



Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message

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Introduction

Francis Schaeffer never presented himself as an academic apologist, as a philosopher, as a theologian, or as a scholar. Instead, he spoke of himself as an evangelist and a pastor, and this truly is how he thought about the ministry that God had graciously given him. I felt it might be useful to begin with a somewhat personal account of factors that contributed to his theological development.

Conversion

Francis Schaeffer was converted at the age of 17 in 1930 while he was a junior in high school. I heard him tell the story on several occasions, but here I will use his wife Edith's account from *The Tapestry*, her autobiographical account of their life together. Edith recounts how, by "accident,"

Fran was sent home from a bookstore with a book on Greek philosophy, when he had in fact entered the shop to buy a beginner's English reading book to help him teach English to a Russian. In God's providence reading this book on Greek philosophy set his mind on fire—but he soon discovered that the philosophers asked many questions, yet seemed to have no answers to the basic problems of the human condition. Reflecting on this he recognized that the preaching he heard on Sundays in the liberal church he attended was just as devoid of answers. "I wonder," he mused to himself,

"whether I should stop calling myself a Christian, and discard the Bible?" Then he reconsidered, and faced the fact that he had never read the Bible in his life. Since at this time he was reading Ovid, he decided that before discarding the Bible, he'd read some of Ovid and some of the Bible night by night. Gradually he put aside Ovid altogether and spent all the time he had on reading the Bible.

How did he read it? Who helped him to understand? No one gave him any suggestions. He wouldn't have known who to ask, and in any case, he had no idea that there was any way to read it other than to read it in the same way as any other book. He started at the beginning of Genesis and read to the end. If you want to know why Fran has such high regard for the Bible and feels it is adequate in answering the questions of life, the answer is right here. As a seventeen-year-old boy with a thirst for the answers to life's questions, he began to discover for himself the existence of adequate and complete answers right in the Bible. . . .

Sometime in the next six months Francis Schaeffer became a Christian. He believed and bowed before God, accepting Christ as his Savior, having come to an understanding directly from the Word of God itself. He thought he had discovered something no one else knew about. He thought what he had found was unique, and that he alone had found it. If what he had discovered was being a Christian,

then he thought he was the only one. But—he didn't call himself that. It was a transforming reality that changed his whole outlook; it began to change his marks at school and the way he looked at the woods. But, for a time, he did not know that there was anyone else who shared this truth he felt he had discovered. You see, he thought that Christianity was what he heard preached by an old-fashioned liberal who gave ethical talks and who did not preach Biblical truth. At that time Fran was totally ignorant of the fact that there was any other kind of preaching.¹

This beginning to his Christian life was, as Edith says, and as he would say himself repeatedly, foundational to his approach to the Bible. He discovered that in following what he was later to call “the flow of biblical history,” the answers to the most fundamental questions and problems of human existence were to be found. In the unfolding biblical account of creation, fall, and redemption God answered his questions through his Word. Long before he had ever heard of such a term, Schaeffer was beginning to develop what theologians today would call a biblical theology, and what many Christians would describe as a biblical world and life view.

Theological Education

After studying as an undergraduate at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, Francis Schaeffer started his seminary training at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1935. There he was exposed to the biblical theological approach of Geerhardus Vos and others standing in that tradition. In Vos' foundational work there is a statement which sums up so much of the way Schaeffer studied the Scriptures. Vos writes that biblical theology is “the study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space.”² These words

sound very like numerous statements made by Schaeffer himself about his own approach to Scripture: “God is there; he is not silent, but rather he has made himself known to us in space and in time and in history.”

Pastoral Ministry

After seminary Francis Schaeffer served in three different churches in the United States, two in Pennsylvania and then one in St. Louis, Covenant Church, now on Ballas Road, but at that time—in the 1940's—it was on Union and Enright down in the city. But after these years in pastoral ministry, Francis and Edith believed that they were called to ministry in Switzerland, where they moved in 1948.

These intervening years had seen involvement in several different ministries. They had started a children's work, Children for Christ, while they had been in his third pastoral position here in St. Louis. This involved them leading evangelistic children's Bible studies, teaching others to do the same in their homes, writing the material for these studies, and organizing this ministry, which at its height had 700 children coming every week to home meetings, to group meetings, and to occasional large gatherings where all the children came together. This eventually became international and the Bible studies they wrote for children were translated into many languages. Francis and Edith personally helped to train leaders of evangelistic children's Bible studies in several different countries.

In addition to the children's ministry and his pastoral work, Schaeffer was also involved in the International Council of Christian Churches, a separatist body formed to stand for biblical orthodoxy over against the World Council of Churches. Participation in the ICCC led Schaeffer into speaking and writing against the influence of liberal theology in the wider church and in particular against neo-orthodoxy. Francis and Edith were sent to Europe by their denominational Mission Board with the call “to strengthen the things that remain.” In 1947, the year before they were sent to Europe to live, Schaeffer had traveled in Europe for several months seeking to understand

¹ Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981), 51–52.

² Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 13.

and evaluate the state of the European Church in the years after World War II. His being “sent” arose from the impact of the reports he had written about what he had learned about the struggling nature of much of European Christianity.

