

The Critiques of Francis Schaeffer's Work

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to discuss Francis Schaeffer's life and thought, with special emphasis on his apologetics. The primary resource is one of his books, 'How Should We Then Live?' and also several books about Schaeffer from various other authors: (1) Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique by Thomas Morris, (2) Reflection on Francis Schaeffer, edited by Ronald W. Ruesegger, and (3) Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message, written by Louis Gifford Parkhurst, Jr. In his method of apologetical verification, he used of elements of common ground as a point of contact with unbelievers. Unlike the inductive approach, he majors on inner, existential values as well as outer empirical data. In contrast with the pre-suppositional approach, Schaeffer's method discovers and appeals to factual and personal data in confirmation of his hypothesis

Keywords: apologetics, presupposition, verificationist

Abstrak

Tulisan ini mencoba untuk mendiskusikan kehidupan dan pemikiran Francis Schaeffer, terutama pada bidang apologetik. Bahan utama diskusi adalah berasal dari bukunya yang berjudul How Should we Then Live, dan juga pengarang-pengarang lainnya yang membahas pemikiran Shaeffer dalam buku-bukunya antara lain: (1) Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique by Thomas Morris, (2) Reflection on Francis Schaeffer, edited by Ronald W. Ruesegger, dan (3) Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message, written by Louis Gifford Parkhurst, Jr. Dalam metodenya verifikasi apologetik, Shaeffer menggunakan unsur-unsur kesamaan sebagai titik kontak dengan orang-orang yang belum mengenal Tuhan. Berbeda dengan pendekatan induktif, ia mengutamakan pada bagian dalam (inner) manusia, nilai-nilai eksistensial dan data-data empiris. Berbeda dengan pendekatan pre-suposisi, metode Schaeffer membuka banyak data faktual dan personal yang mengonfirmasi hipotesisnya.

Kata kunci: apologetika, pre-suposisi, verifikasiasionalis



Introduction

My curiosity to know more about Francis Schaeffer increased the first time I saw the film *How Should We Then Live* at the Christ For the Nations Institute in Dallas three years ago. A small man, with a bulging forehead, furrowed brow, and goatee beard narrated the documentary film with a strong orthodox protestant background.

Francis August Schaeffer is one of the leading figures in what has been called “the evangelical renaissance.” In 1948, after a ten-year pastorate in the United States, he went with his family to Switzerland as a missionary. In 1955, he and his wife began L’Abri Fellowship in the small town of Huemoz, Switzerland. Gradually, students traveling in Europe began to hear about L’Abri—that a man lived there who was relating orthodox biblical Christianity to contemporary culture and philosophical problems (Morris, 1976). In Schaeffer’s own words:

At L’Abri, I listened as well as talked. I learned something about twentieth-century thinking, in many fields, across many disciplines. Gradually, people began to come from the ends of the earth—not only students but professors. They heard that L’Abri was a place where one could discuss the great twentieth-century questions quite openly. To the best of my ability I gave the Bible answer. . But all the time I tried to listen and learn the thought forms of these people. I think that my knowledge, whatever it is, is formed from two factors: 1) 40 years of hard study, and 2) trying to listen to the twentieth-century man as he talked (Morris, 1976).

Schaeffer’s work became internationally known and his impact widely experienced by many people around the world, especially since all of his books and discussions were published widely.

This paper will attempt to reflect Francis Schaeffer’s life and thought, with special emphasis on his apologetics. The primary resource was one of his books *How Should We Then Live* and also several books about Dr. Schaeffer from many authors: (1) Francis Schaeffer’s *Apologetics: A Critique* by Thomas Morris, (2) *Reflection on Francis Schaeffer*, edited by Ronald W. Ruesegger, and (3) *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, written by Louis Gifford Parkhurst, Jr. First, a brief biography of Dr. Schaeffer will be presented, followed by an examination of *How Should We Then Live*, then Francis Schaeffer’s apologetics method will be discussed, and finally, critiques of Francis Schaeffer’s works will be presented.

Francis Schaeffer’s Biography

In Philadelphia in the late 1920's, a young teenage boy decided that he didn't need God. He had tried church, and it didn't give him the answers he was looking for. After a time of living as a self-proclaimed agnostic, he decided to read the Bible, beginning with Genesis, and see for himself if God exists. Within six months, he was convinced that God is real and that the Bible is His revealed Word to mankind. In 1930, eighteen-year-old Francis August Schaeffer prayed to receive Christ as his Savior.



