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READING ASSIGNMENT FOR STUDENTS TO BE READ BEFORE MEETING FOR LESSON 2

Handbook of Doctrine: Chapter 2
Creator of Heaven and Earth

The God we worship

We believe that there is only one God, who is infinitely perfect, the Creator, Preserver, and Governor of all things, and who is the only proper object of religious worship. We believe that God is the Creator of the world and sustains it by his gracious purpose. The world and all that is in it was created fundamentally good because it was brought into being by a holy, wise, powerful and loving God.

A. Christian monotheism

Monotheism is the doctrine that there is only one God. This belief is not unique to Christianity; it is also held by a large section of the world's population who belong to other faiths, including Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. However, Christian monotheism has its own particular meaning and content. Christian monotheism affirms the oneness of God (Deuteronomy 4:39, 6:4; Isaiah 44:6; Mark 12:29-31). Moreover, the one God, eternal, supreme and personal, is revealed and known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an eternal tri-unity. God has always been, is and always will be Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian monotheism does not mean that God resides in passive isolation. He is a God who is related to his creation; he is not a static being, unrelated and unmoved.

The great Initiator, Preserver and Governor of all things interacts with his creation. The way in which God makes himself known and meets with his people is central to the biblical record (Exodus 3:1-6, 13, 14; 34:6, 7). His desire for a holy and loving relationship with humanity is central to the message of both the Old and New Testaments (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5; 2 Kings 13:23; Jeremiah 7:23; Jonah 3:10; Ephesians 1:4, 5; 2 Timothy 1:8-12; 1 Peter 1:15).

B. The character of God

The God we meet in Scripture and in our human experience makes himself known to us as the loving God who is holy, jealous, faithful, merciful and true. God is holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8; 15:4). As the one who is altogether different, the uncreated source of all being, he evokes our awe (1 Samuel 2:2). To acknowledge the holiness of God is to become aware of his utter goodness and purity. God is jealous (Exodus 20:2-6; 34:14 Deuteronomy 4:24). A consequence of his love is the desire that we love him in return with single-hearted devotion. God cares so much for his people that he can never be indifferent to their unfaithfulness (Joshua 24:19-21; Luke 13:34, 35).

God is faithful (Deuteronomy 32:4; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24). Throughout Scripture he is shown to be unswerving in his covenantal love and commitment (Psalm 89:1- 37; 1 Corinthians 10:13), however much and however often we may fail him (Jeremiah 3:6-14; 2 Timothy 2:13). God is merciful. He shows mercy to all and delights in pardoning those who turn to him (Luke 15:11-24), trusting in his love and forbearance (Psalm 51; Ephesians 2:4, 5). God is true. He is always consistent with his character of love and righteousness. He is the source, ground and author of ultimate truth and justice (Psalm 19:7-11; 1 John 5:20; Revelation 3:7; 19:11-16).

1. Perfect in holiness

A feeling of awe in the presence of God is common to religious experience. We reach out to that which is different from ourselves, to complete purity and goodness, not simply to greater power. What we are recognizing is the holiness of God. Our sense of awe is often accompanied by an awareness of guilt and unworthiness in the presence of divine holiness (Isaiah 6:1-7; 57:15). From beginning to end, the Bible testifies to the holiness of God. From an early understanding of God's otherness that is sometimes expressed in alarming terms (Leviticus 10:1-3), the Bible moves to a profound perception of the awe-inspiring nature of his goodness and righteousness (Isaiah 5:16), which is evident in his covenantal relationship with his people (Psalm 111:9, 10). It is this holiness,

this separateness, which differentiates God from us. It is this divine quality which draws us to him in worship (Matthew 6:9; Revelation 4:1-11).

2. Perfect in wisdom

While the holiness of God reminds us of his otherness, that is, his transcendence over his creation, the wisdom of God points to his engagement with us. By exercise of his wisdom, God directs all that happens towards the fulfillment of his purposes (Romans 11:33-36). God is actively involved in and with all that he has made, and his wisdom is constantly at work to bring all people to himself (Proverbs 8:6-21). God knows all things and is alongside us as the future unfolds. His knowledge is not dispassionate; he not only knows us, but he is also involved with us.

Old Testament writers saw God's wisdom at work in all his tireless activity. Wisdom was employed at creation and revealed in God's works and in the ordering of the world (Proverbs 8:22-31; Jeremiah 10:12). In his wisdom, God gave the Law to enable his people to live in right relationship with him. The teaching of Jesus expresses God's wisdom and the person of Christ fully embodies it (1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Colossians 2:2, 3). His wise and loving understanding of us is constantly directed towards our good.