Spiritual Crisis

Three or four years after moving to Switzerland, Francis Schaeffer went through a profound spiritual crisis. What brought on this crisis? Going back many years to his time in college, and later in seminary, Francis and Edith were bothered by the lack of love shown between Christians, especially where there was any disagreement. The denomination of which they were a part had been formed by a split from the Northern Presbyterian Church over the influx of Liberalism and the defrocking of J. Gresham Machen when he started an Independent Mission Board to ensure that the missionaries sent overseas were Bible-believing Christians. This new church experienced a subsequent division into two denominations within a year of the first split. Schaeffer was a student during these divisions and had joined the part that started Faith Seminary in Wilmington, Delaware. At that time, Francis and Edith had wrestled with the question, “How could people stand for God’s holiness and the purity of doctrine in the church, and in one’s personal life, and yet not have it turn out to be harsh and ugly?”³

By 1951 Schaeffer felt he had seen so much that was harsh and ugly within “the separated movement” that he was not sure he could in honesty be a Christian any longer. He saw so much that was negative, so much that defined itself primarily in terms of what it was “against.” He saw so much infighting within the circles of which he was a part, in his own denomination and across large segments of the evangelical community. He saw men struggling for power and using unscrupulous methods to gain or to maintain control and positions of influence. He saw church courts which were so governed by secret meetings, by prior agreements, and so manipulated in

underhanded ways by men who were so absolutely confident that they were right and were serving the Lord better than anyone else, that presbytery and synod gatherings seemed sometimes more like the worst of political shady dealings and movements to wrest control by any means at hand. He began to despair of whether Christianity could indeed be true.

In reflecting on this embattled mentality and the political intrigues that came with it, Schaeffer began to wonder what he and the other separatists—those who thought that they were consumed with zeal for God’s Word and for God’s honor—were truly “for,” and what affirmations there were to set alongside the negations. Where was the passion for evangelism that fills the pages of the New Testament? Where was the devotional literature expressing love for the Lord? Where were the hymns that would demonstrate that the imagination and the heart were being touched by God’s truth along with the mind? Where were the supernaturally transformed lives of a people who were being changed by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit? Where was love for fellow believers and for one’s unbelieving neighbors that would show to the world that the Father sent the Son for our salvation (John 13:34-35; 17:2-23)?

Schaeffer was not only dissatisfied with the circles of which they were a part. He said, “Edith, I feel really torn to pieces by the lack of reality, the lack of seeing the results the Bible talks about, which should be seen in the Lord’s people. I’m not talking only about people I’m working with in ‘The Movement,’ but I’m not satisfied with myself. It seems that the only honest thing to do is to rethink, reexamine the whole matter of Christianity. Is it true? I need to go back to my agnosticism and start at the beginning.”⁴

I heard Schaeffer speak about this time in his life on many occasions during our “workers’ meetings” in L’Abri and our session and presbytery gatherings for the International Presbyterian

³ Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 189.

⁴ Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 355-357; see also Schaeffer’s own brief account of this crisis in the Preface to Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1971).

Church. He went through a period lasting several months during which he reread the Bible and thought through the most basic questions about our human situation all over again.

But, once again, just as when he first was converted, he found his answers in the unfolding of God's revelation of himself in what he would later call "the flow of biblical history."⁵ He recovered a delight in the truth of the biblical message and developed a confidence in Scripture which would, in God's providence, be of enormous help to him in the work the Lord was preparing for him. As God knew, in the years to come, Schaeffer would be inundated with the questions of unbelievers and of struggling and doubting Christians. He also "discovered" that the central, unfolding theme of God's revelation is the love shown by God to us, and the trusting and dependent love that we are called to show him in return. Schaeffer wrote, after this experience, an article in two parts for the *Sunday School Times*, "The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord."⁶ Schaeffer would often say in later years that this was the most important thing he ever wrote.

Devotional Habits

For most of his Christian life, Francis Schaeffer kept a disciplined pattern of Bible reading. It was something he was reluctant to speak about in public, as he did not want people admiring him, copying him, or thinking he was imposing a "rule" on anyone else to govern their conscience. He read four chapters of the Bible every day of his life, three from the Old Testament, one from the New. He would divide the Old Testament into three roughly equal parts—let's say, starting in Genesis, 2 Kings, and Proverbs—and read a chapter from each, and thus progress through the Old Testament; and then also read a chapter from the New Testament. In this way he would regularly be reading through the whole

Old Testament every nine or ten months, and the New Testament every eight months or so.

What is particularly interesting about this pattern of reading Scripture is that he developed an ever-growing sense of the unity of the biblical message; a deep sense of the unfolding of God's words and actions over time in real history; of the way that the content of all biblical passages relate to the foundational themes of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation; the centrality of God's unfailing love for his people and their call to love him in return; and the absolute trustworthiness of the Word of God. These "true truths," as he liked to call the teachings of God's Word, were being constantly reinforced by this continual reading of different parts of Scripture at the same time.

Schaeffer's Strengths

Francis Schaeffer was given many gifts by God to bring blessing on the Church, but I think that most of those who worked with him would agree that his two greatest gifts were the way he led discussions and answered people's questions and his preaching.

I will never forget some of the sermons I heard him preach. The fact that his voice was high and often would crack as he emphasized a point, the reality that no one could describe him as "charismatic" or "strikingly handsome" in appearance—these things were completely unimportant. I would listen to a message, often for well over an hour, and be captivated by the truth from God's Word that was communicated with such clarity and power and with such relevance to our own moment of history and such immediate application to my life. One sermon on Rahab often comes back to me: "We are all harlots," Schaeffer declared. "We have all prostituted ourselves constantly to other gods." There are many others of his sermons that have left this same indelible impression on my mind.

For my own personal life, and for the life of most of us who worked with him, I would say that his humble dependence on the Lord, his deep awareness of his own inadequacies, and the compassion he demonstrated as he listened to

⁵ See, e.g., Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), chapter 1: "Creation."

⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, "The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord," *The Sunday School Times*, June 16 & July 8, 1951.

people and answered them were the most important aspects of his ministry and of his example in being an imitator of Christ.

