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Francis A. Schaeffer: The Man

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IT GIVES ME much pleasure to speak to you about Francis Schaeffer at the outset of this conference. By necessity and design, this will have to be a limited portrait. I do not intend here to relate to you the details of Schaeffer's biography. His birth, childhood, family background, studies, and work have been carefully and extensively presented. A personal and intimate record is found in *The Tapestry*,¹ in which Edith Schaeffer has woven together many threads into an elaborate tapestry, on which her and her husband's fruitful life and their colorful family, past and present, are assembled before our eyes.

Colin Duriez has recently published an excellent biography of Dr. Schaeffer, *An Authentic Life*.² It is a thorough collection of insights and images from a number of researchers and from interviews of people, members of the family and others

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

2. Colin Duriez, *An Authentic Life* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

outside. Duriez was a student under Schaeffer in his earlier years. His biography is about Schaeffer's world of thought and practice. It also tells of the respect Schaeffer had in the eyes and ears of people outside a theological identity who had not expected Christians from a Bible-believing background to address issues of a philosophical, cultural, and political nature. Less insightful is the recent book *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* by Barry Hankins.³ This author appears to have only spotty familiarity with Schaeffer's world of thought and sees Schaeffer through his own presuppositions, and thereby fails to do sufficient justice to the person and his view of truth.

These doors into Schaeffer's life are available for those who wish to learn more of Schaeffer's thought and ministry. I could add minor details and personal observations: that he wrote his widowed mother a lengthy, handwritten letter before going on his day off every Monday; how he discussed Roman culture, ruins, and roads as well as current political and philosophical issues when he hiked on old trails; that he countered any blind optimism about the human race by looking at the "hair shirt" behind his bedroom curtain (in fact, he had a collage of pictures and articles by which he reminded himself of how fallen God's world really is). In this way he reminded himself of the immense cruelty of people and the brokenness of life in a fallen world. Also, I could tell you he had no time or patience for small talk; that he laughed over a few favorite existentialist jokes; and his daily prayer was that he would have neither poverty nor riches, deliberately not owning a car, staying in people's houses while on the road instead of hotels; that he gleaned ideas from any source, from books he richly underlined and annotated to

3. Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

articles gathered for future use in lectures and sermons. Once he used the playbill of a *Don Juan* ballet to scribble down in his characteristic handwriting thoughts that came to him during the performance. He then used the notes as the basis for a lecture on the unity and diversity within the sameness and otherness of a faithful marriage as it worked out across the many years between one man and one woman, who each change and become different at each stage.

However personal, my presentation will be, by virtue of the subject assigned to me, a focus on Francis Schaeffer as a person, to show why a considerable number of people in the church around the world look back to his life, work, and writing as the source of a more confident and even gutsy embrace of God's truth and love across all areas of life. The pleasure I have to speak to you about this is rooted in a lasting love on my part, and in an appreciation for the privilege of spending many years with him in close association and in a multitude of settings.

I first met him in September 1960, and worked closely with him for twenty-three years after completing my law and seminary studies until his death in May 1984. During eighteen of those years we were associate pastors in the International Presbyterian Church. We were also direct neighbors during much of that time (although he did not appreciate at all the barking of the dog we had collected from the pound to give it a home for a few weeks).

The first time I met Dr. Schaeffer (he had just returned from a lengthy visit to the United States to speak and for family reasons, and I had hitched a ride once again from Geneva) was a night when he was discussing with a table full of guests the view of God in theological liberalism. I remember Schaeffer saying that to the students following the view of Karl Barth and the Neoorthodox theology, there is no direct revelation from God.

The Bible is only a religious book, from which one may perhaps glean religious meaning in existential moments, in moments of crisis. God is for the Neoorthodox like the wind in the trees of a Chinese ink drawing: not visible, only vaguely indicated. There seems to be something there, bending the branches and moving the leaves, but in the end it is always more wishful thinking than realistic evidence. The viewer chooses to imagine the wind there, but there is no clear evidence of it.

Schaeffer had gone to Europe motivated by a burden to encourage evangelical churches and schools and people against the expanding theological weakness in the church after World War II. Higher criticism of Scripture had left the world with only a divine immanence in man and nature. This, combined with the atrocities of the war, gave rise to nihilistic existentialism and utopian ideologies, naturalistic and pagan in content. The church's response with a transcendent god of unknown characteristics could not resurrect God of the Bible. A different kingdom would now arrive on the shirrtails of Darwinism, fascism, and communism without his participation. Theologians talked about God, but had excluded any direct knowledge of God. Their vocabulary attempted to give hope, but could not provide any certainty of a good God, merely a hope for a random existential experience, perhaps: a bit of wind to move the branches in a Chinese ink drawing. Schaeffer used this illustration of what became known as Neoorthodoxy: "This theology and atheism are like two bottles of poison, with the difference that the atheist bottle is marked 'poison.'"

In this situation of despair, Schaeffer proposed, as so often in later discussions and during years of sermons and lectures, that the central proposition of the Bible that God exists is more than personal views and spiritual experiences. One can speak of the truth of God's existence because the text of Scripture and

the evidence of the real world give us a tightly woven net of interlocking ropes, which can carry the weight of life and answer its questions coherently. That net is held by God's hand, and he does not drop it.

