

UNIT ONE: THE HUMAN SITUATION

SESSION ONE: WHAT, WHO, WHY, AND HOW DO WE KNOW?

Summary of the First Session

The Alien's Question: Who are you?

Using the imaginary scientist from another planet sent to earth to study us, we saw that *what we are* can be described in various ways. We can be analyzed chemically, biologically, psychologically, and sociologically. Our talents, skills, and achievements can be assessed (as can our weaknesses and failures). Our genetics can be mapped. Our personal histories can be recorded and documented. The imaginary alien, however, had no understanding of our pronoun, "who." The first task of the group was to find ways to answer the question, "Who are you?"

Most regular confirmation classes, where the students are seventh and eighth graders, answer the question, "Who are you?" by giving their names, and so did the adult group, but not right away. First, someone spoke of a personal history of experiences, relationships, and achievements that distinguished her from all other people. I find this insight very helpful in realizing personal identity. Others may be able to do what I do (and may do it better), but no one else has lived the life I have lived; mine is unique and cannot be repeated. Then, we got to the matter of personal names.

We quickly saw that our personal names relate us to other people. We do not usually name ourselves; our parents give us our names – the last name by heredity, the "given names" by their choice. The very names which identify us as individuals relate us to other people in our families. We answer the question, "Who are you?" by relating ourselves to other people. I am someone's son, someone's brother, someone's father, someone's husband, someone's pastor, someone's friend, and someone's teacher. We saw, also, that negative relationships become part of *who we are*: I may also be someone's enemy or rival. Even stranger can be a name that identifies me to certain people and can affect my life. No one can have a personal identity by himself or herself, without relation to other people. Completely on our own, without even memories of other people, we would be animals, not true human beings and certainly not persons. The Bible's declaration, "It is not good for the human being to be alone," is profound. The human being cannot stand alone and be a person.

The Disturbing Question: Can you be replaced?

The group of adults very quickly realized the answer is both "Yes" and "No." In terms of function, each of us can be replaced: someone else can do the job, whatever the job may be. Even if I could be the best in the world at something, I would not be able to maintain that distinction for

very long. Someone else can play my position, do my part of the project, or teach my class. In that sense, we are all replaceable.

As soon as the question becomes personal, however, I am no longer replaceable. Love and friendship do not accept substitutions. Even when a spouse dies and the surviving spouse remarries, the new spouse is not simply a replacement and, often, is not regarded as a replacement at all. One love or friendship does not cancel another. I suspect many widows and widowers marry each other knowing this new marriage is not the same as their first marriages, especially not if their first marriages were good. They love each other, but not necessarily on the same level. So, the new marriage is just that – something new and different.

As a person, you have a variety of talents, skills, accomplishments, and experiences, but you are more than the sum of them. You also have inabilities, weaknesses, shortcomings, failures, and sins. Even if you could produce a complete balance sheet of the positive and negative in your life, the result would still not be a full assessment of you. Ultimately, you are assessed by love because ultimately you are assessed by the God who loves you. Jesus and the Bible insist that you are also assessed daily by love on its own terms. These *terms of love* are what we call “grace,” and they are God’s terms of assessment. To God, you are not a *what* but always a *who* – a person God loves. Knowing ourselves and each other in terms of the pronoun *who* is crucial to understanding our faith and to finding life. Without the word “who,” we will never understand the promise of life or the promise of resurrection.

Keeping Perspective and Balance

Is love enough? Can I be content with nothing more to say of myself and my life than this: that I am loved? No, we are designed by our Creator to learn, grow, and achieve. We are humanity the builder, the thinker, the artist, the engineer and architect, the writer, the developer, the social planner, the politician, the teacher, and much more. So, the “terms of love” are not the whole of life but, rather, the context for life within the realm of God’s grace. Within that context, we “live and move and have our being.” We develop our lives in relationships, achievements, studies or training, hopes, and plans. We win and lose. We succeed to some degree and fail to some degree. We also experience redemption within the context of life: that is, our failures and sins can be, not only forgiven, but transformed into lessons or positive influences grace can use to make us stronger, wiser, and more compassionate. Redemption never justifies the wrong done to us or the wrong we did; it takes the wrong, picks up the pieces, and brings a life-giving effect out of the circumstances that were, in themselves, destructive to life. Redemption is the work of God, not just ultimately, but daily within the context of actual human life. Of course, our ultimate redemption matters; without it, all the redemptions along the way would be lost and would, finally, count for nothing. If, however, we think only of ultimate redemption, our lives lose their present value, and human history is robbed of its significance. Then, only heaven matters to us, and earth is lost. Such devaluation of earthly life is unbiblical and unfaithful.

