

Remembering Francis Schaeffer

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In the summer of 1974 a committee headed by Billy Graham convened a conference on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland. Among the many papers presented at the conference was one entitled “Two Contents, Two Realities,” which begins simply,

There are four things which I think are absolutely necessary if we as Christians are to meet the need of our age and the overwhelming pressure we are increasingly facing. They are two contents and two realities:

The First Content: Sound Doctrine

The Second Content: Honest Answers to Honest Questions

The First Reality: True Spirituality

The Second Reality: The Beauty of Human Relationships¹

The paper's author was Francis Schaeffer. I begin my reminiscences of him here for two reasons. First, because this paper was my first exposure to his work. I was twenty-four years old in 1978, a recent college graduate. I had bummed around Europe for six months, prior to stopping by the Schaeffer's home in Switzerland. As I listened there to a recording of “Two Content, Two Realities” I was so intrigued by what I heard that I abandoned my travel plans and stayed put. Even now, twenty-four years later, I remain intrigued by Francis Schaeffer and his work. The second reason I begin here is because I can think of no better summary of what was important to him and what so fascinated me than “Two Contents, Two Realities.”

In the interests of full disclosure, let me confess here that I—as we used to say at home—was born and raised a Southern Baptist. My family has been Baptist for

several generations. Every pastor of every church I attended as a child was educated at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville during the 1950s. Thus my first impressions of Schaeffer were peculiarly Baptist. Those impressions? This man believes what I believe. His understanding of the gospel was the same as that I had heard preached in revivals by Angel and Homer Martinez when I was a boy. He was, I thought, a true fundamentalist, and thus was trustworthy.

At the same time he was unlike any fundamentalist I had ever met. He was well-read in a wide range of subjects including philosophy, fiction, and history. He took an evident delight in music, not just the Christian composers like Bach, but even wild secularists like Beethoven and Debussy. The visual arts, especially painting and film, were of particular interest to him. He would spend hours each week comfortably and amicably conversing with non-Christians. He was interested in everyone and everything around him. By the time I arrived at his home in the late '70s, it was a haven for an odd and delightful band of misfits from all over the world. They came to talk, learn, and live with Francis Schaeffer, one of the twentieth century's great Christian teachers.

Sound Doctrine

For Francis Schaeffer the starting point in any discussion of sound doctrine was the Bible itself. An ardent supporter of the inerrancy of scripture, he saw it as the most important issue dividing the twentieth century church.

Martin Luther said, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every point of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."

In our day that point is the question of Scripture. Holding to a strong view of Scripture or not holding to it is the watershed of the evangelical world.

The first direction in which we must face is to say most lovingly but clearly: evangelicalism is not consistently evangelicalism *unless there is a line drawn* between those who take a full view of Scripture and those who do not.²

Promoting and defending the doctrine of inerrancy is one of the earliest and most consistent factors in Schaeffer's work. One finds it early on in his work in his involvement in the International Council of Christian Churches, later in his participation in the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, and in his last book, written while dying, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. Throughout his life he evidenced this concern in his lectures, books, and in personal conversations and correspondence with theologians such as Karl Barth. He was convinced that twentieth century neo-orthodoxy posed an even greater threat to the church than nineteenth century higher criticism. Whereas nineteenth century liberals openly declared their contempt for the supernatural, neo-orthodoxy retained the language of faith, but cast off its moorings to Scripture. The result—an unstable amalgam of faith and existentialism—undercut the gospel as mere modernism never could, in that it sought not just to deny the authority of

Scripture, but to replace it with individual religious experience. Not that Schaeffer was opposed to the work of the Holy Spirit; quite the contrary, orthodox doctrine with no spiritual reality in it was "dead orthodoxy" and "there is nothing uglier than dead orthodoxy." Still he recognized that the heart of the challenge posed by neo-orthodoxy is the question of authority: does it lie in written revelation (the Bible) or in an inner feeling? To Schaeffer there was only one answer to this question, the answer given in his favorite hymn: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

To Schaeffer sound doctrine was more than just the doctrine of inerrancy; it was the Reformed faith. In the late 1970s his students not only considered his analysis of western philosophy and culture, they studied his lectures on Christian Doctrine, based on the Westminster Confession of Faith. His was the faith of John Calvin and his successors, a tradition to which he held with pride, but not without an awareness of its historical tensions. "There are those who are Reformed," he once said to me, "And those who are Truly Reformed," and added, "I'm Reformed." For Schaeffer simply saying, "God is sovereign" was not enough. One must add with equal force, "God is not the author of evil, and human beings are truly significant."