Schaeffer's central contribution to the church during those years was the confident example and demonstration that the Bible is the inerrant text by which we have the only fitting understanding of the real world. That truth starts with God being there, thereby answering Sartre's basic problem: why anything exists. The infinite-personal God of the Bible is the only possible beginning of all reality, the material order of things, and the true personality of each man and woman. In a similar way, Christianity affirms our awareness of evil, horror, and death in the teaching about the historical fall of man. Consequently evil need not be denied, and while God fully knows the end from the beginning, evil is contrary to the nature of God himself and is abhorrent to him.

What I relate here about Schaeffer goes to the heart of his view of life, of God, and of man in history. I want to place particular emphasis on what was the core of his mindset, his way of thinking, and his view of reality. We shall find an honest approach, seeking answers to basic questions, questions about life and death, origins and purpose, knowledge and frustration, political authority and individual moral stands, etc. The particular way in which he approached these and other questions had a significant influence on thousands—some who met him and many more around the world who over the years only heard or read him.

This view of things for many years reached mostly individuals, and only a few at a time. Others were introduced to his view of reality through the many books he wrote and the several films he produced. He was amazed by all of this, but

also saw the wider and more important result of his work when his ideas were understood, valued, and applied. He understood that they would transform the way people would see their lives and their professions when viewed in light of God and God's Word to man in the fallen world. Schaeffer really believed in the power of ideas. He thought God's Word, realistic insights, and sensible analysis shaped human belief and good actions, while bad ideas and false religions and ideologies have caused much harm and suffering around the world. According to Schaeffer, ideas shape the way man sees things. They map out a course of action and they allow us to think through alternatives without having to experience them all. When they relate to a world of facts they are helpful; when they present an ideology contrary to the facts they are deceptive, neglecting the details of real life in favor of a desirable picture that lacks concreteness and plays with our dreams in blatant disregard for the real world.

Once in a Dutch airport he was asked whether he had any weapons, to which he responded in the negative. When his case was checked and a Bible was found in it, the female guard said with a smile: "That is a weapon, isn't it?" Schaeffer loved telling this story. In his book, *The God Who Is There*, he laments that we neglect the power of modern ideas, how presuppositions shape people's worldview. He then explains their development against a background of the philosophical despair following the denial of God, truth, and reason.

When Schaeffer showed how our culture had arrived at such a place, he unlocked the door to a philosophical and not just a moral understanding of our times. With that, key evangelicals could recognize the failure of secularism and participate more intelligently in life in the public square. Schaeffer had a major part in bringing evangelicals to understand their place in the public square. He saw no need to reduce the Christian view

of life to a personal relationship with Jesus independent of the wider scriptural context. The intellectual certainty of an inerrant Scripture about God, man, and history, and valuing what is right and good about human existence, were the essential components of his thinking. Schaeffer treasured what the Bible states about man made in the image of God. For him the spiritual person does not deny space/time existence, but sees it informed by God's Word, whose author is the Spirit. He taught and lived its truth, giving a high value to people even in their brokenness and encouraging them to fulfill the mandates of a life important to God and history. Sadly, that balanced view finds little room in churches, where mass is favored over mastery, where sensuality has replaced sensitivity, where religion counters but does not satisfy the mind. Sentimentality is mistaken as spirituality, and a focus on size replaces a concern for substance.

Yet Schaeffer's understanding of God's good news continues to encourage and to enliven people who apply what they have discovered for life in the marketplace and in the *polis*. His understanding is that Scripture teaches God's passion on our behalf, inviting us to live in society as family and neighbors, fully appreciating human efforts and work to do good. With the full-orbed view of life found in Scripture we can responsibly practice the lordship of Christ in different fields of endeavor, from the sciences to the arts and from the schools to the factories. It means taking ethics into economics and applying morality to humanize the market. I frequently meet people who treasure all of life more because of Schaeffer showing how sensible, coherent, and affirmative Scripture's program is concerning our existence.

Though the particulars of Schaeffer's life as pastor, philosopher, writer, and genuine human being may be less familiar today, his way of seeing God's truth is not really bound to time. He merely dusted off an older, frequently hidden perspective,

which had been neglected under the effects of Gnosticism and “holiness pursuits” within the church. In fact, he loved life, including but not limited to the human body, the material world, Canova and Bellini statues, fieldstones and running water, and old roads with carefully laid edges. He liked wrinkles on a farmer’s face and heavy carts to bring in the hay. After a Bible study in Lausanne, while he was waiting for the train home, he always sat with my wife (Schaeffer’s daughter) for an hour or two, watching people of all ages go by and spending time talking and looking around. He liked to work with his hands. Once he even worked to move an old church building to a new location in Grove City, Pennsylvania. He saw as unscriptural the dichotomy between a fascination with the spiritual/eternal and earthly necessities and occupations. A biblical view of life has the whole man, body and spirit, rightly alive under God.