The Question of Our Sources: How do we know God?

The New Testament and the Christian church agree on the primary answer to this question: we know God in and through **Jesus**. He is the Word of God made flesh who has lived among us. To have seen him is to have seen the Father. “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being. . . .” (The Letter to the Hebrews) Our faith is in him. He is the way to God and the living truth of God (John 14). To be valid, any other way of knowing God must, in some way, bear witness to him or to the truth he embodies. It does not necessarily need to name him, but it needs to be true to him (whether it knows it or not).

Our attempts to answer questions (sometimes agonizing questions) about God’s will must also be made with reference to the truth of God as we find it in Jesus. If we look elsewhere for God’s will—to nature, human history, or our own experiences—we receive very mixed messages. Nature gives life and kills. It shows us breathtaking beauty and nauseating cruelty. History shows us even more shocking cruelty. Our own experiences of life and of our own existence are not reliable witnesses to God’s will even for us, let alone for the whole world. The pictures of God we draw in our minds if we look only to nature, history, and our own experiences can be very misleading and may cause us to lose or falsify faith. We may develop an idea of God that is sentimental, naive, or cynical. God may even seem to be monstrous. Religious people are always tempted to create God in their image—to make their god conform to what they desire or what they fear.

Jesus is the living truth of God. He is God’s supremely personal word of truth to us and our world. He is a person, not an object. We cannot possess him, and he always remains the one who speaks and represents God’s truth to us.

God abhors idolatry. Nothing we can make, engrave, or manipulate can represent God to us, because God cannot be manipulated or controlled by human beings. God is always subject not object: God speaks to us, God comes to us freely, and God loves us freely. So, God is represented to us in the living person, Jesus, and not in anything that can be made into an idol and used to serve our will and our purposes.

Jesus went about the region of Galilee healing the sick, forgiving the sinful, teaching the lost and confused, giving hope to the discouraged, proclaiming the good news of God’s love and mercy, and raising the dead. He did not go around making people sick, condemning the sinful, rejecting the lost, scolding the confused, taking hope away from people who already had a loose grip on hope, proclaiming bad news of doom and condemnation, or executing people. So, in his ministry, we have a living picture of what God’s will truly is. It is on the side of healing, hope, salvation, and life. It is to forgive, heal, and restore. “I have come,” Jesus says (John 10), “that they may have life and have it abundantly” (“to the full,” one translations reads). We need to be very careful about declaring death, suffering, and calamity to be God’s will. Jesus’ own life, ministry, and death suggest otherwise.

Jesus intervened in people's lives on behalf of God's will. In our discussion, we talked about the common belief that "when your number is up," you die. Jesus rescued people whose numbers were up. There is a truth in the statement when we realize life is not ultimately in our hands nor under our control, but faith in Jesus is not fatalistic. We look for redemption from fate. We hope for a change in human destiny. We put our trust in the one who creates hope where none existed.

Notice that my references for supporting the assertion that Jesus is the one in whom and through whom we know God and God's will all come from the Bible. We hold the Bible, **the scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament**, to be, "by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal and God's word to us." No other witness to Jesus and the truth of God he represents to us in person has or may have the authority of the Bible. Later in the course, we will see how important this assertion (Martin Luther's *sola scriptura*, "scripture alone") is to our freedom as Christians. The Bible guides and corrects all church doctrines, creeds, sermons, teachings, and statements.

The phrase "by the Holy Spirit" is crucial to our understanding of the Bible as the unique and authoritative witness. The Bible's truth does not belong to us; it belongs to God. It is God's truth, and God speaks it to us. Great damage is done by Christians who think they have authority over the authority of the Bible. When the Bible is used in ways that contradict the truth of God we find in Jesus, the Bible becomes a false witness and may even become an idol. When read, studied, and preached with minds open to the Spirit of God, hearts open to people, and the humility we should have as human beings, the Bible speaks God's truth to us and leads us to the living truth.

Within the context of knowing God in and through Jesus, as we know him through the biblical witness to him, how else do we know God and God's grace? The traditional answer comes in terms of what the church has called "the means of grace."

Our discussion, however, took a different turn. Before we even talked about the Bible, another idea emerged. Instead of saying we know Jesus through the witness of the Bible, the group suggested that we know him **through other people** and that the world should know him **through us**. As children, we first learn to know God through our parents. These observations not only conform to the realities of human life, but they are also biblical. Especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus describes a movement of knowledge and grace from the Father to the Son to the disciples to the world. "As the Father has loved me," he says, "so I have loved you." "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus prays (John 17) that his followers will be united (may "be one") so the world will know the Father sent him. The New Testament itself is the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ: the testimony of people who knew him and put their trust in him. In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy especially insists that the Israelites must teach their children the words and ways that come from God—must pass the knowledge from generation to generation.

