

PASTORAL PRESUPPOSITIONALISM:
LESSONS FROM THE LIFE AND WORK OF FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

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It should come as no surprise to us when the Christian faith comes under attack. After all, our Lord has reminded us that, “A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn. 15:20). This persecution comes in many forms and in varying degrees. Some believers are threatened physically, while others are subjected to intellectual ridicule or social bias by those for whom the cross of Christ is foolishness. Whatever their predicament, believers can take courage from the stories of Christian martyrs throughout the centuries, as well as learn from the theologians and apologists whom God has given His church to help “make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

One such example of a Christian minister who bore witness to the hope of the gospel, “speaking the truth in love” quite effectively to his own generation, is Francis A. Schaeffer. And while most of the great apologists in the history of the church may seem far removed from us due to significant differences between the times in which they lived and our own, Schaeffer ministered during the latter half of the twentieth century, and thus provides a more immediately relevant guide for those of us living in the first half of the twenty-first. Much of the overall mindset, as well as many of the specific questions he sought to answer, still prevails today. He also anticipated many of the tenets of postmodernism to which we must now respond.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that Francis Schaeffer still provides a model worth emulating in our promulgation and defense of the faith. We will proceed in three parts. First, we will examine the life of Schaeffer, noting significant turning points that helped shape his approach to apologetics. Second, we will look in more detail at his distinctive apologetic method. Finally, we will conclude with a brief examination of lessons we can learn from Schaeffer in our efforts to persuade men and women of the truth of Christ.

The Life of Francis Schaeffer

Francis August Schaeffer IV was born January 30, 1912, in a little house in Germantown, Pennsylvania, to Frank and Bessie Schaeffer. The parents of our subject were no-nonsense common workers of German descent. Reflecting on these humble roots, Edith Schaeffer writes, “It fascinates me to consider that as Fran was born, C. S. Lewis was a boy of thirteen in his miserable boarding school.”¹ Unlike Lewis, the twentieth century’s other highly popular Christian apologist, Schaeffer grew up among hardworking folk who prized working with their hands but who devalued intellectual pursuits. Schaeffer, like his father, worked from an early age at various odd jobs to help support the family. One of these jobs came to him through the aid of a Sunday School teacher in the liberal Presbyterian church his family attended, who wondered if Schaeffer might be interested in tutoring a Russian count in English. Schaeffer agreed. Upon returning home from a trip to a Philadelphia bookshop, he found to his great surprise that, instead of the beginning English grammar book he had requested, the attendant (and God in His providence!) had sent him home with a book on Greek philosophy. He began to read the book out of curiosity, and an insatiable desire for answering the big questions of life was

¹ Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1981), 37.

born.² These early experiences in the working class community in which he was raised prompted an older, more analytical Schaeffer to postulate that shipyard workers “have the same questions as the university man. They just don’t articulate them in the same way.”³ The ability and desire to speak to the common man on issues of ultimate importance shone brightly throughout all the years of Schaeffer’s ministry.

Though he was a bright student in many areas, the only academic encouragement Schaeffer received from his parents was to take classes in woodworking and electrical wiring, in preparation for a career in engineering. Still, Schaeffer’s young mind was ablaze with questions which he needed answered. Alongside his Greek philosophy, he had also begun reading the Bible. Though he had basically dismissed Christianity (or rather, what he thought was Christianity), he felt he should honestly read through Scripture before discarding it. To his surprise, he discovered that with the Bible “you had answers – real answers – and without these there were no answers either in philosophies or in the religion I had heard preached.”⁴ Schaeffer was excited about what he was discovering in the Scriptures and increasingly felt God’s call upon his life to go into the ministry. Thus, after only one semester at a nearby vocational college he made plans to begin preparing for ministry at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, though as yet he had no idea how he might pay for tuition.

