

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 93

Francis Schaeffer

In 1969, Jimmy Page, lead guitarist for the rock band Led Zeppelin, was speaking with Frank Schaeffer, son of Francis Schaeffer. Page produced a copy of Francis Schaeffer's book, *Escape from Reason*, commenting on what a great book it was. Page went on to say that Guitarist Eric Clapton had given the book to him as an important read.¹

Many credit the same Francis Schaeffer as one of the core persons responsible for the rise of the political religious right in America. Schaeffer put out a strong pro-life message and helped encourage Christians to realize their role as the procurers and preservers of Christian American culture. It is open to question whether Schaeffer would have liked to be credited with much that has transpired under the aegis of the "Religious Right." But, there is little dispute that Schaeffer had a key role in the movement. Many in the movement, from Jerry Falwell to James Dobson, have pointed to Schaeffer as a major part of their inspiration.

From rock stars to religious personalities, and many persons in between, Schaeffer's impact was broad. Schaeffer published over 20 books, made several movies, and produced a prodigious library of taped lectures that dealt with a myriad of subjects, from the role and conduct of the church, philosophy, apologetics (arguments for the existence of God and the defense of the Christian faith) to the dignity of man. Hence, we properly consider Francis Schaeffer as we draw to a close this two-year study on Church History. It is particularly fitting to finish our historical study with Schaeffer because almost without exception, when Schaeffer wrote on a subject, he always sought to understand or teach it in light of its historical roots. Whatever aspect of current culture Schaeffer was addressing, he was always quick to use the history of art, music, philosophy, or civilization to both put his point into a historical context and to give it a deeper meaning.

In this, we have used a "Schaeffer mindset" for this entire series. What is a "Bible Study hour" doing studying Church History? Why would 350 of us gather each week for two years and study the apostolic fathers, the late Roman church, the medieval church, the reformation, the enlightenment, the Great Awakening, the multitudes of church denominational schisms during a time set apart for study of scripture? We study these topics because of a firm conviction that we best understand where we are and where we should head when we understand where we have been and how we got here.

¹ Sharlet, Jeff, "Holy Fools" *Newstatesman*, October 25, 2007. Online at www.newstatesman.com/200710250048.

So, we bring our study to a close looking at a major personality in Christian history from the 20th century—Francis Schaeffer. In the interest of time, we will not be going into great biographical detail beyond certain core facts necessary to the purpose of the lesson. Should anyone wish to explore some of the details of this remarkable man's life, there are a number of books available including *Tapestry* written by his wife, Edith Schaeffer.

In 1969, Edith Schaeffer wrote a book entitled *L'Abri* that set out the development of the small Christian community by that name (*L'Abri* is French for “shelter”) that the Schaeffers established in the Swiss Alps. L'Abri had open doors for those seeking to come find answers to life's great questions. It is within the framework of that community that the Schaeffers lived and served as they saw God's calling and plan for them.

In the book's foreword, Francis Schaeffer wrote:

This book and my books form a unity. The work of L'Abri has two inter-related aspects. First, there is the attempt to give an honest answer to honest questions—intellectually and upon a careful exegetical base... The second aspect is the demonstration that the Personal-Infinite God is *really there* in our generation.

This foreword is very revealing both as to the person of Francis Schaeffer and as to his ministry and work. Schaeffer was not a perfect man, in action or doctrine. Schaeffer was not a perfect scholar, in teaching or writing. But, Schaeffer was a Christian driven both to honest answers for honest questions and to demonstrated love for hurting people and a hurting world. If Schaeffer was like most everyone else, then his drive on these issues was likely his own need for them. Schaeffer was one driven by a need to answer honest questions in his own mind. Schaeffer was also a man who understood the need for a real love that exceeds what one might deserve. In other words, Schaeffer offered others what God offered him, a chance to explore his honest hard questions with truth at the end, and an undeserved love for fallen people who wish they were better than they were.

We will focus this class on two areas: questions and demonstrated love. While that does not fully encompass the man or the ministry, it certainly covers much of the core ground needed. After all, this is a lesson in Church History Literacy, not a seminar on Francis Schaeffer!

QUESTIONS

In the life of Schaeffer, and in his ministry, he practiced a policy that, “No questions are off limits.” He welcomed any real question by anyone who truly sought an honest answer. Schaeffer was convinced that scripture offered answers to all the questions of life, if not directly, at least through reasoned application. While the questions he confronted were many, we sift through them to draw up a few that were core questions. Space dictates we do so! On those questions we do not have time to address more fully, we will at least give some reading resources for you to go find out what Schaeffer offered as answers!

Is there a God?

