The Need to Read Francis Schaeffer

Todd Kappelman provides us with a compelling introduction to the thought and writings of Francis Schaeffer, one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century. As a Christian scholar and a visionary worldview thinker, Schaeffer applied Scriptural truth to the issues people are dealing with in the modern world. He demonstrated that Christ's truth is universal both across time and cultures.

The *Need to Read* series began several months ago with a program on C.S. Lewis . The rationale for this series is that many of the great writers who have helped many Christians mature are now either unknown or neglected by many who could use these authors insights into the faith.

This installment focuses on Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984), one of the most recognized and respected Christian authors of the twentieth century. He saw so much more in what he was looking at and agonized over it much more that the rest of us. He was one of the truly great Christians of our time.{1} If this is the case, and I and many others believe that it is, then this question follows: What was Schaeffer looking at? The remarkable answer to this question is all of human history and the long chain of events which have led to modern man as we see him today.

In a time when true scholarship is often equated with specialization in a particular period, people, or subject, Schaeffer was a grand generalist. He was a true Renaissance man who knew something about everything, as opposed to everything about something. In addition to his remarkable and encyclopedic knowledge of human history, he was able to connect important events together such that Christians can see what has happened in human history, what is happening now, and

what will happen if man continues on his present course. Schaeffer was a visionary who had an uncanny understanding of the times we live in and what mankind can expect in the near future.

Schaeffers greatest gift, like that of C.S. Lewis, was his concern for the average Christian. He believed philosophy, theology, and ethics should not be reserved for the conversation of learned academics; rather they should be the daily concern of the man on the street. The price for ignorance of the subjects could be our life, or more importantly, our very souls. The Scriptures are very clear concerning the price of ignorance. The prophet Hosea said that Gods people perish for lack of knowledge.{2} In light of this observation, Schaeffers genius was his ability to communicate extremely difficult philosophical and theological issues on a non- technical level. His writings provide Christians with access to some of the most pressing concerns of our times.

Several aspects of Schaeffers style and sweeping concerns will be discussed in this essay. First, he perceived the wholeness of the created order. There is a basic need in all human beings to know the answers to the great questions of life, and Schaeffer believed that God has given man the answers in the form of natural and specific revelation.

Second, Schaeffer believed that man has a natural inclination to desire the reasonable. Schaeffer argued that the Christian faith is not only true, but that it is the most plausible account for the existence of man and his place in the universe. He contended that an irrational faith is not what God intended to communicate to man.

Third, Schaeffer was one of the original cultural critics of the twentieth century. He believed that mankind, both Christians and non-Christians, was adrift on a sea of irrationality. He further believed that this drift was intensifying to the point that true, orthodox Christianity was

being lost.

Schaeffer and *The God Who Is There*

Francis Schaeffer developed some important themes in three of his books: *The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason,* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent.*

Lets consider *The God Who Is There* first. The major thesis in this book is that modern man has abandoned the idea of truth, and that has had widespread consequences in every area of life.

In his argumentation, Schaeffer summarizes the last half of the twentieth century, tracing the development of the intellectual climate in Western society. Previous generations had grown up with a basic operational belief that the law of non-contradiction was true. What Schaeffer would have us understand about the law of non- contradiction is this: a statement cannot be both true and false in the same way at the same time. For example, you are either reading this essay or you are not. You cannot be both reading this and not reading it at the same time. Either you are or you are not—choose one.

When we hear something like this, our first reaction is of course we believe in this law of non-contradiction. We believe in it and live by it, even if we did not know what it was called until just a few moments ago. But Schaeffer points out that there has been a gradual decline of belief in this basic principle beginning with philosophy in the late eighteenth century. This first step in the movement away from reason is followed by second and third steps in the areas of art and music. These are, in turn, followed by the fourth steps of general culture and theology. There is much debate about which step came first and who followed whom. The important thing to realize is that after the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe, and certainly before the height of the Industrial age, men in the highest positions of academic

and artistic life began to think very differently.

In the first half of this century, Western man began to think in terms of mutually exclusive truths. In other words, we began to believe that two people could believe mutually exclusive truths simultaneously and both of them could be correct. This would be like two people seeing an object and one claiming that it existed and the other claiming that it did not exist. The two men shake hands and say that they are both right in their conclusions. Objective reality is completely undermined and nothing is true. The result of this thinking is that man begins to despair of his condition.{3} He doesnt know what is ultimately true.