His parents were indignant. They viewed ministers as lazy good-for-nothings, “little more than parasites upon society.”⁵ On the morning he was to leave, his father made one last attempt to change his son’s mind. The younger Schaeffer, wishing desperately to honor his parents, went down to the cellar to pray feverishly for God’s will to be made clear. In the end, he flipped a coin. Then he flipped it again, and again. Each time it came up as he had prayed. The son was unmoved, determined to follow the Lord, even if it meant estrangement from those he loved most. Seeing this deep resolve, the father stormed out of the house. “But just before the door hit the frame, his voice came through, ‘I’ll pay for the first half year.’”⁶

At this point, a couple of issues are germane to a discussion of Schaeffer’s apologetics. First, though we certainly may not approve of the method of discerning God’s will Schaeffer employed in the crucial time just before he left for college, it is worth pointing out that this bold confidence in God’s guidance was a mark of his life and ministry from this point forward, especially in regards to the work of L’Abri, the crucible in which his apologetics was forged.⁷ Second, Schaeffer knew what it meant to be isolated from loved ones because of the gospel. This would play a role later on in his emphasis on Christian community, being willing to open his home, with a special place for those left destitute on account of their commitment to Christ.⁸ Lastly, though those final moments in the doorway were quite tense, Schaeffer later expressed that he believed that the conviction and love he exhibited that day was key in his father’s conversion.⁹ This combination of candor and compassion is a Schaefferian hallmark that God uses to win souls for Christ even today.

On one of Schaeffer’s trips back home during school holidays, he went to a “Young

² Ibid., 51.

³ Bryan A. Follis, *Truth With Love*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 39

⁴ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 52.

⁵ Louis Gifford Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1985), 36.

⁶ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 62.

⁷ Follis, *Truth With Love*, 93-94.

⁸ Ibid., 155-156.

⁹ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 62.

People’s Meeting” at his liberal Presbyterian Church. The leader on that June evening in 1932 gave a talk entitled, “How I know that Jesus is not the Son of God, and how I know that the Bible is not the Word of God.”¹⁰ At a particular point toward the close of the meeting, Schaeffer stood up and calmly objected to some of the arguments which had been made, appealing only to his own experience and the teaching of a couple of Bible teachers he had encountered in Virginia. His comments made little impact. Right after that, however, a young lady stood up across the room and, with great vigor and strength of argument, articulated some of the points Schaeffer had only alluded to. She was Edith Seville, the youngest daughter of missionaries from the China Inland Mission, and she was to remain his partner in the battle for the truth for the rest of his days.¹¹ Her father, George Seville, was a well-respected minister who later became a professor of missions and New Testament Greek at Faith Seminary, where Schaeffer would eventually earn a degree. The Seville family would, from time to time, host faculty members from the nearby Westminster Theological Seminary in their home. It was Edith who first introduced Schaeffer to the writings of great men such as J. Gresham Machen and Cornelius Van Til. Their books came to have a profound influence on Schaeffer’s choice of seminary and subsequent ministry. None of this, however, was as influential as the girl Edith herself, to whom Schaeffer was married on July 6, 1935.

Machen helped found not only Westminster Seminary, but also the denomination known as The Presbyterian Church of America (which later became the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). While he had led the charge against encroaching liberalism at Old Princeton, after Machen’s death, his followers could not sustain a united front. The new denomination split, with the minority group (who favored premillennialism and total abstinence from alcohol), including George Seville and Oliver Buswell, forming the Bible Presbyterian Church and Faith Seminary. Francis Schaeffer was among the first graduating class from Faith Seminary in 1938, and was subsequently the first minister ordained into the Bible Presbyterian Church. In the midst of the denominational strife there were some overly critical statements made, Schaeffer himself taking some rather staunch positions he would later regret.¹² His ministry in later years majored on the positive statement of Christian hope, on issues that unite evangelical believers rather than on matters that divide and tear down.¹³

After seminary, the Schaeffers transitioned into a life of pastoral ministry in Pennsylvania and eventually in Missouri. Schaeffer’s blue-collar background and solid education had prepared him well for the pastorate. He always made time for visitation, often bringing along a manual project to work on alongside parishioners.¹⁴ His expertise as a tradesman made him a key volunteer worker in a building project at a church in Pennsylvania, again working “in the trenches” with others from his congregation. The Schaeffers also demonstrated a special concern for children and youth, especially those with special needs. Schaeffer worked one-on-one with a child suffering from Down syndrome to help provide the education her parents could not afford. Divine healing was granted to a little girl with a rare tongue disease whom Schaeffer had prayed for and anointed with oil (see James 5:13-15).¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., 131.