It is also worth noting that a commitment to Reformed theology did not move Schaeffer to separate himself from the wider evangelical community, nor did one have to affirm the Westminster Confession in order to work with him. When he established the L'Abri community in Switzerland and wrote the doctrinal consensus to which new workers would be held, he wrote it to reflect a broadly evangelical perspective, rather than a specifi-

cally Reformed one. This illuminates, in my opinion, the nature of his doctrinal commitments. For Schaeffer, adopting a creed did not prevent dialogue, but rather was the basis upon which he communicated with those who disagreed with him. When my Catholic mother-in-law-to-be came to Switzerland in 1978, she attended the discussion Schaeffer led each Saturday evening in the mountainside chapel near his home. It was typical of the discussions that Schaeffer fostered in those years, full of conflicting opinions and extravagant personalities. What struck her most forcefully about the discussion was the diversity of viewpoints it contained. "I can't believe you let these people disagree with you so much, Dr. Schaeffer," she said afterwards. "That's the heart and soul of what we do here," he replied. "Truth doesn't depend upon agreeing with me."

Honest Answers to Honest Questions

Since his death in 1984 much has been written about Schaeffer's apologetic method. Some see him as a disciple of Cornelius Van Til. Others place him in the classical tradition.³ While acknowledging his debt to those who taught him, Schaeffer himself often denied having an apologetic method. Embracing a method is easy; answering the questions of individuals is a far more difficult task.

Christianity demands that we have enough compassion to learn the questions of our generation. The trouble with too many of us is that we want to be able to answer these questions instantly as though we could take a funnel, put it in one ear and pour in the facts, and then go out and regurgitate them and win all the discussions. It cannot be. Answering questions is hard work.

Can you answer all the questions? No, but you must try. Begin to listen with compassion. Ask what this man's questions really are and try to answer. And if you don't know the answer, try to go someplace or read and study the answer.⁴

The goal of mere apologetics is often nothing more than to reassure believers that they have made the right choice. I have dozens of books on mere apologetics in my library. They are written by Christians, for Christians. Their purpose is to reassure people who have already committed themselves to Christ in faith that they have made the right choice. Mere apologetics functions after the fact of faith, not before.

Schaeffer was not satisfied with mere apologetics, because he himself did not come to faith this way. As a young man he read philosophy, a study that for him was never merely academic. Plato and Aristotle had written their books to give answers to people about life. Why read them as mere academic abstractions? And to Schaeffer, the young man looking for answers, theirs seemed more substantial than those he had heard preached in main-line Presbyterian churches. The turning point in his life came when, as an exercise in intellectual honesty, he also read the Bible. There he discovered, to his surprise, that the same questions were asked and sufficient answers were given. Schaeffer's conversion was not a Damascus road experience; it came through honestly wrestling with his own questions in light of Scripture. If there is a first step in his approach to apologetics, it is this: be honest with your own questions, for you will never be able to answer someone else's questions until you have answered your own.

It is also worth noting that Schaeffer

polished his apologetic craft in a secular setting. In his early years in Switzerland he spent many hours talking with students at the University of Lausanne, either on campus or in his home in the mountains. The chief obstacle to communicating the gospel to them was not the French they spoke well and he poorly. It was rather the ideas they had embraced, which ideas, in their experience, Christians had shown little interest in. Most were students of the social sciences, newly-enamored followers of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, or Karl Jaspers. They were convinced that the meaning of life is something each person creates for himself, that faith commitments are inherently personal and subjective, and that each person must find the truth that is right for him.