For that reason he despised death and dreaded aging, which he saw as a result of the fall. Those forms of decline he fought, and refused to accept them. He talked about his cancer as obscene, and in no way saw it as the end of his life. He read through the whole Bible once a year starting with Genesis and the creation of a material world. He did not start with the New Testament and its promise of a way to heaven. For Schaeffer, redemption was not of the soul only, but of the whole person. He understood that salvation frees us from moral guilt and from the finality of physical death. It does not, however, replace a life in the body. We still wait for that in the coming resurrection.

His view of Scripture had further ramifications. God made man in his image within an originally good creation. Our categories of understanding are accurate, because they are derived from the attributes of God. They are not adjusted for the needs

of finite human beings, who then project human aspirations to the unknown beyond. The God of the Bible is not the *totaliter aliter* or “wholly other” of Kant, or Rudolf Otto in his 1917 book (German edition), *The Idea of the Holy*.⁴ God does not lower himself to anthropomorphisms to adjust to our finiteness. Instead, man is addressed theomorphically; that is, the concepts and words relating to our existence have their origin in God, the creator of the real world, not man. Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6, which addresses human beings as gods, because they can understand and apply God’s Word (John 10:34–36). Any continuity of categories exists from the Creator to the creature, not the other way around.

With this brief excursion from the Bible to Schaeffer’s view of nature and human existence, I wanted to show how Schaeffer’s insights helped the church out of its cultural ghetto. For many, he laid the intellectual foundation for wholesome relations between soul and body, mind and matter, aesthetics and ethics. For Schaeffer, Christianity is the only possible, intellectually viable explanation for all of reality.

Schaeffer taught that reality is originally a consequence of God’s ideas and power. God thinks, feels, and acts: God is a person, we are told in his *25 Basic Bible Studies*.⁵ Much of any cultural reality is in turn the result of the way people think, what they perceive, and how they act in the real world. “As a man thinketh in his heart so is he.”⁶ This is true for any person. Presuppositions about reality shape one’s beliefs and practice. Out of differences grows a critique of culture; they give focus to evangelism and apologetics. Cultures anywhere are not simply God’s work or composition, but the practice of good or bad

4. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

5. Francis Schaeffer, *25 Basic Bible Studies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996).

6. James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (1903).

ideas, of people playing either harmonious variations of God's Word and work or just a tune of their own invention out of frustration, habit, or despair.

This contrast reminds me of the first time I heard Schaeffer's voice. I had not met him yet, but listened to a recording of a discussion among students at Cambridge. The question he was answering related to God's role in history, whether all was sovereignly planned, including evil, death, and pain. Schaeffer reasoned that the universe either (1) is an impersonal everything from the beginning, without will or action or freedom, in which case all history merely takes place, unrolls, and happens according to a program; or, (2) started with a personal beginning, as the Bible teaches. In this case, history is real, and good and evil are the results of real choices for which God is not responsible. History results from free choices, and bad results follow the misuse of personal freedom.

Clive James would say it this way: "That's what history is: The story of everything that needn't have been like that."⁷ Evil, pain, and death do not just exist in the flow of things, but evil results from a deliberate action of the creature against himself and against God. God's critique of history after the fall is central to the way Schaeffer, the man, saw the Christian understanding of reality. It matches each Gospel. Mark starts with the "good news" of Jesus Christ for what is a very rotten world.

The freedom to lay things out, to consider options, to debate alternatives—rather than merely to repeat positions—made Schaeffer attractive as a person. It was to him the corollary to a sentence he used on many occasions, including the conference that turned out to be his last public speaking event. He said that there is only one reason to be a Christian, and that is because it

7. Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 15.

is the truth of the universe. There is nothing theoretical about it. Truth was not a construct for him, but a discovery of how things hang together. They relate to each other and to the real world. The tight correspondence between text and reality confirmed the known universe, which Schaeffer described as both the universe and its form, and the mannishness of man that could only be so on the basis of the “inspired” and not merely inspiring Scripture.

Schaeffer wanted to comprehend life in the real world. As a young man and as part of his studies for school he read through the Bible with the central questions of Greek philosophy on his mind. They had been raised and discussed in class by one of his teachers. Schaeffer wanted to know the Bible’s answers to these questions before he threw it out, but didn’t expect to find any. Instead, he found that the Bible not only admitted these same questions, but also provided fitting and interlacing answers. It was all like balloons tied to strings and held together in the hand of a vendor, who controlled them. Schaeffer thought he had found a previously hidden door that opens into another part of the world. The answers related to the reality of the world in which all men live.

Initially Schaeffer thought he had discovered something totally new, as the liberal church his parents attended took neither the questions nor the Bible seriously. Schaeffer was not interested in faith or religion, but came to conclude that the truth of the universe cannot hide in some mystery, but must lie before our eyes. He faced the puzzle of life, and wanted to examine and then put it together. Like a scientist, he was looking for a way to a world in which the questions lead to the answers like a shadow makes us look for the definite object. Reality presents the questions, to which only the Bible gives fitting answers. With his active and open mind, provoked by life, by people, and by all