¹¹ Ibid., 131-132.

¹² Ibid., 192.

¹³ Greg Grooms, “Remembering Francis Schaeffer”, *The Southern Baptist Theological Journal*, vol. 6 (Summer 2002): 53-54.

¹⁴ Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 39.

¹⁵ Louis Gifford Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, 54.

In 1943, the Schaeffers moved to a church in St. Louis where they eventually founded an international children's ministry called "Children for Christ," which started as a Bible class in their basement.¹⁶ Schaeffer himself seemed to marvel at what God had done with this ministry, commenting in a director's report that, "Children for Christ is one of the greatest living demonstrations of what can be done by the power of the Holy Spirit without great fanfare."¹⁷ While on the surface this season of pastoral ministry may seem disconnected from the ministry for which Schaeffer is so well-known, in reality it was a blessed time of further preparation, as the Schaeffers' practicality and spirituality were deepened considerably as a result of their obedience in hard work and surrender.¹⁸

In 1947 Schaeffer traveled to Europe as a delegate from the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions and the American Council of Churches to determine the status of the post-war European churches and to warn them of the dangers of liberalism plaguing American seminaries and Bible colleges. Schaeffer had done some denominational work prior to his travels, but this trip turned out to be quite formative for the young pastor as he spoke to a wide array of audiences and met with many Christian leaders, including Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.¹⁹ He also had opportunity to visit many museums and historical sites which stimulated his burgeoning interest in the arts and his affinity toward the heritage of the Reformation. Not long after his return to the United States, Schaeffer began receiving letters from brothers and sisters in Europe expressing their desire that he return for a more extended period of ministry. Moreover, there was a direct request from the Independent Board, stating, "We find from what you have given us in your report that we feel strongly that we should send someone to Europe to help strengthen the things that remain, and the consensus is that the only ones we would send would be you and Edith."²⁰

Thus, in 1948 Francis and Edith Schaeffer, along with their three daughters (a son, Franky, was born in 1952), moved to Switzerland to serve as missionaries. Schaeffer was thirty-six years old when he arrived in Europe and would remain there for another thirty-six years.²¹ Initially, Schaeffer was quite busy preaching, lecturing, and writing, primarily against the deadliness of liberal, neo-orthodox, and Roman Catholic views of Scripture. The intensity and dedication with which he approached his work garnered him a measure of recognition.²²

Still, in spite of his popularity, Schaeffer was experiencing a growing discontent as he observed the divergence between the robust gospel orthodox Christians were contending for and the anemic spiritual fruit their lives displayed. Nowhere was this more evident than in his own heart. The battle still raged between conservative and liberal Presbyterians back home, and Schaeffer knew he had not always acted in accord with the truth he preached. The result was "one of the central events in Fran's life,"²³ what he later called a "spiritual crisis" over "the problem of reality."²⁴ In a situation reminiscent of his early study of Greek philosophy, when the restless teenager felt that for the sake of honesty he must go back and read the Bible, an older, uneasy Schaeffer now re-examined his most foundational beliefs. As his wife prayed, he walked

¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁷ Burson and Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*, 39.

¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, 58.

²⁰ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 275.

²¹ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, 64.

²² Christopher Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1985), 120.

²³ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 354.

²⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), Preface.

for hours on end in the mountains of Switzerland and in the hayloft of their chalet, thinking and re-thinking everything he had believed and taught, poring over Scripture, asking God for light. The cold winter of 1951-52 hovered long as his “dark night of the soul” would not lift.