But how did he answer questions? His approach was always to look to Scripture for his answer—but not by going to individual verses to find a “proof-text.” He would go to the themes of biblical theology, and these themes would beget his answers. This was true whether he was answering a “philosophical” question about the value of human persons, the nature of history, or the problem of evil, or whether he was answering a “pastoral” question about homosexual practice, marital infidelity, caring for an elderly relative, or business ethics. If one reads the volume of his letters that has been published, one finds the same thing; that is, the letters are informed by the central themes of a biblical theology all the way through.⁷

Of course this volume of letters is just a tiny selection of the thousands that he wrote. But, my wife, Vicki, who was his secretary for a time, would testify that they are representative, and that this constant reference to scriptural themes was his daily practice as he dictated to her all through the time she worked for him. (He often dictated a dozen letters at a sitting and would expect them to go out the next day. Much to her distress, when Vicki first began to work with him, Schaeffer would always change something on her perfect transcriptions of his words, because, as he said, he wanted the recipient to know that he had reread and signed the letter himself.)

Sometimes he ministered by the spoken word, sometimes by the written word. But whichever it was, through all those years of ministering in L’Abri, from the early 1950s until his death in 1984, he was helping countless individuals to see the central themes of biblical truth that had captured his own heart, mind, and imagination. As a pastor he helped great numbers of believers grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. He was always ready to listen with a compassionate heart and to lead people to see

what God’s Word said to direct their lives; and he would always pray with and for those who came to see him.

At the heart of all of Schaeffer’s teaching was his basic conviction about the unchanging truth of God’s Word. This foundation led him to relate all that he taught to the creation, fall, and redemption framework of biblical teaching. People came to him with their troubles and in their lost wanderings, in their sense of despair and in their alienation. He answered them with the message unfolded in God’s revelation, the message of who we are as finite and glorious persons made in the likeness of our infinite personal Creator. He spoke of who we are as proud, disobedient, and ruined rebels who will not bow before a holy Lord, but instead insist on our autonomy. And he spoke of who we are as those needing to humbly accept “with the empty hands of faith” the redemption of the God-man Jesus. This biblical framework informed all that he said in answer to the questions of those who came to him for help.⁸

This is so, not only with regard to the answers he gave people, but also it is true of the manner in which he treated those who came to him with their questions. He always treated people with dignity as God’s image-bearers, with compassion as those fallen from a glorious origin and deeply marred by sin and its consequences, and with love as those for whom Christ died. (If I long to imitate anything about him, it is this deep respect, compassion, and grace which was so evident in the way he responded to the most miserable, difficult, and even aggressive people who challenged him.)

Creation in God’s Image

Schaeffer saw our creation as God’s image-bearers as foundational to everything else that Scripture reveals about human persons. Where many Christians today want to begin with the sin and the

⁷ Lane T. Dennis, ed., *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985).

⁸ See *Reclaiming the World*, a video series and accompanying handbook in which Schaeffer sets out his apologetic methodology. Richard B. Sherman, *Reclaiming the World: Comprehensive Leader’s Guide* (Los Gatos, CA: Schaeffer V Productions, 1982), contains a transcript of the text of the videos.

fallenness of people around us in our secular society, Schaeffer insisted that the fall did not “stop anyone from being human.”⁹ The same point is made repeatedly in his study on Genesis, *Genesis in Space and Time*. See, for example, his account of the creation of human persons in chapter 2: “For twentieth-century man this phrase, *the image of God*, is as important as anything in Scripture, because men today can no longer answer that crucial question, ‘Who am I?’”¹⁰ Or again: “That which differentiates man from the machine is that his basic relationship is upward rather than downward or horizontal. He is created to relate to God in a way that none of the other created beings are. . . . This differentiation makes genuine love possible. . . . Furthermore, if we are made in the image of God, we are not confused as to the possibility of communication; and we are not confused as to the possibility of revelation, for God can reveal propositional truth to me as I am made in his image.”¹¹

This recognition of human uniqueness at the heart of all that Scripture reveals about who we are also marked Schaeffer’s approach to the Christian life and true spirituality. He believed that Christian growth is restoration to the image of God, that is, to true humanness. It was his lead in this area, and his personal encouragement that stands behind the book Ranald Macaulay and I wrote together: *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience*.¹²

Human Life

This approach of always going back to biblical foundations enabled Schaeffer to have the freedom to think about subjects that were not normally matters of discussion or concern among evangelical Christians. This is true with regard to human life issues. He began to address the problems of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia long before most other

evangelicals. The reason for this was his deep sense that human persons are made in the image of God and are therefore to be treasured by us.

Just two years before his death, Schaeffer said in a lecture entitled “Priorities”: “We must understand that human life stands at a unique place. Human life stands at a crucial place because there is an unbreakable link between the existence of the infinite personal God and the unique dignity, intrinsic dignity of people. If God does not exist and he has not made people in his own image, there is no basis for an intrinsic, unique dignity of human life.”¹³ For Schaeffer, his conviction that Scripture teaches that we are God’s image-bearers continually fed his passion to help alienated young people see that they had dignity and value, and also challenged him to speak up for the unborn, for the newborn, for the handicapped, and for the elderly.

Racial Equality

This sense of the unique dignity of all human persons also filled Schaeffer with a deep passion for racial equality and reconciliation, both in his own personal life and in his teaching. We can readily see this in examples from his college days when, as a very young believer, he would walk across the fields from the college to teach a class of African-American children each Sunday afternoon; and when he regularly visited the African-American janitor from the college when he became ill—Schaeffer would go to the man’s home to read the Scriptures and to pray with him.¹⁴

⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Finished Work of Christ: The Truth of Romans 1–8* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 32.

