to work itself out in the way we treat nature, just as it should work itself out in the way we treat one another.

Let us turn, second, to our relationship to nature, our human relationship to nature. Point one: we have been called to have dominion over nature. We are given mastery over nature. Genesis 1:27-28 says this. And the words that are used there in Genesis 1 are very strong words: "to rule" and "to subdue." These are very strong words. And Psalm 8:3-8 expresses the same point—that God has set us over everything on this earth. He has indeed made everything subject to us (Psalm 8:3-8). Yet, second, it is important to remember that this is God's earth. We have no absolute ownership. It is not ours. Our dominion is to be expressed under God. There is a quite extraordinary statement in Leviticus 25:23 where the Israelites are told that they are to regard themselves as aliens and tenants on the land because it is God's land and not ultimately theirs. God is the real owner of the earth. We are simply tenants and even aliens in comparison with Him. That is very important because it means we do not have absolute ownership.

Third, we also are creatures. Genesis 9:12-17 brings this out very strongly. God makes a covenant with all of reality, with humanity and with the rest of life. Schaeffer uses the expression from a song by The

Doors, speaking of nature as our fair sister. That is quite appropriate biblically. Remember, he uses his little picture of the infinite, personal God. But on the side of God's infinity, there is an absolute chasm between God and man, animals and plants. On the side of personality, the chasm comes not between God and man but between man and everything else because we are like God, we are persons like him.

Now, this is very important because it gives us a basis both for affirming human distinctiveness, human uniqueness from creation—we are made in the image of God, and animals and plants are not—and it also tells us that we are creatures like the rest of reality. Therefore it is appropriate for us to respect the rest of creation as fellow creatures, creatures with whom God has also made His covenant. That brings me to point number four. While Genesis 1 uses these very strong words for dominion, Genesis 2:15 uses quite different words to describe our relationship to nature. The two Hebrew words there are *ebed*, which is to serve—that is, we are servants of nature, of creation—and *shema*, which is to care for or preserve, protect, keep. Thus while we are given dominion over nature, that dominion is as stewards who are called to preserve nature and to serve it, not to destroy it or abuse it, but to keep it and pass it on the better for our keeping and not the worse for our keeping.

The fifth point is that the earth is damaged by our sin. As I mentioned before, there is a direct relationship not only between original sin and the curse but between continuing sin and the judgment of God. There are a couple of remarkable passages from the prophets on this. Let me read to you Hosea 4:1-3. Listen to this:

Hear the word of the LORD, you Israelites,  
 because the LORD has a charge to bring  
 against you who live in the land:  
 “There is no faithfulness, no love,  
 no acknowledgment of God in the land.  
 There is only cursing, lying and murder,  
 stealing and adultery;  
 they break all bounds,  
 and bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
 Because of this the land mourns,  
 and all who live in it waste away;  
 the beasts of the field and the birds of the air  
 and the fish of the sea are dying.

Isaiah 24 makes exactly the same point. Isaiah 24:4-5 says, “The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers. The earth is defiled by its people. They have disobeyed the laws and violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth.” It goes on to say, “The new wine dries up and the vine withers.” Now, the point of these passages is that there is an ongoing relationship between human sin and the destruction of the environment. The more sinful a culture is, the more its environment will be destroyed.

Sixth, there is the command that we are not to worship nature. Idolatry, the worship of nature, is rejected everywhere in Scripture. It is rejected in the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 4:15-19), in Romans 1:21-ff. The pantheism and worship of nature that is unfortunately so much a part of some of the environmental movement today is clearly forbidden by God. But also, it will not produce what it wants to because it is fundamentally sinful at its heart and will only bring destruction, not only in relationship with God but in every other way as well, ultimately.

Seventh, God provides for us, for our food, and yet also for all of the creatures. When we see God's care for us each day and thank Him for providing our daily bread, we need to also remember that the same Lord is providing for and caring for everything else. It is interesting how often the psalms tie these themes together. Psalm 104:10-15 and Psalm 145:14-18 both tie together God's care for the rest of created reality and His care for us. Again, this underlines the unity we have with nature in the proper sense of the word.

Eighth, we are encouraged by Scripture to develop the earth, not simply to keep it as it is. When God gives the Israelites the land of Palestine in Deuteronomy 8:7-9, He tells them that as well as having fields they can plant any trees they can take the fruit of. He has also made it in such a way that they can dig copper and iron from its hills. The Bible is certainly in favor of the development of the environment. But again, it has to be developed with respect.