However, with the warmth of spring, Schaeffer emerged with a renewed conviction that the truth of historic Christianity was indeed the only tenable position. God was good to allow growth in understanding the relationship between doctrine and life. Schaeffer began to see clearly that the finished work of Christ upon the cross and the reality of the Holy Spirit were to affect the whole of the Christian’s existence. He concluded that “not only was Christianity true truth, but that results are meant to be coming forth, including an enjoyment of the Lord.”²⁵ Perhaps most significant for our study, there was now a greater desire than ever to help those grappling with ultimate questions, to speak the Christian answer into their lives, and to demonstrate in his own life the reality of Christian experience. Twenty years later he opined that apart from this crisis of faith, “there would be no L’Abri.”²⁶

The Schaeffers had been involved in the lives of various young people since the beginning of their work in Europe. Students they had encountered along the way from many different backgrounds culturally and religiously would find their way to the mountains of Switzerland to discuss issues facing the rising generation. However, the beginning of the work of L’Abri is best dated May 6, 1955, when the Schaeffers’ eldest child, Priscilla, brought a friend home from college who was wrestling through some doubts and questions in her mind.²⁷ She found help, and soon word got around that Priscilla’s father had a knack for tackling the most perplexing matters with candor and clarity. A steady flow of visitors commenced and within weeks Schaeffer wrote a letter of resignation to the mission board.²⁸ L’Abri Fellowship was off and running. Their years with Children for Christ had prepared them well for this new ministry, which was based on the same principles of prayerful trust and diligent work.

As L’Abri began to attract more and more guests from around the globe, Schaeffer also received more and more invitations for speaking engagements, mostly on college and university campuses. Many of these talks turned into books, and by the early 1970’s Schaeffer had published three works which were to become “the hub of his entire corpus and the proper entry point into his thinking”²⁹ – *The God Who Is There*, *Escape From Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. The vision of God and reality so powerfully expressed in these early volumes was expanded throughout the remainder of Schaeffer’s life as he and wife Edith produced a prolific and comprehensive program of books on topics ranging from biblical authority (*Genesis in Space and Time*), to ecology (*Pollution and the Death of Man*), to family life (Edith’s *What Is a Family?*), and many points in between. Schaeffer also teamed up with son Franky to produce two films coinciding with books of the same titles, *How Should We Then Live?* and *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*. The latter film was a groundbreaking work on the sanctity of human life, instrumental in awakening evangelicals to the pro-life cause, done with the help of Dr. C. Everett Koop, Surgeon General of the United States from 1981-1989.³⁰ His work in this area was particularly influential in the political sphere. Parkhurst seems to be on target when he posits that, “Dr. Schaeffer brought a new biblical intellectual integrity to Christian social

²⁵ Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 316.

²⁶ Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, Preface.

²⁷ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁹ Burson and Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*, 42.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

involvement.”³¹ Through the endless sermons, lectures, and conversations at L’Abri, and especially through his books and films, Schaeffer taught an entire generation of Christians what it means to think “worldviewishly,” to understand the times in order to “preach the simple gospel so that it is simple to the person to whom you are talking.”³²

In the fall of 1978, Francis Schaeffer was diagnosed with cancer – lymphoma, some doctors giving him only six weeks to a few months to live.³³ In fact, he would live another five years, going home to be with the Lord in the early morning hours of May 15, 1984. These final years of Schaeffer’s life were some of the most productive as he continued to write and speak, always making time to listen and answer questions from enquirers from all walks of life. At his funeral, footage was shown from the end of the film *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, which Schaeffer called, “the best presentation of the gospel I have ever been able to make.”³⁴ It was a fitting tribute to the man and his work that he was presenting the gospel even as his body lay dead in the coffin, for the gospel of Jesus Christ is what Francis Schaeffer loved and preached. It is a glorious gospel that cannot die, but is indeed the only answer that can make sense of life and death.