Schaeffers ambition was to help Christians be salt and light in our world. And to do that, we have to understand how people think. Schaeffer also cautions Christians against capitulation to irrationality themselves.{4} In the spirit of cooperation, many Christians are choosing to remain silent when they hear people say that all religions are the same, or that Christianity may be true for one person, but not true for another. Christians cannot afford to remain silent in a world that is embracing irrationality. The unity of orthodox Christianity should be centered and grounded on truth. This is not always easy, but it is absolutely necessary.

Escape from Reason

In *The God Who Is There,* Schaeffers main thesis is that modern man is characterized by his willingness to live a life of contradictions. In the book *Escape from Reason,* he shows how we arrived at this position, and what can be done about it.

Francis Schaeffer believed that one of the great watershed periods of human history occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Reformation was a fifteenth and sixteenth century movement, but it was religious in nature and ultimately resulted in the formation of the Protestant

churches. The Renaissance, argues Schaeffer, largely emphasized human reason and the achievements of man. In sharp contrast, the Reformation emphasized the will of God and the authority of the Holy Scriptures. It must be remembered that Schaeffer is generalizing in much of what is said here and that both movements had good and bad aspects.

Schaeffer maintains that men in the Renaissance believed they were great because of the wonderful art, literature, and architecture they produced. The Reformation man believed he was great because of the God who had made him. Man was made to have a relationship with his creator, but the Renaissance man found himself more and more concerned with the things of this world.{5}

As the emphasis on man increased, the importance of God decreased. This movement was further facilitated by discoveries in the sciences which allowed man to understand the universe on purely naturalistic principles. The result of mans success in explaining some aspects of the universe through reason alone was that he began to try to explain every aspect of the universe through reason alone.

Men found that they were able to explain much through reason, but the larger philosophical questions proved to be too great. In addition, they discovered that there were many questions that could not be answered by reason alone. Some of these questions were: How did everything begin? Why is there something rather than nothing? What happens to us after we die? These questions are traditionally answered by theology, and the answers usually included an appeal to a divine being called God.

Modern man, thus, was faced with two possibilities. Either he could return to the answers found in the Scriptures, or he could live as though life had meaning even though he did not believe that it really did.{6} Schaeffer argued that men in the Western philosophical tradition largely opted for

irrational existence, escaping the requirements of reason, hence the title *Escape from Reason.* Schaeffers conclusion to this problem is that Christians must return to a serious belief in the Scriptures and their ability to answer the big philosophical problems, and that we must live our faith consistently in front of the world.{7} In addition, Schaeffer believed that the days are gone when the average man on the street would respond to the Gospel. The language has changed, and we must learn to speak in this new language.{8} We must educate ourselves and be ready to give an account of how modern man got into his present state of affairs.

He Is There and He Is Not Silent

In the analysis of the previous two books, we have seen that Schaeffer explains the development of modern history and how mankind has largely embraced non-reason in the area of morals. In *He Is There and He Is Not Silent,* Schaeffer outlines a solution for the predicament that faces modern man. He argues that there are three areas in which modern mankind has an absolute necessity for God: metaphysics, morals, and epistemology.{9} These are three areas of philosophy which have to do with, respectively, the problem of existence, the problem of mans moral behavior, and how man can come to a true knowledge of anything at all.

Prior to the seventeenth century, philosophy and theology recognized that they were dealing with the same basic questions. The only difference between the two disciplines was that the former appealed largely to reason and natural revelation, while the latter appealed mostly to reason and special revelation. In the middle ages, philosophy was said to be the handmaiden to theology. Theology was understood to be the queen of the sciences. When philosophy took the lead, it soon became apparent that it was not up to the task of answering the big questions. The reality of God known through His revelation, however, does provide the answers for such

questions.