Could there be any more serious question deserving an honest answer? This is a question that never arose for Schaeffer simply from his interactions with others. It is a question that brought him to his Jabbok (see Gen. 32:22-32). In Genesis, we read of a second encounter Jacob had with God (the first was the dream at Bethel in Gen. 28:10-22). Jacob wrestles through the night never being fully overpowered, but finally being touched in the hip and wounded. That night, we are told Jacob wrestled with God and lived to tell about it!

In a similar manner, Schaeffer came to the question of God’s existence through a journey that left him alone to wrestle the question. Schaeffer was reared in a liberal Presbyterian house in Germantown, Pennsylvania. His parents taught him hard work, expecting Schaeffer to go to school and study to be an electrician or electrical engineer. Schaeffer decided to leave any Christian faith, but felt intellectually he should read the Bible thoroughly before rejecting it. Schaeffer’s read through the Bible did not chase him from faith; it actually landed him into a belief that challenged the liberal theology he was hearing at his church.

Schaeffer would go on, much to his parent’s chagrin, to study theology, getting both an undergraduate and a seminary degree with honors. Married by this time to Edith, a devout, intelligent and well-studied daughter from parents who served in China as missionaries, Schaeffer went into the ministry. Schaeffer maintained his Presbyterian affiliation, but as the Presbyterians were splitting over issues of liberalism, Schaeffer maintained his affiliation with the conservative section.

Ultimately, The Schaeffers landed in Switzerland in the late 1940’s as missionaries. It was in Switzerland that Francis Schaeffer had a second serious

encounter wrestling with God.² Schaeffer reached a point where he rejected his entire belief system, spending days and night wandering about the Alps and pacing in his hayloft trying to determine what, if anything, was true about God and faith. It is from this time that Schaeffer came to what he would later term “true truth” about the reality of God, our ability to understand God, and the role that God plays in the believer’s life.

Schaeffer would go on to lecture and write about these events and conclusions, for it was in his heart to help others struggle with the very real questions about God.

In a nutshell, Schaeffer approached this question by setting out worldviews, that of the questioner and that of orthodox Christianity. By “worldview,” we mean the core ideas of what is the world, what is real, and how do we know? For some, that might entail a closed universe of time and chance. In other words, some might believe that this universe of matter is all there is, there is no God within it or without it. We humans exist merely by the combination of chance and the billions of years of time that have gone on before.

Schaeffer’s Christian worldview is built around a few basic fundamentals of orthodoxy. First, an infinite and personal God (three in one) existed with internal love, communication, and moral makeup before anything was made. This personal and infinite God made man in his image. Man was made moral and personal, like God, and yet man was finite. In other words, man was not another God. Man was made to fellowship with God and for the purpose of this fellowship.

Mankind, through Adam and Eve, sinned (in rebellion, chose a moral existence different than God’s), and as a result, fell from God. The fall was a loss of fellowship (there is no fellowship of the profane with the holy) and with that withdrawal of intimacy, mankind suffered death in all aspects – physically and spiritually. This means man’s body was no longer perfect. His intellect was deficient, and his emotions, his devotion, and man in his entirety was broken.

Rather than allow mankind to suffer eternity broken and condemned, God chose (before the foundation of the world) to purchase man’s restoration by substituting the death of Christ in mankind’s stead. This allows one who rests by faith in that substitution to be “justified” or declared righteous in spite of personal guilt. Jesus took the debts of such a person and put them on his personal account.

² The number here is truly irrelevant save for the nice parallel to the Jacob account. We do not know if Schaeffer had had multiple other encounters or not! For that matter, we do not know if Jacob did either!

As a result, although we still live in fallen bodies, we who believe are experiencing a process of sanctification as God seeks to make us more holy and right. This process finds its completion at the time of glorification when, after we die, God finishes the good work he began and we are fully made whole in all aspects of our personage for eternity.

The world we live in is still broken as a result of the fall. It is under a curse pronounced by God in Genesis 3.

Schaeffer would take the Orthodox view, as he understood it, compare the worldview under consideration by the person questioning God, and see which one is the more reasonable explanation. Schaeffer would probe the reasonableness of the views from many angles, including the “mannishness of man,” the inherent morality of man (in this regard his argument was very similar to that of C. S. Lewis we discussed last week in lesson 92³), and the credibility of our thinking that we can truly “know” anything at all.

Schaeffer eventually brought this home with his own conclusion that nothing seems to explain the world we live in and ourselves except the Christian worldview. For Schaeffer, anyone who lived with a different worldview must live somewhere in conflict with the world as it is. In other words, accepting that the Christian worldview is accurate, Schaeffer believed that everyone lives in a world that is truly explained by orthodoxy. So, anyone who has a worldview inconsistent with the Christian worldview lives, at some point, inconsistent or in tension with his or her belief system. Schaeffer saw these points of tension as the place where belief could be cultivated.

