

Lecture: The Life and Significance of Francis August Schaeffer
1912-1984

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Introduction:

I believe one of the most significant evangelical Christians of the 20th century was **Francis August Schaeffer**. In saying this, in no way am I implying agreement with everything he wrote or said, but I am making this conclusion on his overall achievements and contributions by God's grace. Many of us, having been greatly affected personally by him, are indebted to him for who we are today.¹ Just last week I was reading a 20 page interview of Timothy George, America's foremost church historian of the evangelical community, and there in the very middle of the interview was George's testimonial of indebtedness to Schaeffer:

I want to say that a person who was extremely important to me at this point was Francis Schaeffer. I met him at Covenant College in Chattanooga and I read his stuff with great interest. He was a man who believed the Bible and Jesus and yet he could talk about art and music and all this other stuff I was learning at the time. He was a model, to me, of a thinking Christian. He was also very important in helping me think about what a Christian worldview would look like....

His real influence on me was mostly through his writings and his example based on what he was doing at L'Abri. (R & RJ, Vol. 13 #3, 2004, p. 140.)

My goal in this lecture is to introduce you to this man, this little man, who wore knee-breeches (knickerbockers), had a goatee beard, was referred to as "sad-faced" (as *Time* wrote in "Mission to Intellectuals," January 11, 1960), and, as John Stott called him, was "a prophet for the 60's."

His Early Life:

Schaeffer was born in 1912 to German immigrant parents. They had very nominal connections to Lutheranism, but as a high school student, Francis was an agnostic. The atmosphere of the home was clearly liberal in thought. At the age of 17 he bought a book on philosophy and also started reading the Bible. The reading of the Bible really was the means of awakening Francis, and the centre here was seeing the Bible as the truth and Christ Jesus as the Redeemer. The way which God brought about Francis' conversion teaches us the various ways God uses. In addition, we will find that the emphasis on the Scripture as truth and the power of Jesus Christ will be significant for his later ministry.

He attended the noted Drexel Institute in Philadelphia before going on to Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia (then a Southern Presbyterian liberal arts college). At Drexel he had studied engineering, but at Hampden-Sydney he pursued the arts, graduating with a B.A. in 1935, the middle of the Depression years. During his B.A. years, Schaeffer taught Sunday School to black folks, something quite significant in the 1930's in Virginia, which shows his evangelist heart and love. The basis of his apologetic was forming during these conversion and post-conversion

¹ I will never forget being at English L'Abri, Greatham, Hampshire and coming down to breakfast to learn that Francis Schaeffer had died that night (May 15, 1984).

years. As Jerram Barrs described it, “The Greek philosophers asked questions, the Bible answered the questions which Francis had.” This will be significant in our discussions on worldview, but that is jumping ahead. Also in 1935 he married Edith Seville, a student at Hampden-Sydney College. As R.W. Ruesegger wrote, she “would become an able partner in his ministry and a well-known evangelical author in her own right.” (Edith’s father and mother were missionaries in China with CIM.)

Following graduation and marriage, Francis went to the newly founded Westminster Theological Seminary, which had only opened in 1929/30, chiefly under J. Gresham Machen’s leadership. As Machen died in 1937, Schaeffer’s time there overlapped briefly with his final teaching days. He also sat under John Murray and Cornelius Van Til, whom he greatly respected. The following years proved to be a controversial time at Westminster, resulting in its division into two seminaries only a few years after it came into existence. At issue were doctrinal questions, eschatology being one, but also that more nebulous matter of questions of ethos, somewhat representing the tensions of the fundamentals and fundamentalism controversy and just what separation really means. These middle years of the 1930’s at Westminster were thus very turbulent, and Schaeffer found himself pulled into the controversy, as were other students. He was greatly influenced by Westminster’s Van Til, yet by transferring to Faith Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, he also came under the influence of the other strain, fundamentalist Presbyterianism. He graduated from Faith Theological Seminary with a B.D. in 1938, and his first ordination was in the new Bible Presbyterian Church, which had split from the newly formed Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1937.

I stress these Westminster/Faith years because we will discover in the maturing Schaeffer arefined self-analysis of “how can we stand for purity, and yet not let it turn out to be ugly and harsh?” I see in these seminary years the root of what tempered Schaeffer’s ministry later and especially what shaped a distinctive nuance of his worldview theology – he brings in issues of piety, graciousness, and love – often absent in worldview literature and thought. We will refer to some of the small books that he later wrote, which will clearly reveal this mark/ethos of piety. (See, *The Church Before the Watching World* and *The Mark of the Christian*. I also believe Hans Rookmaaker, the mature thinker, will nuance his understanding of worldview in this same way, again out of his ecclesiastical struggles of 1967. Dare I say, Dooyeweerd tempered?!)