¹⁰ Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹² Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs, *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978).

¹³ See also Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), chapter 4, in which he quotes Peter Singer, the Australian ethicist now at Princeton. Singer recognizes that once the tie between the personal God of the Bible and human persons has been cut, then there is no basis for protecting the life of the unborn, newborn, or elderly and infirm. One of Singer’s more recent books is, consequently, entitled *Unsanctifying Human Life*. I was once scheduled to debate with Singer on Australian television, but when he learned of my connection to Schaeffer, he withdrew, saying there was no point in our meeting to discuss on the same panel as we would have nothing in common. I must confess that I was relieved by his withdrawal because of his evident brilliance, but also saddened to lose the opportunity to try to appeal to his humanity.)

¹⁴ Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 123.

This valuing of all men and women showed too in the way people of all races were welcomed to the Schaeffers' home at L'Abri in Switzerland. He was happy to take the wedding service of Interracial couples, despite, in the case of two special friends of ours, the anger of the white parents (a minister in Britain and his wife) at Schaeffer's "aiding and abetting marriage between blacks and whites." I will remember how disturbed some white Christians were by his words in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*—at his speaking with such passion about the injustice and wickedness of slavery and the slave trade. These views on race may have seemed, particularly at that time, unusual for someone of Schaeffer's strongly conservative views about the Bible and about moral and social issues. But he never felt constrained by a "system," whether it was some particular detail of a theological system that seemed imposed on Scripture rather than drawn from it,¹⁵ or a political system of thought that had undermined evangelical concern for those who were discriminated against or downtrodden.

Respectful Dialog

This sense of the dignity of every human person, and his compassion for people in their lost state, arising from his profoundly biblical approach, also brought Schaeffer to desire to avoid aggressive confrontation with unbelievers. His refusal to "debate" with anyone, including a radical liberal like Bishop Pike, was an example of this. He insisted that his meeting with Pike should be called a "dialog." As a consequence of this, they became friends and corresponded with each other until Pike's death as he was searching for manuscripts in the Sinai desert.

No Little People

Schaeffer's sense of the dignity of all people taught him that there are "no little people."¹⁶ He was just

as content teaching one or two as he was teaching hundreds and thousands. He was just as willing to spend time with the maid or the janitor in a hotel as he was to go and talk to the president or someone considered "important" in the eyes of the world or of the Church. He treated people, whoever they were, with dignity and compassion. This led him into his work of child evangelism, for to him children were just as significant as adults, just as precious, just as worthy of receiving our time and effort. In "The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord," Schaeffer wrote, "There is a certain gentleness about really great Christians. There are many ways to observe this, but perhaps one of the best is to notice the tenderness for children in some of the great warriors of the past."¹⁷ I will never forget him at a conference in Ashburnham, England, when he walked into a room and saw our first two children who were then ages 3 and 2. He saw our two little boys and his eyes became so tender and he said, "Whose are those beautiful children?"

Aliens and Pilgrims

Schaeffer often spoke about the biblical theme, first appearing in the life of Abraham and then developed throughout Scripture, of the believer being an alien and stranger in this world.

I will never forget his leading a celebration of the Lord's Supper when he was in St. Louis for a series of lectures at Covenant Seminary. He turned up wearing a raincoat and carrying a pack and walking stick. He gave a short homily on the manner in which the Israelites celebrated that first Passover in Egypt—eating unleavened bread, ready to leave the country where they were unwanted aliens. He spoke of the fulfillment of this in the ministry of Jesus and finished as we partook of the bread and wine with a call to "go to Jesus outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:13–14).

¹⁵ I need to add here that he was not opposed to theological systems or to systematic theology; see, for example, his 60 hours of lectures on *The Westminster Confession*.

¹⁶ See his sermon entitled "No Little People, No Little Places" in the book of his sermons, *No Little People* contained in *The*

Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, Volume 3: *A Christian View of Spirituality* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982).

¹⁷ Schaeffer, "The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord," 540.

Personal Generosity

It was this sense of his true home being in the Kingdom to come that helped Schaeffer to be a man with such a generous heart. When his books started selling very well (there was even a *Time* magazine article about him), he began to receive substantial royalties. This new-found financial prosperity did not change him. Half of all the royalties immediately went into the L'Abri general fund. He and Edith, in addition, would give a very substantial personal gift to every worker in L'Abri at the end of each year. He understood, in a way that very few Christians do, that we are called to be laying up treasures in heaven rather than on the earth. He took the Lord very seriously when he read Jesus telling us that “no man can serve two masters. It is impossible to love God and money.”

Awareness of His Own Sin

Francis Schaeffer believed passionately that the fall was a historical event that changed everything in this world. In particular, he understood that this meant that he himself needed to be always aware that he was a sinner in thought, word, and deed, and that, therefore, it was the mercy and faithfulness of God that brought such unexpected blessing to his ministry, rather than his own gifts, abilities, power, or righteousness. He was acutely aware that what he taught about the doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption must apply to himself first.

He would say that we each have to bow to God three times. We have to bow, first, as a creature, for though we bear the glory of the divine image, we are also totally dependent for life and breath and everything on our Creator. We have to bow, second, as a sinner, for we are in daily need of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ to take away our uncleanness. We have to bow, third, as those who are to be taught by God, who has truth to tell us in His Word. We do not have it by ourselves.

Favorite Scriptures

The Lord impresses particular passages of Scripture on all of us. There are many that were especially precious to Francis Schaeffer. One of his favorite

passages of Scripture was the Servant Song of Isaiah, found in chapter 50. In Isaiah's Messianic poem the servant, Christ, says this:

*The sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.*

Later in the chapter those who follow the servant are admonished to imitate his example of speaking the words of the Lord, rather than their own words; his example of trusting in God, rather than relying on themselves.

*Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the
word of his servant?
Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light,
trust in the name of the Lord and rely on
his God.
But now, all you who light fires and provide
yourselves with flaming torches,
Go, walk in the light of your fires and of the
torches you have set ablaze.
This is what you shall receive from my hand: You
will lie down in torment.*
(Isaiah 50:4–5, 10–11)

Schaeffer was passionate about these words. He knew that only God can establish what we do, only God can teach us what to say, only God can lead us where we should go, only God is sufficient for the challenges we face. He wanted to do the Lord's work in the Lord's way (see the sermon by this title in *No Little People*). He wanted to make a distinction between people—a biblical and theological distinction, and therefore an intensely practical distinction. On the one hand are people who think they are building God's Kingdom for Him (and therefore end up building their own kingdoms). On the other hand are people who pray that God will build His Kingdom and be pleased to use them as He does. This second way, Schaeffer believed with every fiber of his being, is the message of the God who has created us, the God against whom we have

rebelled, the God who has come to deliver us from judgment and from dependence on ourselves.

As I look back on almost 15 years of having had the privilege of working with Francis Schaeffer, my prayer is that this might be one way in which his example would influence me. That is, that I would always look to these unfolding themes of God's love for His people, and of His power and kindness present in creation, present despite our fall and ever present in our redemption. I pray this both for the wellbeing of my own soul and that I might, in God's kindness, be, as Francis Schaeffer would say, some poor blessing to others.

We could look at many additional aspects of Schaeffer's life and message, but it is by his work as an apologist that he is best remembered, and so I will spend the rest of this article outlining his apologetic approach.

Schaeffer's Apologetics

Francis Schaeffer said himself that the heart of his apologetics can be found in the three books *The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. These three books together set out an outline of Schaeffer's apologetic approach, the way he defended and commended the truth of Christianity. *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who Is There* are primarily an analysis and response to the dominant ideas in western thought and culture. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* also deals with many of the ideas set forward today as alternatives to historic biblical Christianity, but in addition it presents a basic Christian worldview in a more systematic way than do the other two books. Other summaries of Schaeffer's apologetic approach can be found in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, *How Should We then Live?*, *Death in the City*, *Genesis in Space and Time*, and by audio in many of the lectures that are still available on tape through L'Abri and from the tape ministry Sound Word.¹⁸

A lecture series that stands behind *He Is There and He is Not Silent* is entitled *Possible Answers to the*

Basic Philosophical Questions,¹⁹ which is an example of Schaeffer's apologetic method put into practice. These lectures were given several times at L'Abri in Switzerland during the decade of the 1960s, and that is where I first heard them. Schaeffer also gave them as a set of special lectures at Covenant Theological Seminary when he came as a visiting lecturer while I was a student there between the years of 1968 and 1971. I remember the lectures very well as I took them for one hour of seminary credit; consequently, I took thorough notes—notes I still possess and which I have before me as I write this.

But the primary reason I remember the lectures so well is that they were open to the public (though they were not widely advertised) and all through the week a handful of visitors would join us in the tiny seminary chapel. (Covenant Seminary has grown considerably since that time and now has a much more spacious chapel.) I remember one man, an unbeliever, who came faithfully to the whole week of lectures. Schaeffer covered the three areas of existence, morals, and knowledge and showed how in each of these areas "modern man"—or, to use his term, "modern-modern man" (today he would say "postmodern man"—is left only with the hell of alienation. Christianity, on the other hand, gives answers in each of these areas that are satisfying both intellectually and personally. At the end of the week he finished by saying that with the Christian answer there can be true beauty in each of these three areas. The young man who had attended so faithfully became a Christian as the last lecture finished.

I mention this story here not only because it is a precious memory, but also because it reveals something about the way Schaeffer approached his lecturing and his writing. The title of the lectures, *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophic Questions*, probably sounds abstract for many when they first come across it. However, Schaeffer was not interested in either abstract or purely academic

¹⁸ See, for example a basic lecture entitled "Apologetics," available online at <http://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-apologetics.html>).

¹⁹ Available online at <http://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-possible-answers-to-basic-philosophical-questions---part-1.html>.

apologetics. He was an evangelist—that is how he thought of himself and how he spoke of his ministry.

Those particular lectures, all the other lectures he gave, and all of his apologetic books were developed to answer the questions of both Christians and non-Christians who came and sat at his table in Huemoz-sur-Ollon in Switzerland, the village where he and Edith had founded the work of L'Abri. I personally know many people who became Christians while listening to his lectures, either when they were originally given, or as they listened to them on tapes at L'Abri or in other settings all over the world. Schaeffer would use the same approach that can be found in his lectures and books when he discussed the truth of Christianity with unbelievers or doubting Christians at mealtimes (as Edith served delicious food to meet their other needs). Or, if the weather was good, as he sat on the bench outside their chalet and talked with visitors to L'Abri, Schaeffer would urge them to consider the truth claims of the Gospel using the same approach. Or, as he walked through the forests, fields, and mountains of that lovely part of Switzerland, he would encourage his companions to raise their questions and doubts about the Christian faith and he would seek to give them answers.