Schaeffer's response to them was more than, "Let me tell you what's wrong with Sartre, Camus, and Jaspers." He helped them understand why and how these men had come to think the way that they did. He helped them understand why such ideas are popular and where they may lead in the end. Most importantly, he helped them reconsider the gospel as an alternative to existentialism.

In his introduction to *How Should We then Live?*, Schaeffer says,

There is a flow to history and culture. This flow is rooted and has its wellspring in the thoughts of people. People are unique in the inner life of the mind—what they are in their thought-world determines how they act. This is true of their value systems and it is true of their creativity. It is true of their corporate actions, such as political decisions, and it is true of their personal lives.⁵

The danger in reading Schaeffer (largely to people who did not know him)

is to understand this statement primarily in abstract terms. To Schaeffer his commitment to think worldviewishly was first and foremost personal and practical. If you want to communicate the gospel effectively, you must first know your audience, what they believe and why, and how believing it influences their lives. Here is step two in Schaeffer's approach to apologetics: understand your audience and their place in history.

But, to Schaeffer, wrestling with one's own questions in light of Scripture and understanding one's audience was only the preparation for the real work of dealing honestly with honest questions. The practice of apologetics—the hard work—lay in putting this knowledge to work with real people. Mere apologetics is often satisfied with communicating information. Schaeffer recognized that the art of persuasion demands more than this: it demands patience, time, and compassion.

It is hard to appreciate the cost Francis Schaeffer paid personally for opening his home to thousands of people over the years. He was by nature a quiet and intensely private person; few people treasured order more than Francis Schaeffer. At the same time few homes have known less of privacy and order than the Schaeffer home during their years in Switzerland. Why would such a man open his home? One reason is that he thought God was calling him to do so. (Edith Schaeffer's book *L'Abri* chronicles the events that led them to this conclusion.) At the same time he opened his home for a very practical reason: living with people for months at a time was often the only way to find the time needed for their questions to be heard and answered adequately. A conversation that began at breakfast might continue not only at

lunch, but over the course of the next few months. Francis Schaeffer is often lauded, rightly so, for the insights that fill his books, but the truth is that he was often able to answer the questions of his generation more effectively than others simply because he took the time to do so. Here is step three in Schaeffer's approach to apologetics: invest your time and yourself.

True Spirituality

In 1951 and 1952 after having served as a pastor and missionary for many years, Schaeffer seriously reconsidered his own faith. He was not driven to this crisis of faith by questions the Bible could not answer, but by the lack of "spiritual reality" he saw in the church and in himself.

I took about two months, and I walked in the mountains whenever it was clear. And when it was rainy, I walked back and forth in the hay-loft over our chalet. I thought and wrestled and prayed, and I went all the way back to my agnosticism. I asked myself whether I had been right to stop being an agnostic and to become a Christian. I told my wife, if it didn't turn out right I was going to go back to America and put it all aside and do some other work.

I came to realize that indeed I had been right in becoming a Christian. But then I went on further and further and wrestled deeper and asked, "But then where is the spiritual reality, Lord, among most of that which calls itself orthodoxy?"⁶

A Hollywood version of Schaeffer's story would have him realize at this point that he had been wrong all along about his insistence on the truth of the Bible and the importance of having answers that make sense. Personal experience, he would learn, is the only thing that matters after all. Instead Schaeffer realized that honest answers to honest questions—important as they are—are not sufficient. Unless he

could see the reality of what the Bible promised existentially both in himself and in the church, he would return to agnosticism. Answers that made sense, but were not accompanied by the reality of God's grace at work in him and in his people were at best half answers; at worst, whole lies.

And gradually I found something. I found something that I had not been taught, a simple thing but profound. I discovered the meaning of the work of Christ, the meaning of the blood of Christ, moment by moment in our lives after we are Christians—the moment-by-moment work of the whole Trinity in our lives because as Christians we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That is true spirituality.⁷

I fear there is no single quote from his writings that can adequately capture what this realization meant to Francis Schaeffer. It not only reaffirmed his faith; it produced his work. By his work, I mean both his books and the L'Abri community he established in Switzerland in the 1950s. It is impossible to understand Schaeffer adequately without looking at both, for to him truth was not just something to understand; it can and must be lived in every area of life and culture.