Following ordination, Schaeffer served three pastorates in the Bible Presbyterian Church, one with the Covenant Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. One aspect of Schaeffer which is often sadly neglected is his strong commitment to teaching children. During these pastorates he became engaged in such ministries, commencing home Bible studies in the neighbourhoods. It showed his compassionate, evangelical heart. I would argue that we will find the essence of this there at L’Abri also, only in a much more expansive way.

Also during the time of these three pastorates, Schaeffer became involved in separatistic organizations such as the International Council, etc. These organizations represented the world of fundamentalistic Presbyterianism. From this association in part would later emerge a man with a vision for a wider world of culture and the intellect and evangelism, having seen the weaknesses of fundamentalistic Presbyterian worldviews and influencing his own “love affair” with the world of Kuyper or Rookmaaker. His life clearly represents the strains of wrestling seriously

with issues of ecclesiastical and cultural separatism. One scholar, Colin Duriez, believes that Schaeffer's life falls into three phases: **phase one** as a fundamentalist Presbyterian pastor (1938-1947/8); **phase two**, the prelude work of L'Abri Fellowship, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and elsewhere (1948-the 70's); and **phase three** his move into Christian activism (the '70's until 1984), chiefly concerning abortion, euthanasia, etc. The schema has certain merits, but I am not sure I would want to be quite as defining for phase three.

1947 – Europe:

In 1947, Schaeffer was sent to Europe by the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions to assess post-war Europe and “to strengthen that which remains.” In 1948 the Schaeffers took up residence in Switzerland, and he became engaged in evangelism, church planting, and children's writing – posting these children's study materials all over Europe! Many of his detractors felt he would just become obscure in Europe, yet it was to prove just the opposite. Also in 1948 Francis met Hans Rookmaaker while in Amsterdam speaking. The day they met they became the closest of friends, walking the streets of Amsterdam that night until 4:00 a.m., discussing “faith, philosophy, reality, art, the modern world and their mutual relations.” It was Rookmaaker who exposed Schaeffer to much about art and also to Abraham Kuyper.

In 1951, Francis underwent what must properly be understood as a “spiritual crisis” when he came to see the terrible ugliness of the separatistic and sectarian movement he was a part of, with its infighting, unscrupulous power struggles, lack of true concern for evangelism, void of deep devotional literature, and absence of imagination in their hymns. There are several themes all intertwining here: anti-intellectualism, anti-spirituality/piety, and anti-cultural creativity. As we see Schaeffer's life unfold, we will see the development of his response to each of these during the remainder of his life.

Jerram Barrs says that what began to emerge in Schaeffer during this time of “spiritual crisis” was a deeper understanding of biblical truth, particularly of *creation, the Fall, redemption, and humanity*. Furthermore, there appeared a heightened compassion and a deep sympathy for the unbeliever as well as the believer, for their struggles and problems. Thus a deeper “true spirituality” and perspective on sanctification were emerging, not the moralism which Schaeffer saw in much of the fundamentalistic Presbyterianism of his period, “not the activism *for* God,” but a spirituality of trust *in* God. From this emerged a dictum which others have also discovered: “The Lord's work in the Lord's way.” In fruition from this in the early 1950's came, in Jerram Barrs estimation, Schaeffer's best writing, “The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord.” The two part article which appeared in London in *The Sunday School Times*, 1951, is revealing: “The Need for Both Purity and Love in the Christian Life.” 1951 was the year of real spiritual crisis. From this emerged his assertion that one had to have “present reality” or else orthodox theology does not have power or joy.

1955 – L'Abri (The Shelter):

Then came the decisive move, the establishment of L'Abri, in 1955. The year 1955 could have a theme for the Schaeffers – “The Personal God Who Leads and Provides.” (See, chapters 9, 10, &

11 in *L'Abri*.) A chalet was purchased and L'Abri Fellowship was established, while waiting on the Lord for the right people and for provisions. The leading for the Lord was central as a tenant, as was reliance on God to send the workers of His choice to aid the work. And the people started to come, countless unbelievers from all over the world – many of whom were converted. Also struggling Christians came, such as Dr. & Mrs. Rookmaaker and children in 1956. Dr. Rookmaaker gave lectures on Modern Art and Christianity, while at the same time he and his wife “gained new insight into truth – so new, and so profound a change that it became a turning point in their lives. Our [the Schaeffers] contact with them was to bring more than any of us dreamed of in the future of *L'Abri* work.” (Edith Schaeffer, *L'Abri*, p. 154.)