From that day, for more than fifty years, Schaeffer was passionately committed to the proclamation and rational defense of the Gospel. One of the foremost Christian thinkers and apologists of this century, he wrote twenty-four books, which have been translated into more than twenty languages. Schaeffer's basic message is the same - God's Word is the only guide man needs to interpret his past and solve contemporary problems.

When Schaeffer graduated from Faith Theological Seminary in 1938, the United States faced many perplexing new social and religious problems. The evangelical movement was threatened by encroaching liberal ideologies, which argued that the Bible is not a reliable source of truth. He and his wife Edith, whom he had met at a church theology debate, were both eager for opportunities to speak out in defense of conservative doctrine.

As a pastor of several churches throughout Pennsylvania and Missouri, Schaeffer was grieved at the compromise he saw in many mainline Protestant denominations. Then, in the late 1940's, he toured Europe on behalf of the American Council of Christian Churches. To his astonishment, he saw even greater needs there and moved to Switzerland to work with youth.

The Schaeffer founded the Children for Christ ministry in 1948 in Lausanne. With three daughters himself already, Schaeffer was familiar with the challenges of teaching young people. In the meantime, he continued touring, lecturing, and studying history and philosophy.

In 1951, Schaeffer's heart became troubled. He wasn't sure where God was leading him, and he questioned his convictions. He remembered, "I felt a strong burden to stand for the historical Christian position, and for the purity of the visible church. As I rethought my reasons for being a Christian, I saw again that there were totally sufficient reasons to know that the infinite-personal God does exist and Christianity is true."

But what was the best way to reach cultures so closed to God's Word? Schaeffer was convicted to start right where he lived in Switzerland. In 1955, he formally opened his chalet in Huemoz as a "home" for solid Bible teaching, where anyone could come and listen to thought-provoking analysis of Scripture. This haven of spiritual rest and discovery was named L'Abri.

Throughout the remainder of the 1950's, but especially in the 1960's when authority and "the establishment" were most severely questioned, L'Abri drew thousands of visitors. How did it keep going? Edith Schaeffer explains: "We prayed that God would bring the people of His choice...send in the needed financial means to care for us all, and open His plan to us."

The Lord continued to unfold His purposes. In 1968, Schaeffer published his first two books *Escape From Reason* and *The God Who Is There*. In these landmark works he explored ways in which other philosophies have failed to adequately come to terms with real-world problems. Gradually, the work that Schaeffer had been developing for years gained recognition, especially in the United States.

It was largely the U. S. Supreme Court's 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision, which



opened the door to legal abortions on demand that drew Schaeffer's interest back to America. In the book *How Should We Then Live?* Schaeffer addressed the foundational problems which led to this devaluing of human life.

Schaeffer continued to proclaim the message of the inerrant Word. When Schaeffer was diagnosed with cancer in 1981 and given only six months to live, he did not cease his labor. The Lord gave him three more years of active teaching and exhorting. His illness, with its long and sometimes debilitating treatments, gave him fresh opportunities to address nationwide medical concerns. Schaeffer died in his home on May 15, 1984. As President Ronald Reagan said: "It can rarely be said of an individual that his life touched many others and affected them for the better; it will be said of Dr. Francis Schaeffer that his life touched millions of souls and brought them to the truth of their Creator (Gifford Parkhurst, Jr., 1986 & In Touch Ministry Web Site, accessed April 22nd, 1998). ."

Francis Schaeffer's Thought

For this part of paper the author looked at one of his books: *How Should We Then Live*.

In this book, Schaeffer starts with a chapter about "The Roman Age." In the Roman age there were two perspectives on life. The Roman perspective was grounded on an infinite, absolute base of God. Schaeffer argues that the Christian perspective is the better one because the Roman Empire collapsed whereas Christianity continues to this day. Finally, toward the end of the chapter, Schaeffer draws some parallels between the world of Rome and our own.