And then finally, there is this emphasis in Scripture on a particular care for created things. Proverbs 12:10 sums it up by saying, "A righteous man cares for his animals." The Mosaic Law is very interesting because it has all sorts of provisions that demonstrate God's command to us to consider the needs of the creatures around us. For example, in the sabbatical year the people are told not only that the poor and the stranger can gather food from the fields, but that the wild animals may as well (Exodus 23:10-12). God demands that the land itself be given rest every seventh year. And when the Israelites fail to do that because of their greed, He gives the land an enforced rest for 70 years by taking the people out of the land. That in fact is stated in the Law of Moses. In Leviticus 25:4 and 26:34-35, God tells them that if they do not give the land its rest, He will take them from it that it may have an enforced rest. Or you can think of the commandment in Deuteronomy 25:4: "Do not muzzle the ox when it is treading out the grain." In other words, we have to be concerned for the animals and not just for profit. Also, Deuteronomy 22:6-7 is a remarkable passage that says, "If you take the eggs or the young from a nest, do not take the mother bird as well." Why? God says, "So that you will live long in the land the LORD your God has given you." In other words, if you abuse your environment, God will take the land away from you and shorten your life on it. But fundamentally, what the Israelites were to see in their whole understanding of the ownership of land in Israel was that the individual did not own the land. It was ultimately God's land. But it was also the land for future generations. Thus stewardship is the biblical model. The faithful Israelite had to keep that land and pass it on to the next generation. That was his responsibility; he was a steward rather than an absolute owner. There is no biblical basis for the exploitation or the unthinking destruction of the environment. The Bible does certainly teach dominion and development. And development will transform a landscape. But it has to be done in the context of stewardship and in the context of respect of the creation because it is God's creation.

Someone has mentioned that we do not see the church doing anything or doing very little in line with this teaching. While we may not blame the Bible for environmental destruction, the church certainly has not done much to stop it. I think that is certainly true. There have been very few books written by Christians on this subject, though there are a couple of good ones. There is a book called *Bent World* by Ron Elsdon, and there are a couple of others. But there has not been much attention to this issue in the church. I know a few Christians who are working in this area. For example, I have a friend, an Englishman, who works in Portugal on a project they have started there that is concerned for the preservation of the environment. There are a few Christians here and there, I know a few who have gone into the science of ecology precisely because they see a calling as believers to do something in this area. I would say that it is a proper criticism to make of the church at the present time. Again, I think much of it is a reaction because quite a few of the people involved in the environmental movement are influenced by New Age ideas. And therefore many Christians immediately run in the other direction rather than ask, "What is right here?" We should be challenged by this. Instead, we have an impulsive reaction. As

soon as we see someone whose ideas we do not agree with, instead of thinking about what they are saying, we simply run away. This is a very serious problem in terms of the church's response on many issues. We had the same response a few years ago. Whenever anyone would raise the issue of social justice in any context, or poverty, or racism, people would immediately say, "You are a Marxist!" They would make that accusation simply because you were talking about those issues. I remember a friend of mine when I was here as a student at seminary who he was a pastor of a church a few miles away. He preached a sermon from 1 John 4 on the need to love one another. Some of the members of his congregation came to him afterward and said, "That is a liberal sermon." This is just ridiculous, and it is the same kind of impulsive response. Just because someone you do not like, who is really wrong, has said these things, you think you cannot say them yourself. This is just foolishness.

I think there is a more fundamental problem, though, were the church is concerned. That is that we have inherited a view of the environment from the end of the eighteenth century onward where the earth is simply seen as something to be used by human beings. Any sense of stewardship under God has been completely lost. I think the same is true with regard to capitalism. Since the end of the eighteenth century, it has been set free from any sense of obligation to God or to one's neighbors, which any kind of economic enterprise has to be carried on with as far as the Christian is concerned. Our bottom line is never profit; it is obedience to God and righteousness, according to His commandments, and care for one's neighbor. Capitalism in general has been set free from any sense of obligation to God or one's neighbor and regarded simply as my chance to make what I can for myself. In the same way, our use of the environment has been set free from any sense of obligation to God and to our environment. It is regarded now as simply something there for our benefit and use. It is our servant to be dominated and abused by us. Therefore I think it is certainly true that the church has not sufficiently distanced itself from or challenged much of what has happened under industrialization and modernization, which has so often meant a radical abuse of the environment. And we certainly need to wake up there because we are called always to be faithful to God's Word. I mean, I do not think I have ever heard anyone except Schaeffer preach a sermon or give a lecture on this subject. I know there are Christians who do, but I have never heard one apart from Schaeffer. I think this is a tremendous challenge to us to really submit ourselves to Scripture. If we draw the division from the last lesson, what we say in effect is, "Yes, the Bible has authority," but then we put the treatment of nature down in the lower story, and the two never touch each other. We really have to be committed to bringing our understanding of everything in subjection to the Word of God.

There is an enormous amount of material in Scripture on this subject if you go and look. I just quoted a dozen passages to you, but on these two sheets of paper I have on God's relationship to nature and our relationship to nature about 50 passages from Scripture. And there are far more than that, even that you could find in five minutes if you sit down to look and see what it says and then pull the material into some kind of orderly form.