3. Perfect in power

Throughout Scripture, God's power is seen at work for our good. It is revealed in creation, in the great events of Hebrew history (Exodus 32:11; Deuteronomy 26:5-11) and is described vividly by the prophets (Isaiah 40:10, 26; Jeremiah 10:12). In the creeds, God is described as 'the Father Almighty'. By his power, God leads the world towards his own goals (Job 9:2-12). While allowing his creation a measure of freedom, God remains ultimately sovereign and works through all events towards the fulfillment of his purposes (Isaiah 40:18-31). In the New Testament, Christ is called the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). The Cross reveals the deepest dimensions of God's power in the apparent weakness which disarms the powers of darkness and the agencies of evil, so accomplishing our salvation. Here God demonstrates the power of suffering love (Romans 1:16). The power of God is demonstrated as a remedy for weakness in the lives of individuals who accept this salvation (2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 6:10).

4. Perfect in love

We believe in God whose love cannot be defined in terms of passing emotion, indulgence or cheap and vague benevolence.

In the Old Testament the love of God is first and foremost his steadfast burning faithfulness to his people, Israel, his covenant love (2 Chronicles 6:14; Isaiah 54:4-10; Jeremiah 31:3-5; Joel 2:13). Though constantly betrayed, God continued in loving faithfulness to lead his people towards holiness (Hosea 3:1; 11:1-11). In the New Testament, the faithfulness of God is shown in the giving of his Son Jesus Christ whose willing obedience revealed the extent of the love of God (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). In that gift, which displays the intimate relationship and complete harmony of God the Father with God the Son, we see God's perfect love (John 17:23). That love determines the nature of divine holiness, wisdom and power. It is God's steadfast love that informs and directs his purposes and empowers his will. His love reaches out to all, whether responsive or impenitent: a covenant love, confirmed by promise and perseverance. It is an unconditional love (Isaiah 49:15, 16).

a. Love and power

Two illuminating aspects of true love are its self-communication and its self-denial. Those who love will express love by both giving of themselves, and denying themselves, giving worth and priority to the beloved. True self-giving is rooted in an awareness of self-worth which is shared in love. If we recognize that God is love, then we acknowledge that he must express himself in a simultaneous affirmation and denial of himself. Our own experiences of life enable us to see how God's love defines his power. To look for an unrestrained show of force fails to recognize the creative power of love.

God's power, tempered by the constraints of his love, demonstrates its creativity in the gift of his Son. Jesus' death on the Cross is the greatest demonstration of divine love, both in terms of utter self-denial (Mark 14:32-42; John 17:1-5) and entire self-affirmation (John 18:37; 19:30). God's suffering love (Isaiah 52:13-53:12; 1 Peter 2:20-24), which has transformed countless lives, is the best argument for the validity of this understanding of his power.

b. Love, power and suffering

Any affirmation of God's power and his love inevitably invites the question, 'Why does he allow suffering?' Much suffering appears cruel and pointless and no attempts at rational explanation are satisfactory. Sometimes the only real comfort comes from the assurance of the presence of a loving God who in Jesus fully entered into our present suffering. He is present in the midst of such suffering so that no-one need suffer alone (Job 36:15; Psalm 116:1-6; 130). We may be helped by the insight that suffering is part of life in a fallen world. It is the cost of life, as growing and insight cost pain.

To gain maturity, wisdom and knowledge involves a measure of suffering. Pain and suffering are part of love and the cost of love is vulnerability. Christians are called to embody this vulnerable presence by standing with, and sharing the pain of, those who suffer. On the Cross, God in Christ shared our suffering

and, though no longer suffering to atone, he still shares human anguish. Such love must suffer (Luke 24:25-27). This understanding does not remove the bitterness of experience but addresses the apparent meaninglessness which makes suffering more acute (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). While no easy answers are given to the questions suffering raises, the Cross provides the most penetrating insight into the true nature of experience. It is a pointer to a plan presently hidden from understanding and a clue to the value of suffering in human lives (Romans 5:3-5; 8:17-19, 31-39).

c. A love to be shared

We best understand the love of God in relation to his revelation in Jesus Christ. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). 'But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). This helps us to see that God's holiness, wisdom and power are defined by his eternal love. For in God holiness is an expression of pure love, wisdom is an expression of love at work, power is an expression of costly love. This love, embodied in Jesus Christ, is the love God invites us to share with the world. It is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers' (1 John 3:16, see also 1 John 4: 7-21).

c. Creator of Heaven and earth

1. Creation out of nothing

We believe that God created the world: 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1). In this text, 'the beginning' does not refer to God, for he is eternal, without beginning or end. The reference is to the universe which is given birth by his will and purpose. In proclaiming that God made all things, we assert that the universe had a beginning: matter has not always existed. God brought it into being by his sovereign will expressed in his word. 'God said, "Let there be ... and it was so."' Creation was out of nothing by the word of God (Psalm 33:6; John 1:1-3; Hebrews 11:3).

