

Francis Schaeffer— An Appreciation

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Barry Seagren received his BA in Physics from Haverford College and then worked as an engineer in the US space program. During that time he was converted and his life redirected. He received his MDiv from Covenant Seminary, graduating first in his class and winning the homiletics prize. During his Covenant years he spent a summer at L'Abri in Switzerland where he met his English wife, Veronica. After Covenant Seminary they joined the staff of L'Abri, serving for 23 years first in Switzerland, then in Southborough, MA, and finally in Greatham, England. Barry then became pastor of the church that had grown out of the English L'Abri, serving there for twelve years before retiring. He and his wife continue to live in England where they have three children and eight grandchildren. They try to contribute where they can in their church and community and family.

The person who touched me more deeply and shaped me more profoundly than anyone else was Francis Schaeffer. He had his faults and his critics. It's not my purpose to discuss those. I want to briefly recount his life in an attempt to show why he had such an impact on me and on so many others, and why his legacy is still crucial for us today.

Francis Schaeffer was born in Philadelphia in 1912. He was the only child of working class, unbelieving parents. He was converted at the age of 18. He had become interested in philosophy and was reading some of the Greek and Latin classics. He started to read the Bible, not because he believed it or expected to find anything in it, but simply out of intellectual curiosity. He used to tell of having Ovid and the Bible at his bedside. Over time, he found he was reading less and less of Ovid and more and more of the Bible. What he discovered was that the biblical worldview provided answers to the fundamental questions of life that philosophy was raising, but could not

answer. There was no dramatic conversion, but over a period of six months, all on his own, he became a Christian. That conversion gave him a profound confidence in the Bible.

He always argued the truth of the Christian faith in terms of these basic biblical ideas, what he called presuppositions.¹ Three themes ran through all his thinking: (1) the existence of the infinite-personal God as the only basis for meaning and for moral absolutes; (2) our creation in the image of God as the only explanation for our humanness—love, morality, language, creativity, spiritual aspirations; (3) a real space-time fall as the only way we can understand suffering and evil and still say that God is good. Only the biblical worldview enables us to make sense of reality.

He went to university, despite the objections of his father. Just before his last year at university he met Edith, the daughter of CIM missionary parents, and they were married right after he graduated. Then after three years in seminary he became a pastor. He had three churches, the first among farmers, the second among dock workers, and the third a city church in St. Louis, Missouri. He often said that the dock workers asked the same questions as the intellectuals, only in different language.

He was becoming a leader in his denomination, and in 1947 his mission board sent him on a three month fact-finding trip to Europe. That time was a turning point in his life. He travelled all over Europe, meeting all sorts of Christian leaders, and he spent his free time in the art galleries and museums. He was waking up to the arts and the humanities and to general culture. He was starting to see how philosophical ideas were expressed in art, music, cinema, etc., and how these ideas shaped the general culture and filtered down to the way ordinary people thought and lived. Ideas have consequences, or “ideas have legs,” as he put it. He was beginning to see the connections, beginning to see the big picture. He was beginning to understand modern culture: its nature, its roots, and how Christians can speak into it.

Years later, he opened his book, *How Should We Then Live?* with these words:

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. The results of their thought would flow through their fingers or from their tongues into the external world. This is true of Michelangelo's chisel, and it is true of a dictator's sword.²

His mission board then asked him to work permanently in Europe, and so in 1948 the Schaeffers moved to Switzerland. In 1951 he went through a crisis of faith. He was part of a narrow separatist group which often seemed more interested in fighting error than in loving God, and the cold orthodoxy nearly killed him. I remember him saying that he and his colleagues could drive hundreds of miles together to meetings and never once warm one another spiritually. He realized that his own spiritual life had become dry and joyless.

He spent weeks walking in the mountains, re-examining his faith. Had he made a mistake in becoming a Christian? Is Christianity really true after all? And, if it is true, where is the reality? Eventually he began to see some things he hadn't seen before, and he came to a new confidence in the truth, and a new walk with the Lord. A year or so later the Schaeffers were back in the States for a long furlough and he spoke on the theme of spiritual reality everywhere he went, giving 346 talks in 515 days. That material later became the book *True Spirituality*. He always said that that time was the spiritual foundation of L'Abri and that without it all the intellectual answers in the world would not have mattered. He put it this way in a long letter he wrote to a close friend in 1951:

I am not suggesting that I have learned to live in the light of Christ's command of love—first toward God, then the brethren, and then the lost. I know I have not. But I want to learn, and I know I must if I am to have that closeness to the Lord I wish to have, with its accompanying joy and spiritual power ... Only one thing [matters]—whether this day I'm where the Lord of lords and King of kings wants me to be. To win as many as I can, to help strengthen the hands of those who fight unbelief ... to know the reality of "the Lord is my song," and to be committed to the Holy Spirit—that is what I wish I could know to be the reality of each day as it closes. Have I learned all this? No, but I would not exchange that portion of it which I have, by God's grace, for all the handclapping I have had when I have been on the top of the pile. I have been a poor learner, but I'm further on than I was three years ago, and I like it.³

Back in Switzerland, the Schaeffers found that they were spending more and more of their time simply talking with people in their home. There were local people whom they and their children got to know; there were parties of schoolgirls on ski holidays. Always there was a warm fire and an attractively presented tea, and always the conversation turned to important matters. People were touched, and several became Christians. The mission board didn't approve, because it wasn't the work they had been sent to do.

In 1955 they resigned from their mission board and set out to live by faith and to care for those whom the Lord brought to them. They called the work L'Abri, which is the French word for "shelter." They wanted to provide a shelter from the storms of the 20th century. They set out to live by faith in four specific areas:

1. Finance: They would not publicize their needs. They would simply pray.
2. Guests: They would do no advertising. They would pray that the Lord would bring the ones of his choice, and keep others away.
3. Helpers: They would not recruit people to work with them but trust the Lord to provide the right ones.
4. Plan: This was the most important area. They did not have a plan. They did not set out to establish a residential study center, or a ministry to intellectuals. Mrs. Schaeffer used to say that "our vision was that we had no vision." They asked the Lord to unfold his plan for them day by day. They often quoted Isaiah 50:11 about the danger of following your own plans: "Behold, all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches. Go, walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled. This is what you shall have from my hand: you shall lie down in sorrow."

As they dealt with the people they met they stressed that a non-Christian has a right to two things. First, they have a right to ask their questions and to get satisfactory answers. The only reason to become a Christian is that Christianity is true. And if it is true, it will stand up to examination. No one should be asked to accept it blindly. They believed in giving honest answers to honest questions.

Secondly, the non-Christian has a right to look at our lives, individually and corporately, and see some reality, see that Christianity is not just a better philosophy. The founding document of L'Abri is known as *The Consensus*.

It says this:

L'Abri Fellowship's basic principle of practical operation is that of operating in all matters so as to exhibit (1) the reality of the existence of God, (2) the character of God—his love and his holiness, and (3) the reality of the supernaturally restored relationship among those who, through faith in Christ, are brothers and sisters.⁴

In those early years L'Abri really was just people coming into the Schaeffers' home as their guests. People came for the weekend, first friends of their eldest daughter who was at university in Lausanne, and then others as the word spread. The study program, with lectures and tapes, developed later as numbers grew. The Lord had led the two of them into a work in which they were both absolutely brilliant, and many were converted.

Edith Schaeffer was an extraordinary homemaker who absolutely thrived on people. She created a home where there was warmth, there was beauty, there was creativity; there was an atmosphere that drew people in and invited them to open up. She also prayed like no one I've ever known. Os Guinness, who was virtually part of the family in the early 70s, summed her up well:

Edith Schaeffer was one of the most remarkable women of her generation, the like of whom we will not see again in our time. I have never met such a great heart of love, and such indomitable faith, tireless prayer, boundless energy, passionate love for life and beauty, lavish hospitality, irrepressible laughter, and seemingly limitless time for people—all in a single person. There is no question that she was a force of nature, and that her turbo-personality left many people, and particularly young women who tried to copy her, gasping in her slipstream.⁵

Francis Schaeffer was superb in discussion. He listened attentively, drew people out, treated everyone with respect, and understood not just the question, but the question behind the question. He was also furthering his own education as he talked with many non-Christian European students and saw what they believed and how it played out in their lives.

One early visitor was Maria, a young woman who had been ostracized by her Roman Catholic family because she had become a Christian. Schaeffer said to her,

“Maria, if one day you have to leave home, you know that you can have a family with us.” She writes, “For the next seven years I went up to L’Abri almost every weekend and every other time I was free from my studies and my job. When the numbers at L’Abri increased, there was always a place for me, even if I could sleep only on the floor . . . The way his eyes lit up, and the tone of his voice, reminded me, each time, of the genuine affection that he felt for me, as he did for many others like me. He would ask me how I was and then made sure that we would have some time to talk and pray together before I left again for Lausanne.”⁶

One feature of L’Abri was the Saturday night discussions. Schaeffer would sit up on the fireplace and ask if anyone had a question. Someone would start, and the discussion would flow. About 11:00 pm he would say that he wanted to stop soon because he still had work to do on his sermon, but in those early days he often went on till midnight anyway.