Francis Schaeffer believed passionately that Christianity is the truth about the universe in which we live. God is indeed there, and He is not silent. God, Schaeffer would say, is not an idea projected from our minds or from our longings onto the giant screen of the heavens, a kind of superhuman created to meet our needs. God is not a thought in the system of a philosopher who cannot cope with having no answers to the dilemmas of our human existence. No, God truly exists, and He has spoken to us in the Bible to tell us about Himself, about ourselves, and about our world. He has made known to us what we could never discover by ourselves in our questioning and searching. God has spoken truly to us in His Word, and therefore the message of the Bible fits with the nature of reality as we experience it. To use an image, the biblical account of human life fits like a glove on the hand of reality. Christianity is true to the way things are.

Schaeffer was deeply convinced of this, and indeed every believer should be convinced of this. When we stand up in a worship service and declare the affirmations of the Creed, we are saying what we believe to be true:

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator
of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate;
Was crucified, dead, and buried;
On the third day he rose again from the dead,
And ascended into heaven.*

These affirmations are not like cartoon balloons floating loose in the air. No, they are statements about the way things truly are. The Christian is saying: “This is the truth about the world, about God, about history.”

Schaeffer often used to say, “I am more sure of God’s existence than I am of my own!” That may sound strange or extreme; but he was simply acknowledging that if God did not exist, then we would not exist. God’s existence is prior to ours, in time of course, but also prior to ours as He is our Creator. Human life is possible only because the Christian Triune God lives.

In the same way, God’s moral perfection is prior to our understanding of morality. God’s character has always been one of holiness, goodness, and justice. It is because God is good that we can affirm that there is a difference between good and evil. It is because God is good that we can commit ourselves to the pursuit of moral beauty. Morals are possible for us because God is moral.

In the same way, God’s love is prior to our love. The members of the Trinity have loved each other for all eternity, from “before the beginning,” as Schaeffer used to say. Because we are made in the image of our Creator we are designed to love, designed for relationships—a relationship of love with our Creator and relationships of love with one

another. Love is possible for us because God is love.²⁰

In the same way, God's knowledge is prior to our knowledge. God knows all things truly—indeed, He knows all things “exhaustively,” as Schaeffer would say. We humans are created by God to have knowledge: knowledge about the Lord, knowledge about ourselves, and knowledge about our world. We will never know exhaustively, for we are finite; but we can know truly, otherwise we would not be able to function at all in this world. Even despite our fallenness we can still have true knowledge, because of God's commitment to care for us and for all creation, and because of His kindness in granting His wisdom to the whole human race.

Knowledge is possible for us because God knows all things and because He upholds all things and because He has designed us so that there is coherence between us and everything around us. Because we know God, or rather, because God has made Himself known to us, it is possible for us to know ourselves. Calvin said that “It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face.” Schaeffer's statement, “I am more sure of God's existence than I am of my own,” is very similar—we can only know ourselves truly when we come to know God.

Because Christianity is the truth about the world in which we live and about our lives, it is proper for Christian believers to encourage one another, to encourage our children, and to encourage unbelievers to ask their questions, to express their doubts, and to raise their objections against Christianity. We do not need to say to the doubting Christian or to the unbeliever, “Don't ask questions—just believe!” We do not need to say when a Christian has struggles and uncertainties about his or her faith, “Just pray harder!” Francis Schaeffer would say, “If you try to load every doubt, objection, and question on the donkey of devotion—eventually the donkey will lie down and

die, for it is being asked to bear a load God never intended it to bear.”

God has made Himself known in his Word in such a way that we can think carefully about what He tells us; that is why, said Schaeffer, the Reformers were so eager to get the Bible translated and into the hands of all the people—so that they could read God's Word for themselves. In addition, God has made Himself known in the created order and in human nature in such a way that we can think carefully about what He has revealed. What God says is “true and reasonable”—to quote the apostle Paul when he is defending the message of the Gospel—and it is not “hidden in a corner.”

In the same way, the apostle Peter encourages Christians to always be prepared to give a reasoned defense of their hope in Christ. Schaeffer saw this calling as part of the birthright of *every* believer—not just of pastors or some specially trained apologists. He was terribly distressed when people would come to his home at the point of giving up their faith because no one in their church would take their questions seriously.

I remember one young woman who came to L'Abri filled with pain because of the response of her parents when she raised questions about the Christian message. Her father was a pastor, but as a young teenager she began to have doubts and she wrote down some of her doubts and questions in her personal journal. One day her mother started reading through this journal (though it was private) and was horrified to read there the struggles her daughter was having. She shared the journal with her husband and they threw her out of her home, declaring that she must be “reprobate” because of the doubts she had expressed. She was then just 16 years old!

This is an extreme example, but all of us who worked in L'Abri with Francis Schaeffer could share many horror stories like this. This kind of situation broke his heart, and he would devote himself to listening for hours to the struggles and questions of those who came to his home. He would say, “If I have only an hour with someone, I will spend the first 55 minutes asking questions and finding out what is troubling their heart and mind, and then in

²⁰ See Schaeffer's sermon “Before the Beginning,” available online from Sound Word at <http://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer-francis-before-the-beginning.html>.

the last 5 minutes I will share something of the truth.”

Some who came to the Schaeffers’ home were believers struggling with doubts and deep hurts like the girl I just mentioned. Some were people lost and wandering in the wasteland of twentieth-century Western intellectual thought. Some had experimented with psychedelic drugs or with religious ideas and practices that were damaging their lives. Some were so wounded and bitter because of their treatment by churches, or because of the sorrows of their lives, that their questions were hostile, and they would come seeking to attack and to discredit Christianity.

But, no matter who they were or how they spoke, Schaeffer would be filled with compassion for them. He would treat them with respect, he would take their questions seriously (even if he had heard the same question a thousand times before), and he would answer them gently. Always he would pray for them and seek to challenge them with the truth. But this challenge was never given aggressively. He would say to us (and he would model for us): “Always leave someone with a corner to retire gracefully into. You are not trying to win an argument or to knock someone down. You are seeking to win a person, a person made in the image of God. This is not about your winning; it is not about your ego. If that is your approach, all you will do is arouse their pride and make it more difficult for them to hear what you have to say.”