The universe and all it contains possesses dignity and meaning because it is not the result of chance or accident. It is the expression of divine intent and authority, which gives delight to its Creator. The creation account in the First chapter of the Bible portrays a progression from dark chaos to luminous harmony and an ordered procession of events which culminated in the creation of human beings, male and female, made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27; Psalm 8; Isaiah 45:12).

God's creative power is not confined to the visible and material. All spiritual powers, even those presently opposed to God, owe their existence to him. Biblical revelation denies all suggestion that matter is inherently evil and that the physical is opposed to the spiritual. All is the creation of the one God, and the Church has rejected teaching which suggested otherwise. Such dualistic philosophies have sometimes corrupted monotheistic religions by teaching that equal opposing forces of good and evil, God and Satan, are locked in unending conflict.

Christian teaching recognizes the power of evil, but claims that ultimately God is sovereign and his creation good. 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). The Christian distinguishes between God and his creation. The material world is not part of, nor does it know from, the divine Being. God is present in all, but all is not God. We believe in the God who is both involved with his creation and distinct from it.

2. The problem of evil

We do not possess a logical explanation of the existence of evil in a universe created by a God of love. Both human wickedness and natural disaster pose enormous problems for Christians. Here is a temptation to ascribe all such evil to the malevolence of Satan, but while referring to Satan and his angels may shed some light, it does not fully resolve the problem (Job 1). Scripture offers no explanation of the problem of irrational evil but teaches that God is in control. Ultimately, even opposing powers conform to his plans although against their will (Isaiah 45:1-24).

Evil that arises from the wickedness of human beings can be seen as a risk of our creation as free, personal beings, made in the image of God (Genesis 3; Romans 1:18-32). We were made to respond freely to the love of God, a freedom that must include the freedom to refuse. God's plan to save us from the frightening consequences of rejecting him led to the Cross (Colossians 1:19, 20).

d. Preserver and Governor

1. God's continuing purpose

God has not ceased his creative activity. Creation is changing and the universe is developing. God is creatively sustaining his creation (Job 34:14, 15; Psalm 65:9-13; 104:24-30), bringing his world to the fullness he intends for it. The New Testament witnesses that through means both gradual and traumatic we are being prepared for a new Heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1-4). In this sense, God is both Preserver and Governor of all he has made. Preservation of the created order does not mean maintenance of the status quo but rather preservation of his ongoing purpose and unfolding plan for creation.

Just as all spiritual powers, even those opposed to God, owe their existence to him, so also God is ultimately Governor of all rulers and authorities, even though for the present they may appear to be operating outside

the boundaries of his control (John 19:11). The redemption brought about by the Cross will ultimately reconcile the whole creation to God (Romans 8:21; Colossians 1:17-19). The purposes of God are the final reference point for all human activity. In our planning, our designs for the future, we are all accountable to God. His is a source of confidence and hope. We can be secure in God's loving care, even in the presence of so much that seeks to harm us. In the face of explainable evil or suffering, we know that we are firmly in the hands of a loving creator God.

2. Caring for God's world

God's authority over the created order does not mean rigid and overbearing control but rather a caring, dynamic, interactive relationship with his creation. He works in co-operation with his creation to fulfill his purposes for it. He is in control, but invites us to share responsibility for his world (Genesis 1:28-31). The relationship of God to his creation is one of loving care and concern. Humanity's stewardship of the earth is a reflection of that care, as human beings are made in the image of God. Our Creator has given us responsibility to care for his creation (Psalm 8). We have the freedom to take the raw materials of the universe and work them into good for present and future generations. That freedom should not be abused. Our challenge is to treat the earth well in the light of increasing population and diminishing resources. The world was made to praise God and reveal his glory (Psalm 19:1-6); our stewardship of it furthers that end.

3. The glory of God

When we meet this God, we meet one who transcends our human limitations, both our finite human nature and the sinfulness that inclines us to idolatry. We meet a God who is exalted above powers and philosophies, over space and time, and yet whose awesome presence can be apprehended by those who love him. In the Old Testament the glory of God is evident in his encounters with individuals and groups (Exodus 24:15-18; Ezekiel 1:25-28), but ultimately the glory of God is seen most clearly in Jesus Christ and is experienced in the life and worship of the redeemed community, the Church (John 1:14; 17:1-5; 2 Corinthians 4:6).