Chapter two is "The Middle Ages." Again, Schaeffer's argument is simple: The pristine purity of the New Testament Church was corrupted in the Middle Ages. In particular, Schaeffer says that there were three areas in which the church struggled with the problem of how to be in the world but not of the world: (1) the attitude toward material possessions, (2) the relationship between church and state, and (3) the relationship between Christian and secular thought. The third issue is central, and here Schaeffer maintains that the Medieval Church was corrupted because Aquinas put reason on the same level as revelation. Furthermore, Aquinas introduced the Aristotelian emphasis on particulars.

The next chapter deals with "The Renaissance." As in *Escape From Reason*, Schaeffer argues that, following the lead of Aquinas, the secular thinkers of this period made man autonomous. The result is the familiar nature-grace dichotomy with "nature eating up grace." In addition, Schaeffer again claims that the Renaissance thinkers were unable to find universals to give meaning to particulars.

"The Reformation" is chapter 4, Schaeffer's basic contention in this segment is that the Reformation corrected the distortions of the early church's teaching that occurred in the Middle Ages. In particular, the Reformation (1) substituted salvation by grace alone for salvation by works, (2) replaced the notion that the church has the same authority as Scripture with the belief that Scripture is the sole authority and (3)



exchanged a mixture of pagan and biblical thinking for just biblical thinking.

The next chapter is "The Revolutionary Age." Here Schaeffer contends that when countries influenced by the Reformation, such as England and the United States, achieved political freedom, there was no chaos. On the other hand, when countries that lacked the Reformation base (such as France and Russia), achieved freedom, there was chaos.

"The Scientific Age" is the subject of the following chapter. Once again, Schaeffer argues that science arose out of a Christian consensus. With the loss of the belief in God, nature is no longer regarded as an open causal system. Instead, it is thought to be a closed system with man as part of the machine. Schaeffer contends that as a result, modern science has produced racism, genetic engineering, determinism, and the use of drugs to control behavior.

In the next chapter, Schaeffer "The Age of Personal Peace and Affluence" Schaeffer holds that humanism, which he feels has replaced Christianity as the dominant world view, has only two values: personal peace and affluence. He argues that all humanism can justify is sociological law, and this, says Schaeffer, leads to the practice of abortion.

The last chapter "The Alternative." In this segment of the book series Schaeffer claims that since Christianity no longer provides form for our culture, something must take its place or chaos will result. Schaeffer predicts that what will fill the vacuum is authoritarianism. He concludes by describing the form of authoritarianism he anticipates in the United States. It will (1) be government by an elite rather than a dictatorship, (2) achieve its goals by the use of drugs, genetic engineering, and manipulation of the mass media, and (3) change the laws through the courts rather than through the legislatures.

Schaeffer's Apologetic Method

For anyone interested in Francis Schaeffer's approach to defending the Christian faith, 1976 was a baffling year. In that year three books came out, with three mutually exclusive interpretation of Schaeffer's apologetic method. In *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetic: A Critique*, Thomas V. Morris identified Schaeffer as a presuppositionalist. In *The Justification of Knowledge*, Robert L. Reymond regarded Schaeffer as a representative of the empirical apologetic tradition (Ruegsegger, 1986). However, Francis Schaeffer denied this saying, "I'm neither. I 'm not an evidentialist or a presuppositionalist. You are trying to press me into the category of a theological apologist, which I'm really not (Ruegsegger, 1986).

In fact he used both approach (presupposition and evidential), therefore, many expert (Gordon R. Lewis, Ronal W. Ruegsegger, Robert L. Reymond) called him a verificationalist.

Why would Francis Schaeffer be called a verificationalist? Let us examine this from his method of apologetic argument. There are five elements that are used to



systematically examine one's apologetics method. They are the logical starting point, common ground, criteria of truth, the role of reason, and the basis of faith (Ruegsegger, 1986).

Schaeffer's most characteristic *logical starting point* is the existence of the "infinite and personal" God of the Bible. His emphasis distinguishes his "presupposition" from alternative assumptions in the East and West, he wrote. "The god of the East are infinite by the definition—the definition being god is all that is'. This is the pan-everything god. The god of the West, on the other hand, has tended to be personal but limited: such were the god of the Greeks, Roman and Germans. But the God of the Bible, Old and New Testament alike, is infinite personal God" (The God Who Is There, 94) (Ruegsegger, 1986).