The Work of Francis Schaeffer

As has already been mentioned, the writings of Francis Schaeffer cover a broad range of topics and, combined with the books penned by Edith, express a view of life through the lens of Scripture that is staggeringly comprehensive in scope. When Crossway Books published *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* in 1982, they appropriately subtitled the collection, *A Christian Worldview*.³⁵ This is quite a satisfying subtitle, but might better be regarded as something more: namely, a categorization, for there seems to have sprung up since the time of Schaeffer an entire genre of works that follow his Christian worldview model.³⁶ These writings are more than mere philosophy, or theology, or history, or Christian living, but incorporate all these fields and more, to present an entire system of coherent truth touching on all aspects of life under the lordship of Christ.

For our purposes, we will focus on Schaeffer’s approach to apologetics, the area of study with which Schaeffer is primarily associated. It should be noted from the outset, however, that Schaeffer did not consider himself an apologist so much as an evangelist.³⁷ Nevertheless, he certainly has a distinctive apologetic approach and one that is viewed by scholars as his greatest contribution.³⁸ Still, as Burson and Walls note, “The question of apologetic methodology is probably the most disputed and controversial subject surrounding the life and ministry of Francis Schaeffer.”³⁹ Many a tree has lost its life in the effort to paint Schaeffer as either a presuppositionalist (whether a compassionate, inconsistent, or modified presuppositionalist is a matter of further debate), or an empiricist (again, some label him an inconsistent empiricist), or a

³¹ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, 100.

³² Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972), 11.

³³ Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message*, 102-103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁶ Nancy A. Pearcey and James W. Sire are two notable examples of such authors.

³⁷ Follis, *Truth With Love*, 31.

³⁸ D.A. Carson, “SBJT Forum,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, vol. 6 (Summer 2002): 68.

³⁹ Burson and Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*, 143.

verificationalist.⁴⁰ Such a wide array of interpretations suggests that Schaeffer's work can be approached from a number of angles. Ours will be somewhat unique. First, in an effort to better understand Schaeffer's thought, we will examine some of the theological and philosophical influences behind his apologetics. Second, we will explore some of the memorable metaphors employed by Schaeffer, which contributed to the popularity and distinctiveness of his approach, and have exercised considerable influence on Christian vocabulary and discussion even to this day. Third, we will look at Schaeffer's view of Scripture, which is at the heart of his apologetics, as it was his own conversion. Finally, we will consider the creative ways in which Schaeffer incorporated cultural and artistic analysis into his apologetics.

Shaping Influences

Schaeffer was a professed Calvinist, who studied under some of the greatest Reformed theologians of his day. As a result, much of Schaeffer's theology can be traced back to the great Genevan Reformer himself. Calvin's views on the doctrine of God and how sinful creatures might come to know Him exercised great influence within the Reformed tradition of which Schaeffer was a part. While Calvin certainly accorded reason a prominent role, the testimony of the Spirit always had pride of place.⁴¹

Nancy Pearcey has detected two strands of influence closer to Schaeffer's own time, both of which have held sway over large swaths of American evangelicalism since the late nineteenth century. These are Scottish Common Sense Realism, as seen in the Old Princeton theologians, who practiced evidentialist and classical apologetics; and the Dutch Reformed tradition, as carried on by Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd, who fostered presuppositional apologetics.⁴²

It appears that Schaeffer borrowed freely from (at least) both of these traditions. Like the Common Sense Realists, Schaeffer maintained that believers and non-believers share common experiences and patterns of thought on account of their both being made in the image of God and living together in God's universe.⁴³ Basic morality, the fundamental rules of logic, a sense of personal identity – all are points of contact that can be agreed upon by believer and non-believer alike. Like the Dutch school, Schaeffer emphasized that even these most basic beliefs can only make sense within an overall framework or worldview.⁴⁴ Indeed, facts do not interpret themselves.