E. The human response: worship

1. Responding to God

It is this God whom alone we worship. In worship we recognize and give worth to what is central in our lives. We express where our full allegiance lies. As Christians we declare our complete allegiance to the triune God. This declaration is foundational to our faith and unalterably identifies the God who is worshiped (1 Chronicles 29:10-13; Psalm 96:1-3).

Christian worship is our wholehearted response to the God who is eternally in community (Chapter 3), living and acting, relating to his creation, known by his works and revealed by his saving activity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Worship begins when God makes himself known to us through his presence and his word, and by so doing makes possible the community of faith. It is completed when we express our gratitude, respond in faith, enter into spiritual fellowship and live the life of God in mission in the world.

The Lord Jesus confirmed the centrality of worship by his own practice and teaching. This was seen in his attendance at synagogue and in his personal prayer life (Mark 1:35; Luke 4:16-21), in his assertion that the Father seeks true worshipers (John 4:21-24), and in the way he linked worship with obedience to God's will. The apostle Paul also taught that the principle of worship was to be expressed in the consecration of our entire lives to God (Romans 12:1, 2). In worship we respond to who God is. The glory of God evokes our adoration.

The holiness of God evokes our awe.

The jealousy of God evokes our exclusive devotion.

The love of God evokes our sense of worth. In worship we respond to what God does.

The saving action of God evokes our response in gratitude.

The seeking God evokes our response in prayer.

The sanctifying God evokes our response in consecration.

The merciful God evokes our response in penitence.

The he community-making God evokes our response in fellowship.

The loving God evokes our response in compassionate evangelism and service.

Worship is life-changing. It helps worshipers move from fear to love, guilt to forgiveness, weakness to power, irresponsibility to stewardship, insecurity to trust, spiritual hunger to fullness of joy, sorrow to comfort, confusion to direction.

2. The danger of idolatry

Idolatry is worship offered or allegiance shown to false deities, demonic powers or material objects or values. In the Bible, idolatry is forbidden by the second commandment and is continually condemned in both the Old Testament and the New (Exodus 20:4-6; 1 Corinthians 10:14). It was the target both of Old Testament prophets (Hosea 14:8, 9), and of Christian preachers when they moved into the pagan world of the Roman Empire (Colossians 3:5; 1 John 5:21).

Today idolatry remains a persistent and pernicious enemy of true religion. It sometimes takes the form of traditional ways of worshiping objects and images. It is also seen in more subtle ways, in the worship of the state, of wealth, of status, race, other individuals, or other concepts. It is an ever-present danger to the Christian who must never divert to religious movements or to leaders the worship and adoration that is due to God alone. To guard against idolatry, we must focus on Jesus. By doing this we will be reminded of the glory of the Father who

is revealed in the Son. The Holy Spirit will help us to resist all temptation to give to any other person or power that ultimate devotion which is due to God alone.

F. A God to make known

As it is in the nature of God to make himself known, it is the calling of Christians to share that revelation. God is the source of all love; he is the foundation upon which all longings for true human community are built. To be found by him is to know oneself loved by the one, true, merciful and faithful God. To find him is to be aware of his glory and moved to worship and praise. It is this God who calls us to share in his mission.

‘The Call to Salvationists’, page 7

Called to be God’s People. The Founders of the Salvation Army declared their belief that God raised up our Movement to enter partnership with him in his ‘great business’ of saving the world. We call upon Salvationists worldwide to reaffirm our shared calling to this great purpose, signified in our name. Salvation begins with conversion to Christ, but it does not end there. The transformation of an individual leads to a transformation of relationships, of families, of communities, of nations. We long for and anticipate with joy the new creation of all things in Christ. Our mission is God’s mission. God in love reaches out through his people to a suffering and needy world, a world that he loves. In mission we express in word and deed and through the totality of our lives the compassion of God for the lost. Our identification with God in this outward movement of love for the world requires a corresponding inward movement from ourselves towards God. Christ says ‘Come to me’ before he says ‘Go into the world’. These two movements are in relation to each other, like breathing in and breathing out.

To engage in one movement to the exclusion of the other is the way of death. To engage in both is the way of life. The vitality of our spiritual life as a Movement will be seen and tested in our turning to the world in evangelism and service, but the springs of our spiritual life are to be found in our turning to God in worship, in the disciplines of life in the Spirit, and in the study of God’s word.