Lets consider the areas of metaphysics, moral, and epistemology. The metaphysical need for the existence of God implies that there must be something or someone who is big enough, powerful enough, wise enough, and willing enough to create and maintain the universe we live in. If these requirements are not met, then man is forced to admit that he is here by chance occurrence and has no special destiny.{10}

The moral necessity of Gods existence centers on man as a personal being and a being who distinguishes between right and wrong. There are only two options. Either man was created from an impersonal beginning and his moral system is a product of his culture, or man had a personal beginning and was given laws to follow and an internal sense of right and wrong.{11} The moral necessity of God is founded on the philosophical need to account for why man is both cruel and wonderful at the same time. This can only be explained in terms of the biblical account of the Fall.

The epistemological necessity of Gods existence addresses our ability to know what is ultimately real. Much of the modern problem in the area of knowledge began in the seventeenth century. As the scientific revolution developed, the criteria for truth became that which could be demonstrated in a laboratory. The result was that belief in God and the miraculous, which cannot be demonstrated in a laboratory, came into doubt and were eventually dismissed by many. The final result was pessimism regarding theological truths and, more recently, any truth at all. We have all encountered the individual who asks, How do you know that? And often this question is repeated for every subsequent answer.

The only answer to these three dilemmas is an appeal to the God who is there, and to His natural and special revelation. The basis of Christianity is the belief that God is there and that man can communicate with Him. If this is not true, then

we are without a foundation.

Francis Schaeffer and "The Man Without a Bible"

The purpose of this discussion of the works of Francis Schaeffer is that we hope Christians will once again turn to this great apologist for the Christian faith and learn from him. In closing, we will address one of his lesser known works titled *Death In The City.* In chapter seven, The Man Without a Bible, Schaeffer offers some advice for Christians living in a post-Christian world. He argues very convincingly that the church in America has largely turned away from God and the knowledge of the things of God. This occurred in just a few short decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s.{12}

We must always bear in mind that many people do not believe that the Bible is inspired or authoritative. For these people the Bible is just another book. The dismantling of biblical authority has been very efficient in the last 150 years. Very few of our major secular universities treat the Bible as authoritative anymore. Yet many of these universities were founded at a time when no one would have doubted the importance of the Holy Scriptures. The majority of men at the end of this century hold vastly different views about the Bible than did their ancestors at the close of the previous century. So, how do we share the Christian message with the man without the Bible?

Schaeffer cites three instances where Paul spoke to non-Christians and did not appeal to the Scriptures. These are found in Acts 14:15-17; 17:16-32, and Romans 1:18-2:16. The reason that Paul did not use the Scriptures on these three occasions is that the people he was addressing did not recognize the claims that the Holy Scriptures made on their lives. In approaching these individuals, Paul appealed to the moral knowledge that men possess as a feature of their created

being. Schaeffer refers to this as the manishness of man.

In Romans 1:18 we have the description of Gods wrath being poured out on man. Schaeffer believes that this is an ideal place to approach modern man. We may tell the modern non-believer that he knows that God exists and that he has suppressed this knowledge. (The knowledge of God must be understood here as natural revelation, and not the gospel.) Paul means that each and every man, regardless of what he says, knows that God exists. This knowledge of God that the non-believer possesses is supplemented by the moral argument for Gods existence. The fact that men hold beliefs about right and wrong betrays the fact that they know that God necessarily exists. Men willingly suppress this knowledge of God and this brings His wrath.

The man without the Bible has suppressed the natural revelation of God, not the special revelation found in the Scriptures. The man without the Bible has not followed his initial knowledge of God to the proper conclusions and therefore remains lost. The many men without the Bible present both an opportunity and a challenge for the Christian. The opportunity is that this man is lost and Christians can share their faith with him. The challenge is in showing these lost people how the world around them and the human nature within them point toward the existence of God.

Francis Schaeffer was wonderful at discussing Christian truths with non-believers without appealing to the Scriptures. It is our loss if we do not familiarize ourselves with, and use, the works of one of this countrys greatest Christian thinkers.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, forward to *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy,* by Francis Schaeffer (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), xiv.

2. Hosea 4:6.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* in *Francis A.*

Schaeffer Trilogy (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 109-114.

4. Ibid., 196.

5. Ibid., 217-224.

6. Ibid., 225-236.

7. Ibid., 261-270.

8. Ibid., 207-208.

9. Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 1990), 277.

10. Ibid., 275-290.

11. Ibid., 291-302.

12. Ibid., 211.

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