Memorable Metaphors

Against this background, we are positioned to examine our first metaphor, that of "taking the roof off." Schaeffer perceived that the unbeliever, in affirming basic truths with the Christian (such as the rules of logic and basic morality), is actually borrowing from the Christian worldview – the *only* worldview able to provide the basis for such truths. Only inconsistently does the unbeliever hold to foundational realities provided for within a biblical view of God while at the same time rejecting God and the Bible. In other words, "no non-Christian can be

⁴⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁴¹ Follis, *Truth With Love*, 23. Thus, Follis argues that attempts to paint Schaeffer as a rationalist ultimately fall short.

⁴² Nancy A. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity From Its Cultural Captivity*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 313.

⁴³ Ibid., 313.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 313.

consistent to the logic of his presuppositions.”⁴⁵ Such presuppositions, if followed, lead the unbeliever away from the reality of what is there, and as a result, leave him in a point of tension. He feels vulnerable at this point and so builds a roof over his head to shield himself. This tension, Schaeffer claimed, works in our favor as we evangelize.⁴⁶ It is our duty to gently lift the roof off, forcing the unbeliever to “stand naked and wounded before the truth of what is.”⁴⁷ In this way we may be able to lead him back toward the God who is there, by God’s grace, through the atonement accomplished by Christ. This approach to engaging unbelievers with the truth of Christ stems from Romans 1:18-20, which teaches that God is known (genuinely, though not savingly) by unbelievers who suppress that knowledge by concocting all manner of explanations for the world around them and their experience of it. In the face of such attempts at autonomy, Schaeffer insisted upon the Christian position that “the *only* answer for what exists is that he, the infinite-personal God, really is there.”⁴⁸

The second metaphor in our discussion is that of the “two-story view of truth.” Schaeffer perceived in the history of thought a growing distinction between grace and nature. Grace is in the upper story and is associated with God, the unseen, man’s soul, and the concept of universals. Nature is in the lower story and is associated with creation, the visible, man’s body, and the concept of particulars.⁴⁹ Schaeffer argued that Thomas Aquinas was a pivotal figure in intellectual history because of his incomplete view of the fall. “In Aquinas’s view, the will of man was fallen but the intellect was not.”⁵⁰ The result was that the door was opened for autonomy in the lower story. At first, Aquinas developed natural theology – theology done without reference to Scripture. Soon philosophy followed suit, with the arts not far behind.⁵¹ Schaeffer’s contention was that whenever human autonomy prevails, nature (the lower story) will inevitably “eat up” grace (the upper story).⁵² Eventually, the lower story kills the upper story as man declares his autonomy over each sphere. By the time of the Renaissance, this is exactly what had happened.⁵³ Man is left with only particulars without any universal touchstone. He can make no sense of his experience of life – who he is, why he exists, and what this thing he intrinsically feels in his heart called love truly means.

Schaeffer traced out the development of this idea across the disciplines of theology, philosophy, art, music, film, etc. Due to the scope of his work, Schaeffer was forced to paint in very broad strokes. And while this has caused many scholars to differ with the details of his analysis,⁵⁴ it is shocking to see how accurately his simple overall framework captured the contours of the development of modern thinking. As Professor Thomas Schreiner has stated, though people complain that Schaeffer was a generalist, it is also the case that “he was generally right.”⁵⁵

This leads us to another powerful metaphor – “the line of despair.” As Schaeffer moved

⁴⁵ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 150.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁸ Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 15.

⁴⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968), 9-10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁴ See for example, Gregory A. Thornbury, “SBJT Forum,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, vol. 6 (Summer 2002): 76-78.

⁵⁵ Audio cassette lecture entitled, “Theology and the Pastorate,” n.d.

forward along the timeline of the history of ideas to Hegel and Kierkegaard, he drew attention to a significant shift in the very concept of truth. Hegel introduced the model of thesis-antithesis, with the answer always being synthesis. Schaeffer described the situation this way: “by Kant’s time the rationalistic rational possibilities are exhausted . . . the upper and lower stories are by his time in such great tension that they are ready to separate totally. Kant and Hegel are the doorway to modern man.”⁵⁶ While Hegel sought synthesis, still holding out some hope of a unified field of knowledge, Kierkegaard put away this hope altogether. Thus, for Schaeffer, Kierkegaard was “the real modern man.”⁵⁷

With faith and rationality cut off completely, the “melancholy Dane” moved underneath “the line of despair.” Schaeffer envisioned Hegel on the line of despair and Kierkegaard as the first one below it. What hope is left? There is no hope, except to take a “leap of faith,” which is our final metaphor. Kierkegaard was unwilling to surrender morality and universals. Thus, his leap, while non-rational, was necessary to hold on to any optimism whatsoever that man might somehow find a meaningful existence.