Schaeffer believed and practiced the conviction that it is God who saves people. Indeed, he would frequently encourage people to leave L’Abri for a time and go off by themselves to think through what they were hearing. He would say that we do not have to try to push and to pressure people into the Kingdom. He loved the words of the apostle Paul: “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). Because Christianity is true, and because God is the one who delights to draw people to faith in Christ, we do not need to put emotional pressure on

unbelievers, nor do we need to try to manipulate them into responding to our message. Rather, we commend the truth to them by seeking to show them that it is indeed the truth, and we pray for the Spirit to open their hearts to that truth.

In addition to his deep compassion for people in their struggles and in their lost state, Schaeffer also had a strong sense of the dignity of all people. The conviction that all human persons are the image of God was not simply a theoretical theological affirmation for him; nor was it just a wonderful truth to be used in apologetic discussion. It was a passionate shout of his heart, a song of delighted praise on his lips, just as for David in Psalm 8:

*What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.*

The truth that we are the image of God, a truth that is at the heart of all Schaeffer’s apologetic work, is, for him, a reason to worship God. This conviction of the innate dignity of all human persons had many consequences for Schaeffer. He believed and practiced the belief that there are no little people. He invited people into his home who were damaged in body and mind and he treated them with the same dignity and compassion as the most brilliant or accomplished visitors.

It was this same conviction of the dignity of people and his compassion for them that led him to desire to avoid aggressive confrontation with unbelievers. Earlier I referred to his refusal to “debate” with anyone, including a radical liberal like Bishop Pike. This conviction also led him and Edith into their work of child evangelism, to which I have also already referred—the Children for Christ ministry that Francis and Edith had begun while they were in St. Louis.

As I wrote earlier, this work eventually became international and was greatly used by God to reach children in many countries with the Gospel. Francis and Edith wrote the materials for the meetings, and Edith designed flannel-graphs to be used with them. These materials were translated into many languages

and he and Edith traveled extensively teaching others how to lead children's meetings. They would model this by leading a study with the adults as if they were a group of children. If one is able to find a copy of these materials (there were, for example, studies on Genesis and on the Gospel of Luke, the latter published in a different format under the title *Everybody Can Know*), it quickly becomes clear that Schaeffer takes the same basic approach to communicating biblical truth to children as he does with adults. I had the privilege of leading an evangelistic study for inner city children while I was a seminary student in St. Louis, and managed to find a copy of the studies on Genesis to use in my teaching. The study was, in essence, a beginner's version of *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions* and of *Genesis in Space and Time*, and I found it very helpful in communicating God's truth to those young children.

Obviously, in this context the communication of truth to children is taking place with the use of different language and with other appropriate adjustments—but children need precisely the same truth and ask just the same questions as adults: indeed, some of the most difficult questions I have ever been asked were asked by little children. In these Bible studies for children, Francis and Edith Schaeffer were dealing with the same fundamental questions about the nature of human existence and with the same wonderful answers that the Bible gives to these questions—the very same questions and answers that he presents in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. This is an important point to notice for several reasons.

First, Francis Schaeffer was sometimes criticized for being too intellectual. Some have said that he was dealing with issues that “ordinary people” don't wrestle with in the course of regular life. The fact that the same questions and truths could be used (and used very powerfully and in a way that was greatly blessed by the Lord) to communicate the good news to little children shows the inappropriateness of such a criticism of his apologetic work.

Second, in similar fashion Schaeffer was accused of making the Gospel too complicated. Why did he

not simply tell people the ABCs of the Gospel: You are a sinner; Christ died for you; repent and believe in Him?

His response was that all people (including little children) have to understand and respond to the truths of the biblical worldview; and they have to turn from their idols and from whatever false ideas they have put in place of God's truth. They have to believe “that God exists” (Heb. 11:6), to accept the truth of who God is and who they are as human persons before they can understand that they are sinners and that Christ died for them.

If people already share a Christian worldview because of growing up with a church background and with knowledge of the Bible, then, of course, we may begin with the ABCs, for this will make sense to them. But, if they are like the people of Athens whom Paul addresses (Acts 17:16–34) then we will have to start with the true nature of God and with the false ideas and idolatry of the pagan thinkers if we desire to make Christ known to them.

Schaeffer recognized that there are fewer and fewer people who truly hold to a biblical worldview. Consequently, he saw that it is absolutely essential with the majority of people we meet to begin at the beginning. The beginning for modern and postmodern people is denial or doubt about the existence of God and denial or doubt about the existence of truth. While these might seem like abstract issues, they are not in fact abstract. Rather, they are very practical. Nothing is more practical, nothing is more basic, than the conviction that there is truth that can be known. Without this conviction—and the more consistently people live with this loss of truth—life becomes more and more intolerable and more and more filled with alienation.

Another response that should be made to this criticism that Schaeffer was making the simple Gospel too complicated is that he did not develop his apologetic approach in a study far removed from the lives of real people. The answers he gives in all his apologetic writings and lectures were developed in the heat of battle, so to speak. His home was filled with people seeking answers to the questions of existence, morals, and knowledge.

I worked for almost 20 years in L'Abri, many of those while Francis Schaeffer was still alive. Our pattern was to tell those who came to our homes that "no questions are off limits." For if we believe that Christianity is indeed the truth, we do not need to be afraid of any questions or objections. Consequently, almost all the lectures that were given (and that still are given at the various branches of L'Abri) were given in response to the questions, doubts, and struggles of those staying with us. The issues addressed in Schaeffer's apologetic works are the questions of real people.