This more than anything else about Schaeffer is what captured my attention in 1978. I had come to see a rather large gap between the sacred and the secular. The former included activities at church, in addition to devotional, ethical, and evangelistic activities away from the church. The latter included everything else, and while it was by far the larger (and in many ways the more interesting) of the two, it was inferior because of its worldly nature. My chief existential question when I met Schaeffer was, "Graduate school or seminary?" It seemed to me an easy

choice, until Schaeffer shook up my categories.

All of life short of sin is spiritual and meant to be lived to the glory of God, he said. All of life short of sin is *equally* spiritual and meant to be lived to the glory of God. There are no little people, and no little places of service. God can be as well-glorified and as well-pleased in your becoming an artist as he is in your becoming a missionary. Indeed, Schaeffer's own son became an artist and a film-maker with his father's blessing and encouragement.

To many evangelicals, Schaeffer's emphasis on the scope of what is truly spiritual was nothing less than an emancipation. My existential dilemma, simple as it was, had seemed to me a no-win situation. I could either choose to enter the church professionally and be cut off from much of life and human culture, or I could embrace the world and a second-rate spirituality. If this seems an exaggeration of evangelical pietism, it is only slightly so. After all, every Sunday for years, at the close of worship, I had been given the opportunity both to reaffirm my faith and to commit myself to "full-time Christian service." Schaeffer helped my generation understand that it is possible to be in full-time Christian service and not get one's paycheck from the church. He convinced us that we could have our cake and eat it too. We could embrace life and human culture short of sin, and know God's pleasure in doing so. Indeed, he persuaded us that this was more than permissible; this is what God desires of His people, the church, in every generation. Just as honest answers are empty answers unless they are lived, the Lordship of Christ over all of life is a narrow, empty concept unless it embraces all of life. Developing a Christian world and life view involves

more than striving to understand all of life and culture from God's perspective; it means building on this foundation, being salt and light in every area.

The Beauty of Human Relationships

The late Walker Percy once wrote that the dilemma of man in the twentieth century is that "he is like a child who sees everything in his new world, names everything, knows everything except himself."⁸ To be sure, this is not a new dilemma. Answering the question "Who am I?" is no more important or potentially troubling today than it has ever been. It is perhaps more difficult to answer it now, in an era dominated (at least in the west) by humanistic thinking. After all, declaring man to be the measure of all things does not equip man to measure himself accurately.

Schaeffer understood well both the human dilemma at this point and the Bible's answer to it. The "mannishness of man," i.e., his personal nature, is a reflection of the nature of God himself. We are made in His image. Likewise his "moral motions," i.e., his conscience, innately seeing the world in categories of right and wrong, is a reflection of the holy character of His Maker. Man's cruelty to himself and others is not evidence of schizophrenia, but of the fact that we are fallen and utterly in need of God's redemption and restoration.

Schaeffer's message was that the gospel not only gives us hope, it makes sense of who we are. More than this, it gives us a reason to fight evil.

On this basis we can have an adequate ground for fighting evil, including social evil and social injustice. Modern man has no real

basis for fighting evil, because he sees man as normal.... But the Christian has [such a basis].... God did not make man cruel, and He did not make the results of man's cruelty. These are abnormal, contrary to what God made, so we can fight the evil *without fighting God*.⁹

In its 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision the U.S. Supreme Court overturned laws restricting access to abortion in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Like the nineteenth century decision of *Scott vs. Sandford* it divided this country morally in ways that have endured and deepened to this very day. Some have suggested that it also changed the work of Francis Schaeffer. The early Schaeffer, it is said, contented himself with teaching; the later Schaeffer became a political activist. The early Schaeffer was content to be the missionary to the intellectuals; the later Schaeffer tried to be the conscience of evangelicalism. The early Schaeffer was respectable; the later, troublesome.