The Doctrine of Scripture

Another important aspect of Schaeffer’s apologetics was his insistence on the necessity of biblical inerrancy. As mentioned in the biographical section, Schaeffer came to faith in Christ by reading through the Bible, looking for ultimate answers. As a young person with no training in biblical interpretation and no one to guide him, he simply read the Word as he would any other book. In fact, when he first began reading the Bible it was alongside his Greek philosophy. From the very first chapters of Genesis, he was impressed with the fact that where philosophy only had speculative questions, the Bible had authoritative answers. Furthermore, he also realized that the church he had been attending could not provide answers because they did not acknowledge the authoritative nature of Scripture. Thus, we see in Schaeffer the imminently practical, as well as indispensable, place accorded the doctrine of Scripture in apologetics.

Schaeffer knew that philosophy had proven unable to answer the compelling questions of life. Only the infinite-personal God of the Bible makes sense of reality. As Christians give up an inerrant Bible, they lose the necessary foundation upon which the doctrine of the infinite-personal God is built, which in turn wreaks havoc in apologetics. In other words, the triune God of Scripture is the “transcendental necessity for meaning, significance, values, and truth.”⁵⁸ He is a triune God, communicative from all eternity. He created us in His image as communicative beings, and has spoken to us through the Bible, the ultimate standard of truth. On the basis of God’s communication, we have every reason to believe that He speaks to us truly, if not exhaustively, regarding Himself and the world in which we live.⁵⁹ The Bible claims for itself the very authority of God. As Scripture is self-attesting, so is the God whose Word it is. We see here the inter-relatedness of the doctrine of Scripture and apologetics.

Another biblical doctrine central to Schaeffer’s apologetics is man’s fall into sin in Genesis 3. As Schaeffer stated unflinchingly, “Take away the first three chapters of Genesis and you cannot maintain a true Christian position nor give Christianity’s answers.” This too is

⁵⁶ Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, 40.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁸ Stephen J. Wellum, “Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984): Lessons From His Life and Thought,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, vol. 6 (Summer 2002): 19.

⁵⁹ Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, 83.

related to the fundamental issue of biblical inerrancy. Again, Schaeffer was forthright in his analysis, warning about “evangelicals playing games with the first half of Genesis. But if you remove a true, historic, space-time Fall, the answers do not exist.”⁶⁰ As Christians, we know that God is there and He is not silent. Our apologetics and our evangelism rest on the titanic truths of the historic Christian faith, truths that can only be sustained on the basis of God’s inerrant and infallible Word.

Culture and the Arts

What is perhaps most revolutionary about Schaeffer’s method of apologetics, and certainly something that contributed greatly to his popularity, is his incorporation of culture and the arts into his discussions. Schaeffer was keenly aware that artists, often more poignantly than anyone else, express the worldview of their times. Schaeffer’s great interest in art led him to study the lives and worldviews of the great artists and reflect on what they were saying through their art.⁶¹ He even went so far as to say that as Kierkegaard’s existentialism, an “anti-philosophy,” began to dominate, “the real philosophic expressions have tended to pass over to those who do not occupy the chairs of philosophy – the novelist, the film producer, the jazz musician, the hippies and even the teenage gangs in their violence.”⁶²

One of the profound implications of this insight is the various entry points to the gospel it provides in our discussions with unbelievers. Few people will have any inkling of the latest developments in the arena of philosophy, but will enjoy a good discussion about the latest popular music, or the latest happenings in the mass media, or some shocking story from the world of art or film. Because the framework of his apologetics was an entire world-and-life-view, Schaeffer was adept at discussing the central claims of Christianity from myriad starting points. When we combine this focus on art and culture, and their easy entry points to conversing with nonbelievers, with Schaeffer’s evident love and compassion for people and stated belief that they are willing and able to grapple with the ultimate issues of life, we begin to realize what a potent and rich apologetic methodology he displayed.