My own conversion bears on this issue. As a non-Christian I wrestled with several of the problems that are addressed repeatedly by Schaeffer. I wondered how any meaning and value can be given to human life. "Who am I, and is there any ultimate meaning to my life?" were questions that plagued my soul. I did not see any basis for being able to make a distinction between good and evil. I felt there was a difference, and I longed for there to be a difference, but I could find no reason for such a difference. Does not the same end come to those who seem morally upright and those who devote themselves to wickedness? Does it ultimately matter, or is it just an illusion to think that moral integrity is important? I was haunted by the reality of suffering. Is there any reason for suffering, any ultimate explanation for it, or is it meaningless in the end? Is it just that we live and die, we win some and lose some, we have fleeting moments of joy and longer periods of sorrow, but none of it makes any sense? And is there any resolution to suffering? Or do we simply have to endure it, either with passive resignation or bitter rage—as Dylan Thomas urged us to "Rage against the dying of the light."

When I was a teenager growing up in England in the sixties, many of my friends struggled with such questions; but most of them attempted to drown their anxious thoughts with alcohol, drugs, or promiscuous sexual encounters, or to bury themselves in trying to find a life which would give them "personal peace and affluence" (to use Schaeffer's expression). I found myself unwilling to take either of these routes, for both seemed a betrayal of everything I treasured (largely thanks to

my parents, who were truly good people and who were excellent parents with a genuinely happy marriage). For me, the lack of answers drove me to the very edge of suicide. I was prevented (thank God!) from throwing myself over a cliff one January day by the glory of creation even in the middle of winter. I felt constrained to keep searching just a little longer before taking such a final step.

About two weeks after this I met a Canadian, Mike Tymchak, a doctoral student at Manchester University where I was an undergraduate. Mike had studied under Francis Schaeffer at the Swiss L'Abri and held discussions, Bible studies, and sessions for listening to Schaeffer's tapes in his apartment each week. The first evening he led a reading and reflection on the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. It pierced me to the heart, for here was a man, Mike, and here was a book, the Bible, that took my questions seriously and began to give them answers. Over the next months, Mike played tapes by Francis Schaeffer that covered some of the ground retraced in the book *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Mike's own approach to my questions was the approach that Schaeffer takes. Within a little over a year and a half, Mike led me in a prayer of commitment one Tuesday evening in November 1966 as we knelt side by side on his kitchen floor. God had brought another reluctant sinner to Himself!

A third criticism that is sometimes made of Schaeffer's apologetic approach is that he believed that he could argue people into the Kingdom of God. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He stated categorically many times that argument alone will not save people. He did not say this because the reasons that demonstrate the truth of Christianity are inadequate. They are not inadequate; rather they are fully sufficient to persuade an open-minded person. People, however, are not open-minded. We are all rebels against God, with wills resistant to His truth. Schaeffer would say, as he says in several of his lectures, that to come to the truth men and women have to bow before God three times.

We have to bow first as creatures, acknowledging that God is God, and that we are not the source and origin of our own lives. Rather, we are dependent. Our hearts resist this.

Second, we have to bow morally, acknowledging that we are to see God as the Law-giver, that we are people who consistently have disobeyed His commandments and that we deserve His judgment. We are dependent utterly on his mercy in Jesus Christ.

Third, we have to bow in the area of knowledge. God is the source of truth and we are not. We are dependent on Him for understanding the world and even our own existence.

In addition to this recognition of the problem of the hard heart, Schaeffer understood that there are three elements, all equally important, to the demonstration of the truth of Christianity: persuasion, life, and prayer. This understanding was not merely theoretical. His life's work was built around the practice of these three elements.

Persuasion

We are called by God to make His truth known, and to demonstrate that truth to unbelievers, by giving them compelling reasons for faith. These reasons are found in God's own revelation in Scripture and in Creation. They are not the clever inventions of our minds. Schaeffer believed his apologetic method was faithful to Scripture and that he was using the approach of Scripture.

Life

We are called by God to live the truth, to demonstrate the truth of the Gospel by our lives. Schaeffer called the life of the Christian "our final apologetic," and he sought to show in his own life—"in some poor way," as he put it—the reality of "supernaturally restored relationships." He believed that the New Testament teaches us that the non-Christian ought to be able to see a difference in our lives and thereby draw conclusions about the truth of the message of Christ that we proclaim. Francis would often say how deeply aware he was of how the community life of L'Abri and the meals and practical care that Edith gave so generously to people in their home were essential parts of their apologetic ministry. He would tell people to read

Edith's books and not just his own if they wished to understand the ministry they were doing—books like *The L'Abri Story*, *The Hidden Art of Family Life*, *What is a Family?*, *The Tapestry*, and many more).

Prayer

We are called by God to pray that He would demonstrate His existence in the reality of His answers to our prayers. Francis and Edith Schaeffer prayed that God would bring the people in whose hearts He was at work to L'Abri. Schaeffer knew, and constantly repeated to those who worked with him, that the work of saving people is impossible for us, but it is indeed possible for God. He was a man of prayer who humbly believed that without the work of God in the hearts and minds of people all our labors are in vain.

Actually, I ought to have set these three points in the reverse order, for Francis Schaeffer believed, and spent his life practicing the belief, that prayer is the most important work that we do, whether in the task of apologetics or in any other area of our Christian obedience. In one sense, he would say, "Prayer is a work that we must do." But he would quickly add, "In prayer we are holding out the empty hands of faith to the God who is there and who can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine!"

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