Those who were surprised at the strength of the later Schaeffer's stand against abortion in the 1970s had not been paying close attention to the early Schaeffer. It marked no change in his focus. Instead it was the inescapable result of his doctrinal commitments. What he referred to winsomely as "true truth," i.e., moral and doctrinal absolutes, does not change from generation to generation. It endures. The Christian's calling is not just to understand it, but to act upon it. To Francis Schaeffer, speaking of the freedom and dignity God has bestowed on human beings by making us in His image and redeeming us through the work of his Son and then failing to act to protect those made in His image would have been as unthinkable as understanding the gospel in its fullness and not responding in faith:

"On the basis of an unweakened Bible, we must teach and act, in our individual lives and as citizens, on the fact that every individual has a unique value as made in the image of God. This is so from a child just conceived in the womb to the old with their last gasping breath and beyond."¹⁰

Schaeffer believed with James that hearing the message is not enough. We must live as if what we say we believe is true. Not only does God have a right to expect this of us, the world we live in does too. The place for this demonstration to begin is in the body of Christ, the church.

There is a tradition (it is not in the Bible) that the world said about the Christians in the early church, "Behold, how they love each other." As we read Acts and the epistles, we realize that these early Christians were really struggling for a practicing community. We realize that one of the marks of the early church was a real community, a community that reached down all the way to their care for each other in their material needs....

My favorite church in Acts and, I guess, in all of history is the church at Antioch. I love the church at Antioch. I commend to you to read again about it. It was a place where something new happened: the great, proud Jews who despised the Gentiles... came to a breakthrough. They could not be silent. They told their Gentile neighbors about the gospel, and suddenly, on the basis of the blood of Christ and the Word of God, the racial thing was solved. There were Jewish Christians and there were Gentile Christians, and they were one!...

And I love it for another reason. There was a man called Niger in that church and that means black. More than likely, he was a black man. The church at Antioch on the basis of the blood of Christ encompassed the whole. There was a beauty that the Greek and the Roman world did not know—and the world looked. And then there was the preaching of the gospel. In one generation the church

spread from the Indus River to Spain. If we want to touch our generation, we must be no less than this.¹¹

The Final Apologetic

In the end the distinguishing aspect of the church to Schaeffer, “the mark of the Christian,” is how believers live with one another. There must be “visible love” displayed among Christians, especially in the face of our differences with one another. This is the “the final apologetic,” the one essential element of any presentation of the gospel without which the world is justified in rejecting not the gospel itself but our presentation of it. Sound doctrine, giving honest answers to honest questions, and practicing true spirituality are all worthy goals. Schaeffer’s challenge is that the church will never achieve them apart from a fourth: the demonstration of love in the body of Christ. The challenge to speak and practice the truth in love is without a doubt the most important and the most difficult legacy he leaves to the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To eat, to breathe
to beget
Is this all there is?
Chance configuration of atom
against atom
Of god against god
I cannot believe it.
Come, Christian Triune God who
lives,
Here I am
Shake the world again.
F.A.S. (from the preface to
No Little People)

ENDNOTE

¹Francis A. Schaeffer, “Two Contents, Two Realities,” in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 3, *A Christian View of Spirituality* (Westchester: Crossway, 1982) 407.

²Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester: Crossway, 1984) 51.

³See Gordon R. Lewis, “Schaeffer’s Apologetic Method,” in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruggsegger (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1986) 69.

⁴Schaeffer, “Two Contents, Two Realities,” 414.

⁵Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1976) 19.

⁶Schaeffer, “Two Contents, Two Realities,” 416.

⁷*Ibid.*, 416-417.

⁸Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983) 9.

⁹Francis A. Schaeffer, “He is There and He is not Silent,” in *Francis Schaeffer Trilogy* (Westchester: Crossway, 1990) 299.

¹⁰Francis A. Schaeffer, “Whatever Happened to the Human Race?” in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 5, *A Christian View of the West* (Westchester: Crossway, 1982) 409-410.

¹¹Schaeffer, “Two Contents, Two Realities,” 420-421.