Conclusion

What can we learn today from the life and work of Francis Schaeffer? While there are many enduring lessons that could be discussed,⁶³ some of which have been alluded to already, we conclude with three of the most essential for our practice of apologetics and evangelism.

First, practice personal holiness. While this may not seem like advice in the realm of apologetics, for Schaeffer, a life of holiness was a prerequisite for lasting effectiveness for any Christian minister. Marveling at the work the Lord had done through many of the early Keswick missionaries, Schaeffer noted that, in spite of what he detected as theological inadequacies, “they did understand the spiritual reality of the Lord’s work done in the Lord’s way.”⁶⁴ The Lord’s

⁶⁰ Follis, *Truth With Love*, 44.

⁶¹ Schaeffer’s views on art were greatly influenced by his friend, art critic Hans Rookmaaker.

⁶² Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, 57.

⁶³ Burson and Walls, at the conclusion of their work on Schaeffer and Lewis, list “21 Lessons for the 21st Century.”

⁶⁴ Lane T. Dennis, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer: Spiritual Reality in the Personal Christian Life*, (Westchester: Crossway, 1985), 57.

way is surely the way of holiness. It is never enough simply to present correct philosophical arguments. Our witness is two-sided. We preach with our words as well as our actions. Our lives must match our message if we are to maintain a credible witness. Schaeffer believed, with C.S. Lewis, that “if only ten percent of the world’s population had holiness the rest of the people would be converted quickly.”⁶⁵ Let us not grieve the Spirit of Holiness, but rely on Him evermore in our witness and in our everyday existence. Here we ought to follow Schaeffer’s prayerful example as he followed Christ.

Second, practice pastoral presuppositionalism. While Schaeffer’s apologetics are not easily labeled, it seems clear that he is broadly within the presuppositional camp. This means that he sought to set the Christian worldview over against the vain philosophies of sinful autonomous man. Schaeffer, however, added a distinctive pastoral flair to the presuppositional method. He utilized the breadth of the presuppositional model to great advantage in meeting people on their turf with the message of the gospel. John Frame believes Schaeffer’s most important contribution “was the ability to bring the full spectrum of reality into the apologetic arena.”⁶⁶ It is a shame, and somewhat ironic, that the stereotype of presuppositionalism is one of cold intellectualism. Schaeffer’s life and ministry is a demonstration of how Reformed thinkers can engage people on a whole host of issues with warmth and genuine pastoral interest – something apologists of every stripe ought to learn well.

Finally, practice love, “the final apologetic.” This is the most enduring legacy of Francis Schaeffer. Stories abound of the patience and love he had for people.⁶⁷ He was interested in them *as people* – made in God’s image and therefore inherently valuable. He was especially concerned that love be evident among those who professed to be the followers of Christ. This is “the final apologetic.”⁶⁸ The community he cultivated at L’Abri was his most powerful defense of the faith. Though the church is called to judge whether or not a man is a Christian on the basis of his doctrine, the world will be arrested by “the love that Christians show for each other and not just for their own party.”⁶⁹ This is precisely what Jesus taught us, and what Schaeffer saw so clearly. In fact, he saw this so clearly that it blurred his vision with tears in the face of our tremendous failure. In the end, if we are to approach the faithfulness and effectiveness of a giant like Schaeffer, we must imitate more than just his methods; we must imitate his heart. May God be pleased to grant us this, for the sake of Christ, and for the church for whom He died.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁶ Burson and Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*, 269.

⁶⁷ One of the most poignant is recounted in Burson and Walls, *C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer*, 268.

⁶⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*, (L’Abri Fellowship, 1970), 15.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