Schaeffer’s books on these ideas include *The God who is There*, *He is There and He is Not Silent*, and *Escape From Reason*. The books are fun to read because they show Schaeffer’s historical approach to teaching and understanding. He is not satisfied to reference alternate belief systems. He traces their roots back in the history of ideas and philosophies. He also shows their manifestations through eras of art, music, and general culture.

What can we know of God?

This logical question follows that of whether God exists. Schaeffer follows through with analysis in this area in the book we referenced earlier, *He is there and He Is Not Silent*. “Is there a God?” is the portion of the book meriting the title

³ This and all other lessons in this series can be downloaded from our website www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

He is There, and “Does he reveal himself to us?” is the portion entitled *He is Not Silent*.

Schaeffer makes a point that we can never know God fully or exhaustively, but we are able to know God truly. In other words, just because we cannot wholly know God, does not mean we cannot know important things about the holy God. Schaeffer sees our knowledge of God primarily from God’s revelation in scripture. Schaeffer does not deny the experience of knowing God, individually or from demonstrations of the Church, but the ultimate reliable understanding of God comes from scripture itself.

Does man have meaning?

Schaeffer’s life led him to many of the cutting edge ideas of education and philosophy. He interacted with students from some of the leading universities of Europe. Schaeffer also visited many campuses and cities where he would speak and debate with some of the Europe’s leading intelligentsia and their intellectual offspring. As a result, Schaeffer was highly sensitive to many people whose lives were directly affected by the philosophies taught.

From those interactions, Schaeffer found many who were questioning whether mankind has any real meaning. Is man simply a combination of genetics and environmental exposure? In a real sense, is man ultimately just a biological machine? Are we born with a genetic makeup that dictates how we will respond to circumstances of life, and in that sense, what we are and become is not something we have any real choice about. It just occurs. B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) wrote a best seller about this theory called, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Skinner argued that “autonomous man” does not exist. Man’s behavior is mechanical and an issue of technology. Skinner believed that we could make changes in society through behavioral engineering, utilizing the technology of behavior.

Schaeffer met and interacted with countless purposeless people who felt fully devalued by this belief system. Schaeffer saw the system carried out in art as well as philosophy, and it moved Schaeffer to both indignation and tears. So, when B.F. Skinner wrote his book, Schaeffer responded. He responded by taking time with individuals and explaining the errors of the belief system. He also responded in writing. In direct response to Skinner’s book, Schaeffer wrote *Back to Freedom and Dignity*. Another book Schaeffer wrote on this issue was *Escape From Reason*, the book Clapton had given Page referenced earlier.

Schaeffer traced the roots of the “Meaningless Movement” (my words, not his) back to Thomas Aquinas (see lessons 46 and 47). Schaeffer believed that as

Aquinas sought to establish “natural theology” (where Aquinas taught that God could be understood and his truth validated not just by biblical study but also independently by looking and understanding the world around us), Aquinas opened up a philosophical wedge between God, His revelation, and spiritual matters (termed “grace”) and mankind’s world, the things created and seen (termed “nature”). Schaeffer believed Aquinas failed to account that man was fallen intellectually as well as spiritually and that there could be no real discernment of natural theology without insight from God and revelation.

From Aquinas, Schaeffer walked through subsequent generations of thinkers who more fully developed the separation of the observable physical human experience from the divine spiritual experience. Schaeffer walked through these steps not only as given by philosophers but also as expressed by artists, musicians, writers, general culture, and even theologians. In so doing, Schaeffer put into historical context matters as seemingly diverse as pornography, Picasso, and modern science.

Schaeffer pointed out that the train’s final stop was a station of disillusionment, despondency, and despair. Absent some irrational leap into a void of faith of some inexpressible experience of validation, mankind finds itself a mere machine once God’s wisdom and revelation is removed from the world of nature. Mankind needed to understand the revealed truth that we were made in God’s image. Hence all people, regardless of their state of “salvation,” have an inherent value and worth that exceeds our ability to grasp.

Schaeffer would not only teach this value to each person, but would seek opportunities to show it to them individually as well as to the world at large. This was a large part of the writings and actions we will discuss below as we consider Schaeffer’s “Demonstrated Love.”

What is truth?