His understanding and use of elements of *common ground* as a point of contact with unbelievers fits most coherently with a verificational method. Unlike the inductive approach, he majors on inner, existential values as well as outer empirical data. And unlike the presuppositional approach, Schaeffer's method discovers and appeals to factual and personal data in confirmation of his hypothesis. Schaeffer stated, "In respect to God's infinity we are separated from his being, but with respect to God's personality we are made in the image of God. Hence our basic relationship is upward and we can begin with ourselves, not as infinite but as personal. The fall does not mean that we cease to bear the humanness or God's image. In our fallen state we have in common with non-Christian-human beings the quality of love, beauty, humanness or manhood, rationality, longing for significance, fear of nonbeing, and scientific data (Escape from Reason, 83-90) (Ruegsegger, 1986).

For the *truth* matter, Schaeffer said, "We may begin this point of discussion by observing that Schaeffer hold that both clear comprehension of the importance of *truth* and a clear practice of it. Even when it is costly to do so, is imperative if our witness and our evangelism are to be significant in our own generation and in the flow of history" (God Who Is There, 169). For a theory to be considered true, Schaeffer said, " it must first not be contradictory, second, give an answer to the phenomenon in question and third, we must be able to live consistently with our theory" (God Who Is There, 109) (Ruegsegger, 1986).

According to Francis Schaeffer, reason precedes faith, defining what, how, and why we are expected to believe. He affirmed that, "you cannot have a personal relationship with something unknown. That something must be understood and defined. Then having understood who it is with whom I am to have personal relationship and how I may have it, comes the actual step of entering into that relationship. The invitation to act comes only after an adequate base of knowledge has been given" (God Who Is There, 141-144).

What Schaeffer means by faith is that which is seen as a person is faced with God's promises. Christian faith means bowing twice: first, one needs to bow in the realm of the being (metaphysically)-that is, to acknowledge that he is a creature before the infinite-personal Creator who is there, and second, one needs to bow in the realm of morals-that is, to acknowledge he has sinned and therefore that he has true moral guilt



before the God who is there. In addition, a person must hear and receive as true and relevant the message that Jesus Christ died in space-time-history on the cross, and that when He died His substitution work of bearing God's punishment against sin was fully accomplished and complete. Finally, believing the cognitive truths of the gospel attested by adequate evidence, a person commits himself to the living Christ of which the Gospel affirmations speak. He wrote that "On the basis of God's promises in His written communication to us, the Bible, do you (or have you) cast yourself on this Christ as your personal Savior-not trusting in anything you yourself have ever done or ever will do?" (He Is There and He Is Not Silent, 135)

Critiques of Francis Schaeffer's Works

What are the weaknesses of Schaeffer's apologetic method? First, his use of key terms ("presupposition," and "necessity") has not been technically consistent with his method. Some of these terms were undefined or not well-defined, leading interpreters astray. Second, even with his practical purposes, some recognition of influential sources in a brief select bibliography would have helped. Third, Schaeffer often thinks he has examined all possible hypotheses when he has examined few. Finally, suffering from an all-too-common occupational hazard of popular speakers, Schaeffer tended to overstate the conclusiveness of his case for Christianity (Ruegsegger, 1986).

What are the strengths of Schaeffer's apologetic method? Schaeffer has faced the basic question of justifying beliefs, even ultimate presuppositions. Presuppositionalists never actually address the issue. Inductivists imagine an objectivity and freedom from personal involvement in interpretation that is unrealistic (Ruegsegger, 1986).

J.I. Parker stated that Schaeffer has been criticized as a grandiose guru, but the criticism is inept. It assumes a degree of egoism and calculation that was simple not there. He was no more, just as he was no less than a sensitive man of God who sought to minister the everlasting gospel to twentieth-century people (Ruegsegger, 1986).

On many subject, Schaeffer is an insightful interpreter. Although the details of his analysis will not bear much close scrutiny, the general lines of his intuitions need to be taken seriously. Obviously he is a stepping stone rather than a final authority. In many ways he ventured beyond his intellectual depth. One could not compare him in a class with Carl Henry or Van Til, or with Barth or Bultmann. His influence as a thinker will not last long. But what is impressive and what will last, as in the case of Bonhoeffer, is not the thought but the total quality of the man in whose face the glory of God shone (Ruegsegger, 1986).

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