The idea is not simply that we should teach our own children by blood or adoption and our children in the church the beliefs of Christian faith, but that they should experience God's love and mercy from us and through us. We are to bring them up in the context of grace.

What are the **means of grace**? The church would begin by speaking of the Bible, preaching (the proclamation of the word), and the sacraments (for Protestants, they are Baptism and the Lord's Supper). Prayer was mentioned right away in our discussion. So were the friendship and mutual support we experience within the community of faith.

Then, someone suggested **nature** as a source of our knowledge of God and supported the statement with personal experience. This issue has been debated hotly by theologians. Some say, "No"—we cannot know God through nature. The person of faith, however, certainly sees reflections or expressions of God's goodness in the natural world God created. The danger arises when people use nature as a source for knowing God and God's will apart from Jesus and the biblical witness to him and the truth of God he represents to us. Then, nature sends us very mixed messages about God and God's will. Nature is neutral toward us and our lives. Stand in the wrong place at the wrong time, and nature will kill you. The beauty of the sunset stands in contrast to other events of nature, such as cancer, miscarriage, and mental illness. Nature is beautiful and cruel. It gives life and destroys it. Do we see God's will in the birth of a child or in the natural death of a child? Because it sends us mixed messages, nature is a poor guide to the will of God, unless we already know God through Jesus. Then, we see in the natural world expressions of God's goodness and, also, manifestations of the biblical truth that this world is not yet as God wants it to be. The prophetic promise is, "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Nature is only the first of three possible witnesses to the goodness of God that send us mixed messages if we look at them apart from Jesus. The second is **history**. Does human history manifest God's will? If we say, "Yes," do we mean God sent the planes into the towers of the World Trade Center? Did God approve (actively or passively) the killing of 2½ million people in the Republic of Congo? Did God will the War in Viet Nam? The Holocaust? The slaughter in the killing fields of Cambodia? Did God's will guide the death squads in Central and South America? Was it true, as the slave catechisms written by churches proclaimed, that God willed people taken from Africa to be slaves to plantation owners here in America? The catechisms taught slaves to please God by being good and faithful slaves and obeying their masters, even when they were not being supervised or watched.

Too easy an identification of the courses of history with the will of God generates contradictions faith can scarcely survive. We get the idea that everything which happens in this world happens in accordance with God's will and plan. Jesus taught no such thing. He denied that people's deaths or a man's blindness expressed God's will for them. He taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What a silly prayer that would be if everything were already happening according to God's will and plan! Why pray for what we can already take for granted? The truth is that God's will is not being done in much that happens in our world, and God will not impose that will upon the world by force. So, Jesus saw a conflict in progress between God's will and what he called the workings of "the evil one." Without any lengthy discussion of this "evil one," we can say that much happens in life that is not in accordance with God's will and is not part of God design or plan. We must add, however, that God's desire for this world will triumph, not by force,

but by the power of redemptive love. It is by the cross, not the lightning bolt, that God will overcome the evils in us and our world. So, redemption is the work of God in our world.

The third source of knowing God that becomes dangerous if we take it by itself is **experience**. Can I trust my own experiences of God, my feelings of God's love? Are my feelings a reliable guide? Like people of other religions, Christians have sometimes pursued religious experiences, from speaking in tongues of ecstasy to the sense of mystical union with God. Here, too, we may say that experiences of God's presence and God's grace, feelings of joy "in the Lord," may support biblical faith, or they may become ends in themselves. Following the apostle Paul, Martin Luther insisted upon *sola fide*: "by faith alone," meaning salvation comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ. It does not come by feelings or religious experiences. What happens when we feel distant from God? Are we, therefore, truly distant from God? Faith's answer is, "No." God loves us and can be trusted to stick with us, whether we feel close to God or not. The feeling of God's absence is terrible, as we know from Jesus' cry from the cross ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), and we need to represent God's love to a world of people suffering what certainly looks and feels like abandonment by God. But feelings and experiences in themselves do not prove closeness to God, nor do they elevate one believer above another, as Paul angrily reminds the Corinthians who were proud of their ability to speak in tongues of ecstasy.

Here we stopped the first session without beginning to discuss my next question, "What is truth?" For next time, the suggested reading is Genesis 1:1-31; 2:1-4a, the first creation narrative.