Schaeffer was adamant in his teaching and writing that western civilization was denigrating to a point where objective truth was lost. Schaeffer used history to show the changes in truth by the intelligent thought leaders. Schaeffer would use the same type of concerns mentioned earlier in this paper starting with Aquinas to show the results of dropping God and revelation from the realm of our understanding of man and science. Schaeffer also spent a good bit of time explaining how Hegel left behind historical logic (A is not non-A) in favor of thesis-antithesis producing synthesis. (If you are not following this, no worries... Read Schaeffer! Or better yet, read a primer on Hegel and then read Schaeffer!)

The bottom line for Schaeffer is that western thought leaders abandoned God and revelation, and the natural and logical consequence was the loss of absolute truth. Once absolute truth is lost, what is true becomes relative and subjective; it varies from person to person and event to event. While this may have found its genesis among the thought leaders, Schaeffer does an admirable job of demonstrating how these philosophies eventually filter down to everyone (Notably, it is the middle class Americans who are often the last to be affected!).

Schaeffer saw this as a coming problem for not just American culture but also for the evangelical church. From 1960's until his death in 1984, Schaeffer was ringing the alarm that the unbelief in absolute truth ("relativism") was making its way into mainstream America and into the evangelical church. Schaeffer explained in good detail why and how.

Statistics seem to have borne out Schaeffer's concerns. Since 1984, Barna Research Group, Ltd. has conducted multiple surveys in the United States on the issue of absolute truth. Barna surveyed the following question:

Do you believe that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging, or that moral truth is relative to the circumstances, or is this something you have never really thought about?

64% of adults said moral truth depended on the circumstances. Among those who called themselves "born again," the figure was still 54%. Among teenagers in born again households the figure was 76% while 83% of all teenagers do not believe in absolute moral truth.

These figures are substantially higher than those of years ago. Barna notes that more and more "the basis of people's moral and ethical decisions these days is more likely to be feelings and less likely to be the Bible."⁴

Schaeffer sounded a prophet's warning on these issues, and history has verified his call.

Is scripture reliable?

Just as Schaeffer believed in objective truth, he sought his answers through scripture. Schaeffer was outspoken on the integrity and inerrancy of scripture. Schaeffer believed inerrancy to be the watershed issue for the evangelical church. Lose inerrancy, and the church loses its foundation. Schaeffer explained his reasoning on this in one of his final books, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*.

⁴ www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=106.

Schaeffer wrote a number of books explaining different aspects of scripture that frequently caused people to stumble over the doctrine of inerrancy. These included *Genesis in Space and Time*, *No Final Conflict*, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, *Basic Bible Studies*, and *Art and the Bible*.

DEMONSTRATED LOVE

If one were to talk to those who studied under Francis Schaeffer, then one would repeatedly hear stories of Schaeffer's heartfelt concern for others. Schaeffer saw that the Christian life was not merely one of faith before God and justification. The Christian life was also one of sanctification, learning to live a life of love. The mark of the believer was love for each other and love for the fallen. Schaeffer wrote a number of books that set out this truth in action for individuals as well as the church at large. We look at a few of these areas of concern.

True spirituality

Schaeffer came from common man roots. His parents were hard workers, and he was reared the same way. Schaeffer was never an elitist. He treated everyone with the same dignity and respect regardless of the person's position in life. Schaeffer saw that everyone, big or small, had great capabilities when they placed their lives in God's hands.

Schaeffer wrote of this in *No Little People*, a collection of 16 sermons Schaeffer delivered. Schaeffer took the book's title from one of his sermons where he points out that to God, there is no such thing as a little person. When God sought to use Moses, and Moses felt he was too small and not up to the task, God's response was to use Moses' rod instead! It is as if God was saying, "If you Moses think I made a mistake calling you because I misjudged your ability, then you will find out the key is ME, God, who is working in you! You are incidental! I can do this with a piece of wood!" Then, as Exodus 4:20 tells us, "The rod of Moses became the rod of God," and the rest is history!

As the Christian put his or her life in God's hands, the result should be a growing evidence of God's love in word and deed. Schaeffer consistently taught that there was more to the Christian life than merely becoming a Christian; that was just the start! After a conversion experience, Schaeffer was concerned that believers understand that the Christian life is not following a "To Do" list or a list of "Do

Nots!”⁵ God’s concerns with man center not on outward deeds, but with the inward heart that produces those deeds.

So, Schaeffer wrote in *True Spirituality* that the Christian is to put one and one’s desires behind others and service. The mark of the Christian is one of love toward all. On his own, man can never do this. It is an empowerment of God’s Spirit producing the heart of God. It is man crucified with Christ, and Christ then living in man (Gal. 2:20).