A recurring theme in those discussions was the Lordship of Christ over all of life. Schaeffer enabled people to develop a Christian worldview and to apply it to their own fields. He helped countless people, artists, musicians, doctors, lawyers, teachers, writers, scientists, politicians, business people—whatever—to think through their own disciplines within a biblical framework and in a distinctively Christian way.

Richard Winter is a trained psychiatrist who was part of the L’Abri branch in England for many years before going on to teach at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis. He put it this way:

Had I not been so helped by Francis Schaeffer’s teaching, I wonder whether I would have survived psychiatry. In so many ways he helped me to build a firm foundation and framework within which to develop a Christian mind in the academic discipline and the therapeutic practice of psychiatry . . . Always I returned to a simple, yet profound, fact which makes sense of our day-to-day experiential reality—the fact that we are made in the image of the “infinite personal God.”⁷

When people hear the stories, it sounds romantic. Actually, it was terribly costly, and it still is. He could have had a more normal life as pastor of a big church. Instead he was buried away on a Swiss mountainside talking with a handful of people. They both worked far into the night. Finances were always precarious and sometimes desperate. Drugs came into their home; people

vomited in their rooms; all their wedding presents were broken within three years. They paid a price, but the Lord honored their obedience.

It was in 1965 that Schaeffer became prominent. He went on a speaking trip to the United States. First he spoke at Harvard and MIT, where the students loved him and the professors ignored him. Then he spoke at Wheaton College, the leading Christian university in the States. It was electrifying. As Michael Hamilton put it,

At Wheaton College, students were fighting to show films like *Bambi*, while Francis was talking about the films of Bergman and Fellini. Administrators were censoring existential themes out of student publications, while Francis was discussing Camus, Sartre, and Heidegger. He quoted Dylan Thomas, knew the artwork of Salvador Dali, listened to the music of the Beatles and John Cage ... Francis Schaeffer tore down the gospel curtain that had separated evangelicals from contemporary cultural expression, giving Christians object lessons in how to interpret sculpture, music, painting, and literature as philosophical statements of the modern mind. Future historian Arlin Migliazzo was thrilled: "Schaeffer showed me that Christians didn't have to be dumb."⁸

The Wheaton lectures later became the book, *The God Who is There*. This book is still the best exposition of his thinking and his analysis of modern culture.

Then he moved on to Covenant Seminary and gave a two-week course covering the same material. This is where I came in. I was a first year student and a fairly new Christian. We were bowled over. He was talking about Kant and Hegel, about Van Gogh and Picasso, about existentialism and modern mysticism. I was just a dumb kid from Pittsburgh. He was opening doors. I was getting a good theological training but he opened the doors much wider. How do we know all this Christian stuff is true? And, if it is true, how does it relate to the modern world?

After that, L'Abri became the place to go and Schaeffer the man to quote. There were the tapes, hundreds of tapes. He initially resisted making tapes because he felt it would inhibit discussion, and the tapes only began when someone, with Mrs. Schaeffer's connivance, hid a mike in the flowers. Everyone loved it and wanted a copy. There were the books—24 books, selling 3 million copies in 20 languages. There were the speaking invitations – all

over the world. There were the films, beginning with *How Should We Then Live?* in 1976. And there were the L'Abri conferences, beginning with one at Ashburnham in Kent in 1968. The work soon expanded beyond Switzerland and today there are branches in Australia, Brazil, England, Holland, Korea, Massachusetts, Minnesota, South Africa, and Switzerland.

Gene Veith described his experience with the films.

I remember leading a series of discussions on the film *How Should We Then Live?* for a little small-town church in Oklahoma. Few of the people watching these films were well-educated. Most of them were sophisticated in their faith, but not in ways the academic world would respect. Yet here they were, urgently and perceptively discussing Michelangelo and Rousseau. They were seeing in modern art reflections of the problems their children were having with their friends. They were noticing the clash of world views evident in political discussions and in TV shows. They were understanding how modern ways of thinking and everyday problems have their origin in the past and how they themselves are part of a dynamic Western culture. These people were recovering their heritage. They were being equipped for ministering as Christians to the modern world.⁹

Michael Hamilton summed up the Schaeffers' ministry: "During the next two decades (from 1965) the Schaeffers organized a multiple-thrust ministry that reshaped American evangelicalism. Perhaps no intellectual save C. S. Lewis affected the thinking of evangelicals more profoundly; perhaps no leader of the period save Billy Graham left a deeper stamp on the movement as a whole."¹⁰

He never lived to see many of today's trends, but those of us who knew him, as we watch things unfold and try to understand them, have said to one another, "Schaeffer was right."

