

Learning from Francis Schaeffer

At the risk of oversimplification, Francis Schaeffer's vision can be expressed in two fundamental concerns:

- * True truth
- * True spirituality

Born in the German town section of Philadelphia in 1912, as a young man he came in contact with the Christian faith in an almost unique way. During his late teens he happened to be reading classical philosophy. This showed him (a) that he had found the field of interest in which he felt most at home, ideas; and (b) that philosophy had no answers despite the fact that it dealt with what he called later 'the basic philosophic questions'. Plenty of questions, but no answers!

Then he found the Bible, or rather the Bible found him! He read alternately from the classical philosophers and from the Old Testament with the latter steadily displacing the former as he went along. 'Before I left Genesis 3', he once told me, 'I knew that this book had the answers to what the philosophers were asking'. Simply through his reading of Scripture he was born again. No one on the outside was helping. 'Before I reached the New Testament I was virtually a believer in Christ', he said. Not surprisingly his life began to move in an entirely different direction.

Truth and untruth

From the very beginning, then, Schaeffer had a mind for what he called 'True-Truth'. He loved the Bible and its message of salvation first and foremost because it accurately reflects the reality within which all human beings find themselves and against which, ultimately, they cannot revolt — try as they may.

The corollary of this was a sense of inescapable responsibility to unmask falsehood. Other religious and philosophical worldviews are basically 'lies' or distortions of the truth, as much in relation to the created order as in relation to God's acts of salvation through history. So Schaeffer's approach to 'apologetics' was 'presuppositional' from the start. Begin with the Christian worldview and everything makes sense: start elsewhere and nothing does!

Without recourse to Van Til or Kuyper or Dooyeweerd, Schaeffer had discovered the ground-motif of Scripture they shared, namely the Reformed perspective. He also agreed with their critique of 'evidentialism' but carefully distinguished himself from them over the practical implications of this. Human beings could be reasoned with intellectually, he argued, not because they share a common presupposition with the Bible, because they don't, but because they are unavoidably creatures of the one true God. Surrounded by evidences of God's creation and actions in the real world — what he called the mannishness of man and the form of the universe — they inevitably stand (though inconsistently within their alternative intellectual frameworks) on common ground with the Bible.

Europe and L'Abri

Schaeffer's experiences after moving to Europe in 1948 merely reinforced these convictions. The hollowness of life based on modernist presuppositions had already been expressed in the existentialist philosophy of men like Sartre and Camus, and their intellectual capitulation was quickly echoed and enlarged by the 1960s hippie revolution. Europe was never the same again.

In such a context, what Schaeffer found he could do, always with great sympathy and gentleness, was to apply these theological convictions to the 'pulling down of strongholds' (2 Corinthians 10.4). He relentlessly exposed the inadequacies of all non-biblical thinking and tried to lead men and women to Christ.

This was already strikingly different from the run-of-the-mill evangelicalism then current. But what made it truly outstanding was the fact that Schaeffer carried on this ministry within the context of a highly personal and non-exploitative environment — the existence of L'Abri, a French word meaning 'The Shelter'. At great personal cost to himself, his wife and family, a constant stream of individuals made their way to their home in the Swiss Alps. This slowly developed into a larger community and study centre, the first of eight such L'Abris now scattered around the globe. (see <http://www.labri.org>)

Spirituality

The reality behind this brings us to the second of Schaeffer's prime convictions — true spirituality. For, in a sense, what happened to the Schaeffers in the second part of their life involved a type of 'burial' along the lines of what Jesus said about the seed. If it is to bear real fruit it must fall into the ground and die (John 12). Something like this happened to them under God's supernatural leading. They deliberately turned from the organisational razzamataz they had been accustomed to in the States and began to 'live by faith', making prayer the centre of L'Abri's 'methodology', not programmes, or advertising or gimmicks. Edith Schaeffer's *The L'Abri Story* describes what happened.