[One must also note here that in 1956 the Bible Presbyterian Church split with the majority forming the Bible Presbyterian Church, Columbus Synod, and immediately founding Covenant College in 1956 and Covenant Seminary in 1957. Eventually this body changed its name to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (1961) and then merged with the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod, to become the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (1965).]

From this emerged *L'Abri* in Holland and the intermingling of the two strains of worldview produced, I believe, something which was distinctive and unique. The next journeys of the Schaeffers to the U.K. – London and Cambridge (not to mention Italy) were in some ways like those of two traveling itinerant European evangelists, leading to what became an absolutely incredible tapestry of lives! Conferences emerged with lectures, music, and questions – the minds and souls of many being affected. This was no monastic retreat. The reign of King Jesus touched everywhere. The strains of Kuyper, perhaps, but not exactly. There was a very different ethos through it all. This was Christianity in which truth was demonstrated – freedom to ask questions about God's existence, yet this profound love, prayer, and demonstration of God's power. It was no secret that the Schaeffers found Amy Carmichael “inspiring.”

I will not take time here to provide annotations to all of Schaeffer's works but will make some Schaefferian general comments. The *Collected Works* comes as five volumes:

1. *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*
2. *A Christian View of the Bible as Truth*
3. *A Christian View of Spirituality*
4. *A Christian View of the Church*
5. *A Christian View of the West*

These thematic titles do justice to the basic thought patterns of his worldview. However, they miss a very moving ingredient which I find in his *Letters*. Here I feel something akin to Luther's *Tabletalk*. They show a very unique evangelist, pious pastor, and lover of souls who listened to the rude and hard. He was truly a man of compassion to the people. In terms of showing his analysis of our relativistic age, one should read *Escape from Reason* (1968), which chronicles what we now call the roots of our post-modernism. Also read *The God Who Is There* (1968), which traces the origins of modern relativism and the loss of unity in knowledge.

Jerram Barrs saw in Schaeffer a man who articulated a Christian worldview in a most profound manner. He was faithful, compassionate, prophetic, and never exclusive toward all the little people of the Kingdom of God. There is no doubt that he saw the biblical framework of **creation, fall, and redemption** as absolutely foundational to his biblical theology of worldview. There is also no doubt that crucial to his analysis of modern man was his clear thinking on Western culture's lack or rejection of moral absolutes. He traced this back to Hegel, who replaced the idea of truth as antithetical, therefore as absolute, with the idea that truth is synthetical or relative. Thus, modern man becomes existential and follows Kierkegaard. This shift from absolute truth in the Reformation period to relativism he saw as having spread three ways:

...geographically, from Germany to the Continent, England and the U.S.; socially, from intellectuals to the working class and then the middle class; and finally, by disciplines, from philosophy to art, music, general culture and then theology.

In his later writings, such as *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (1976), Schaeffer detailed the political and moral consequences of abandoning absolute truth. Politically, he held that without a Reformation base to unify form and freedom, freedom give rise to chaos which in turn leads to authoritarian government. In the area of morals, Schaeffer contended that biblical morality has been replaced by sociological law or the view that whatever the majority holds is right. As a result, the belief that man was created in God's image has been replaced by a low view of man, permitting the practice of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. Schaeffer held that only a return to biblical absolutes can reverse these trends, and he admonished evangelicals to stand firm on the doctrine of inerrancy and take a public stand against social and moral evils. (*Dictionary of Christianity in America*, p. 1051)

Over 3 million copies of Schaeffer's books have been sold in over 20 languages. This statistic alone is staggering. He has his critics. Van Til saw him as compromising apologetically to reach the masses. I firmly believe Schaeffer did not because he was truly at heart an evangelist. He never viewed himself as an academician. I think Schaeffer's world at its centre was shaped first by his sense of mission to Europe, next by his love for souls and his own spiritual struggles. Thus, his apologetic method really must be rightly termed "person-centred apologetic." There was in such a man the engaging conversationalist and listener because at heart he was an evangelist. From the 1950's until his death, at L'Abri, Switzerland, and also in the U.K. and in Holland there began "a pilgrimage perhaps unique in the history of evangelicalism."

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