Then in 1978 he learned that he had cancer. He went to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for treatment, which led to a L'Abri branch being established there. He fought the cancer and continued his work for nearly six years, but finally the cancer prevailed. He had to move permanently to Rochester late in 1983 and he died at home on May 15, 1984. I remember being in a staff meeting that day at the English branch of L'Abri. Ronald Macaulay, his son-in-law, came in with the news that he had died. We all wept over the passing of a great man and a good friend and a spiritual father.

What did I learn from Schaeffer? Perhaps I should say, what do I wish I had learned more thoroughly from him? Most of it I have touched on already, but let me try to draw it together.

1. He gave me confidence in Christianity as truth. “True truth” was his phrase. Not just spiritual truth, or religious truth, or my truth, but the truth of what is there, truth in contrast to the relativism and post-modernism of our age. And truth that can be rationally defended – not blind faith, but honest answers for honest questions.
2. He helped me to understand the world from a biblical perspective. As he often put it, “ideas have legs.” He argued that many of the good things in western culture are the outworking of biblical ideas, especially from the Reformation onwards; many of the sorrows we now see are the outworking of non-Christian ideas as our culture increasingly turns its back on its Christian heritage. And he wasn’t just interested in cultural analysis or academic apologetics; he was interested in helping people live, in helping them understand and engage and change their culture.
3. He showed me a spirituality that was both real and human. Christ is Lord over the whole of life. Every part of life is spiritual. There was no separation between the sacred and the secular in either his thinking or his living. There was no false piety, no holy language, no Sunday morning religiosity. There were no gimmicks, no how-to-do-it techniques. He was never flippant, never trivialized things. He was a man who was deeply flawed and never tried to pretend otherwise; he acknowledged his own struggles. Whenever I led the Sunday service at the Swiss L’Abri chapel, if he was there I always asked him to pray because it did me so much good. He was a man crying out to the God whom he loved dearly but often perceived only dimly. He talked about exhibiting simultaneously the holiness of God and the love of God. That is exactly what he did, never perfectly but always genuinely.
4. He taught me to treat every individual with compassion. This is something that touched those of us who knew him. His book of sermons is called *No Little People*, and he practiced it. There were no little people with Schaeffer. He took the most lost young back-packer as seriously as the most prominent Christian leader. He always had time for the individual; when you spoke with him, you never felt that he had a million more important things to do. I never saw him put anyone down or make fun of them. I never saw him treat any person, or their question, dismissively. People mattered to

him. He was a remarkable pastor.

I'll give Os Guinness the last word: "I have never met anyone anywhere like Francis Schaeffer, who took God so passionately seriously, people so passionately seriously, and truth so passionately seriously."¹¹

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- ¹ There has been much discussion of the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til versus that of Francis Schaeffer. Having listened to both men, my simple take on it is that they used the word differently. For Van Til, a presupposition was virtually an axiom, a statement that must be accepted before discussion can be meaningful. For Schaeffer, our presuppositions are our basic ideas, the building blocks of the Christian worldview, but ones that we hold for good and sufficient reasons and are prepared to discuss and defend.
- ² Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976), 19.
- ³ Lane T. Dennis, ed., *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 39-40.
- ⁴ *The Consensus of Faith*, usually known more simply as *The Consensus* is a brief three page document drawn up by the Schaeffers at the beginning of the work, distributed internally and never changed.
- ⁵ Os Guinness, "Fathers & Sons: Francis Schaeffer, Frank Schaeffer and *Crazy for God*" [accessed 26 August 2020]. Online: <https://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/book-review-resources/2008/fathers-sons-francis-schaeffer-frank-schaeffer-and-crazy-for-god/>
- ⁶ Maria Walford-Dellu, "You Can Have a Family with Us," in *Francis A. Schaeffer: Portraits of the Man and his Work* (Lane T. Dennis, ed.; Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1986), 132-133.
- ⁷ Richard Winter, "The Glory and Ruin of Man," in *Francis A. Schaeffer: Portraits of the Man and his Work*, 86-87.
- ⁸ Michael S. Hamilton, "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer" (*Christianity Today*, March 3, 1977), 26-27.
- ⁹ Gene Edward Veith, "The Fragmentation and Integration of Truth," in *Francis A. Schaeffer: Portraits of the Man and his Work*, 47.
- ¹⁰ Hamilton, "The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer," 22.
- ¹¹ Os Guinness, "Fathers & Sons."