In hindsight, of course, one is able to see the extraordinary providence in all this. For what looked at the time bizarre and inefficient turned out to be just the sort of environment in which the pointlessness and inauthenticity of postmodern experience could best be challenged — a family, a small community in which the individual is supremely valued. This dual thrust of Schaeffer's work was necessary then and is all the more necessary now: modernism needs to be challenged intellectually and postmodernism needs to be shown something 'real'. Schaeffer was able to combine both within L'Abri. Hence the relevance of Schaeffer's second abiding concern.

God has called us, he would say, not to programmes but to personal experience, not to the imitation of the mechanical, but to the imitation of Christ. Whatever sphere of life one is called to, Christianity has to be a moment-by-moment experience of the living Christ. Hence the importance for him of prayer, of being led by the Spirit, of knowing weakness because of sacrifice and frustration because of the severities of the battle.

What influence?

What remains to be asked, of course, is how much this or any of Schaeffer's many concerns actually got across to the wider church? The answer to that question is complicated.

Many individuals were deeply affected by his message about True Spirituality and their lives changed as a result. But in the US at least, what attracted the majority were his ventures into the apologetic arena, not his teaching on the Christian life. Undoubtedly he helped to strengthen the intellectual convictions of many. This, in turn, enabled a new level of engagement academically and politically, for all of which he deserves our thanks and respect to this day.

But the church at large, even as it eulogised him, in fact ignored his emphasis on spirituality. So radical was it that it remained practically invisible and unintelligible.

In large measure this helps to explain why Schaeffer's later and much misunderstood emphasis on social concerns, particularly his passionate loathing of abortion, were less carefully applied and nuanced than he himself would have wanted. For example, he repeatedly warned against the dangers of 'wrapping Christianity in the American flag'. But his warnings went unheeded and the result was that the larger community quickly identified him with what evangelicalism at large was doing politically, dismissing him along with the rest as a right-wing fundamentalist, which he most certainly wasn't.

What he was doing, in fact, was applying another of his familiar dicta: 'the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life'. Christianity, in other words, is not 'churchianity' — worship, evangelism, prayer meetings, etc., good as these are — but reality, hence requiring engagement within all arenas of public life, business, culture, education, etc.

Virus of technique

Schaeffer's acceptance in American evangelicalism was widespread and influential, though complicated, as we've said. When he insisted on the development and application of the Christian mind he was well received and the church inestimably strengthened as a result. But things would have been better had his spiritual challenge been more widely understood. Instead, what I call 'the virus of technique' continued to be the church's default mode across the board. Mega churches proliferated, marketing techniques were enthusiastically applied — neither to the church's advantage, as writers such as David Wells and Os Guinness have documented.

Marginalised in UK

British evangelicalism by contrast managed to marginalise Schaeffer. His biblical challenge to the idiosyncratic traditions of its varied constituencies was too threatening. Rather than let him prevail they chose to ignore him: the scientists found fault with his insistence on a real Adam and Eve and an actual literal 'fall'; the preachers didn't like his emphasis on discussion and persuasion — it was too intellectual, not sufficiently spiritual; the medics took umbrage at his 'hard-line' position on abortion and infanticide; the pietists wondered what good could come

out of 'culture'; and the Anglicans, of course, disliked talk of 'pure' and 'impure' churches.

As a result, Schaeffer is still a household name in Evangelical circles in the States, while being almost unknown in the UK. Despite this his influence remains. His books continue to sell widely, as do the documentaries he made on history and ethics, as do the writings of his wife, Edith, who is still alive. Younger leaders in South America and Asia are discovering his prophetic insights and finding them just what they need at the start of the 21st century. In addition, L'Abri continues to exist and to flourish, though never, given its unusual calling, without difficulty and a certain 'hiddenness'. That, too, testifies to what he achieved. No greater testimony exists, however, concerning the reliability of his fundamental concerns, than his continuing relevance. This is the more remarkable given the phenomenal rate of change over the past half-century. The continuing 'fragmentation', as he called it, of Western society in fact increases our respect. Did he not predict just this almost 50 years ago?

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