

FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

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Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1984) spent most of his adult life with his wife Edith and their four children in Switzerland where they founded L'Abri Fellowship, the story of which can be found in Edith Schaeffer's wonderful book, *The Tapestry*. Over the years, hundreds of people came to L'Abri where many found Christ as Schaeffer listened carefully to their questions and helped them to see how historic Christianity answered those questions. Consequently, Schaeffer eventually earned the reputation of having a mission to the European intellectual. In 1960, *Time* magazine referred to Schaeffer's ministry noting that "the European intellectual is the single object of the Schaeffers' mission in the mountains."¹ However, they had been sent to war-torn Europe in 1948 by the Presbyterian mission board to work among the children, many who had been orphaned by the war. That often comes as a surprise to those not well acquainted with Schaeffer, because by the time he was well-known, it was not for children's work, but work among young people and intellectuals.

To understand Schaeffer's approach to evangelism, one must give attention to the three works that reveal the foundation of his understanding of man, reality, and the Bible. Three books serve as the foundation for all his other books, forming a trilogy: "*The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. All the other books fit into these as spokes of the wheel into the hub."² In 1982, the works of Francis Schaeffer were edited by Schaeffer and published in a five-volume set in which the trilogy is in the order in which they

¹ Editorial, "Mission to the Intellectuals," *Time* (Jan 11, 1960), 62.

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is There* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), x.

were written. This order reveals the development and foundation of his thinking apologetically and is essential to understanding Schaeffer and his apologetic method.

The Trilogy³

Schaeffer's view of man shaped much of his apologetic approach (which for him was part and parcel of his evangelism). Historic Christianity, according to Schaeffer, was creation centered and central to creation was that God created man in his image. The first apologetic implication of creation was that man had intrinsic worth which meant he was to be treated with respect and love. This truth shaped Schaeffer's life and ministry as he was motivated and directed by love and compassion for man as a person. Apologetics, he urged, must be "shaped on the basis of love for the person as a person."⁴ As Bryan Follis notes, "we need to emphasize that the love being displayed by the Schaeffers was not just a tool being used to commend their apologetic. Indeed I would maintain that the apologetics of Francis Schaeffer flowed from his love for people."⁵

While Schaeffer did not minimize the historic fall recorded in Genesis, he argued that the fall "did not lead to *machineness*, but to *fallen-manness*."⁶ There was a greatness to man even though he could also be very cruel. Schaeffer's point:

Perhaps you do not like the word *nobility*, but whatever word you choose, there is something great about man. I want to add here that evangelicals have often made a serious mistake by equating the fact that man is lost and under God's judgment with the idea that man is nothing—a zero. . . . There is something great about man, and we have lost perhaps our greatest opportunity of evangelism in our generation by not insisting that it is the Bible which explains *why* man is great."⁷

³ *The God Who Is There, Escape From Reason, and He Is There and He Is Not Silent.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵ Bryan Follis, *Truth with Love* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 137.

⁶ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 67.

⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 278.

This truth moved Schaeffer to take all men seriously and to answer the honest questions of fallen man. Furthermore, the Christian must take care to understand the person by looking carefully at cultural artifacts. Schaeffer was brilliant at discerning underlying worldviews and presuppositions revealed in cultural artifacts.⁸

The second apologetic implication of creation is that man can understand the world in which he lives because created reality is stable and intelligible. The categories of the mind of man correspond to the structure of the world as God had created both. The result—there is common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian. This is not something man put upon the universe; it is simply the way it is. Man lives in a morally structured, rational universe and no matter how he might try to live against the way the universe is, Schaeffer was sure it would push back at him and create tension for his presuppositions.

It is the Christian's apologetic task, according to Schaeffer, to show man where the point of tension existed between his presuppositions and the way the world really is. Schaeffer's approach was to "push him [man] towards the logic of his position in the area of his own real interests....If it is art, then gently and yet firmly we push him from the point of tension to the end of his presuppositions."⁹ Apologetically, he noted that "at the point of tension the person is not in a place of consistency in his system, and the roof is built *as a protection against the blows of the real world*, both internal and external....The Christian, lovingly, must remove the shelter and allow the truth of the external world and of what man is, to beat upon him."¹⁰ Of course this was not a game for Schaeffer and he urged the Christian always to give the answer as understood in light of historic Christianity and to do so in a loving and compassionate tone. He was convinced

⁸ This is most obvious in his film series (and book by the same title) *How Should We Then Live?*

⁹ Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 139.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

that when speaking to the non-Christian “the truth that we let in first is not a dogmatic statement of the truth of the Scriptures, but the truth of the external world and the truth of what man himself is.”¹¹ For Schaeffer, the real point of contact with the modern (and post modern mind) was reality. Regardless what presuppositions a man claims as grounds for his worldview, Schaeffer shows how they can be tested for truthfulness when pressed against the reality in which every person must live.

We may conclude that Schaeffer remains an important apologetic resource for Christians in the 21st century.

¹¹Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 140-141.