The Church was to be no different. Schaeffer thought it imperative that the church be known for its love and compassion, just as much as its doctrinal purity. That was the mark of the church with true spirituality.

Ecology

Schaeffer also wrote on issues as diverse as ecology (*Pollution and Death of Man*) and the importance of the church to treat the world with the same healing approach that we are to treat each other. God has given the church a responsibility in this fallen world to seek to aid in minimizing the harms of the fall. The church should “consciously in practice be a healing redemptive factor—in the separation of man from God, of man from himself, of man from man, of man from nature, and of nature from nature.”⁶

In the church’s attitude toward nature, Schaeffer saw as a testimonial of the church toward loving God, His creation, and all of humanity.

Hospitality/Shelter

In the area of hospitality and shelter, Schaeffer lived his sermons. His home was often over run with seekers, people needing love and shelter, and every other assortment of person. All the Schaeffers would seek to listen, to share and to love those God placed in their way. They would even pray that God would send them those whom they were to help and assist.

In this way, the community of L’Abri grew. Today, it encompasses multiple sites around the world. Those with an interest in this practical day to day lifestyle the

⁵ Schaeffer was never big on “to do” lists. A major complaint he received about his book, *How Should We Then Live*, was that it never directly answered the question, “How should we live?” The book used history to show our need for understanding life’s choices and the ways our beliefs sculpt our actions and values.

⁶ Schaeffer, Francis, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (1970), Ch. 6.

Schaeffers' developed should read Edith Schaeffer's book, *L'Abri* or visit the website at www.labri.org.

The Church before the world

Schaeffer also wrote a good deal on the Church as well. He taught the need for orthodoxy, inerrancy, and love. One of his last books, *A Christian Manifesto* was a call for the church to work to restore Biblical morality in the American culture. This was the book credited by Randall Terry of Operation Rescue and many other Christian activists as the springboard for their efforts.

POINTS FOR HOME

We have left out much of Schaeffer's works. For example, we failed to cover two film series done with his son, Frank Schaeffer. We pause here and ask what impact does this lesson offer us for this moment in our lives? I would suggest the points for home could be numerous, but we will limit it to three:

1. God and faith have nothing to fear from honest questions. Scripture teaches this just as much as Francis Schaeffer does! It is in scripture we find the questions: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? (Ps. 22:1⁷) In times of distress when God seems to do nothing and prayers go unanswered, the psalmist asks, "O Lord, how long will you look on?" (Ps. 35:17) or "Why have you rejected us forever, O God? (Ps. 74:1). Or how about this, "Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" (Ps. 88:14). While not directly asking if there is a God, the psalmist asks whether God will "hide yourself forever?" (Ps. 89:46).

We cannot consider questions of God without referring to the book of Job. Job asked the question, why do good men suffer and wicked prosper? (Job 3:20-21). Job's friends do not really probe God with honest questions. Instead, they make assumptions about God and statements of God's character and purpose that seem presumptuous if not a bit outrageous. God, in fact, gets angry with Job's friends for the things they say about him (Job 42:7, "I am angry with you...because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has"). Now, God was not angry at the questions! Job asked questions, yet God deems him as speaking rightly. God was angry with those who

⁷ Jesus quotes the first question in this psalm from the cross as recorded in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34).

arguably *should have been asking questions* instead of simply making up answers! Of course, God himself answers many of Job's questions and issues by asking his own set of questions! (Job 38-41) In those questions, Job finds his answers.

2. Does the Bible give every answer to every question? Yes and no! In scripture, we have "God-breathed" or inspired resources for us to be "thoroughly equipped" for our lives (2 Tim. 3:16). Most importantly, scripture sets out the principles of God, infinite, personal and moral, man made in His image, sin and the fall of humanity and the earth, and the redemptive work of God in Jesus. We have the assurance of the Holy Spirit and sanctification. We have the promise of future glorification. Yet, Paul has no hesitancy to write, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?' But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (Rom. 9:19-20) Of course, after Paul writes this, he goes on to try and answer the question! But, the Bible never claims to provide absolute answers to the manifold mysteries of God. We have what we need, not always what we want! It is the Bible, however, that gives us reliable revelation by which we can evaluate and measure our answers and philosophies. Our minds are fallen and in need of enlightenment. We must always include God and revelation in any effort to understand reality.
3. In the midst of our searching and questioning, we must never forget Jesus admonition, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). God has called us to be salt to the world, a city set shining on a hill (Mt. 5:13-16). We are to shine His love, His compassion, and His caring in our words and our deeds. Christ modeled this demonstrated love to the point of "death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). We should let Christ live that same life in us (Gal. 2:20), as we "take up our cross and follow him" (Lk 9:23).