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**FRANCIS SCHAEFFER:
PASTOR, EVANGELIST, APOLOGIST, PROPHET**

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In the fall of 1976, I bought a medium-sized paperback book with an odd abstract cover in the University of Oregon bookstore in Eugene. I was back in school, trying to get my intellectual bearings as a fledgling and intellectually confused Christian. The book was *The God Who Is There: Speaking Christianity into the Twentieth Century* by Francis Schaeffer. He courageously ranged over philosophy, theology, painting, poetry, and all things cultural to demonstrate that the Christian worldview offers the best answers to life's deepest questions. This was Christianity with backbone, brain, muscle, guts, and heart.

It is no cliché to say the book changed my life for the better and helped define my calling. This smallish man with a high-pitched voice was the mentor I never met. The history of evangelicalism in the twentieth century cannot be written without careful attention to his body of work.

The God Who Is There was published when Schaeffer was fifty-six years old. It was the first of more than twenty books he would write before he died in 1984 at age seventy-two. These books were timely, biblical, and compelling. Through his writing, preaching, and counseling, Schaeffer left a deep, wide, and true mark on the world. Humans make ripples that go on for eternity. Schaeffer was no mere pebble dropped into a pond but a huge boulder thrown into the great lake of human history. We feel the waves of his influence still through those influenced by him, including Os Guinness, Nancy Pearcey, Willian Edgar, Michael Card, John Whitehead, and many others.

This wide man cannot be narrowly categorized. Schaeffer was large in gifts and ministry and heart. Before finding the right descriptions for Francis Schaeffer, let us consider the outlines of his life.¹

Schaeffer was an only child born in 1912 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, to working-class stock. He attended a liberal church in his youth, but saw that the theology had neither weight nor substance. Being intellectually honest (as he always was), he stopped attending and became an agnostic.

But after reading various philosophers along with the Bible, he decided that Christianity explained the most important matters of life and that other worldviews did not. He then became a Christian at age seventeen and soon discerned a call to be a pastor.

Young Schaeffer attended a college to prepare for ministry. After completing his ministerial training degree, he attended Westminster Theological Seminary, where he studied with the influential apologists Cornelius Van Til and J. Gresham Machen. After Schaeffer's first year, Faith Seminary split from Westminster, and he went with it. Schaeffer finished his degree at Faith Seminary and began to pastor effectively at several churches in the United States.

A turning point came when his small Reformed denomination requested that Schaeffer travel to Europe to investigate the state of the church just after World War II. After a long and exhausting trip, Schaeffer returned with deep concern for Christianity's influence on Europe. He and his young family traveled to Switzerland to bring the gospel to an arid landscape. But due to the sectarianism and a lack of love for God and man he found in his denomination, Schaeffer left it and even questioned the truth of Christianity.² He and his wife Edith persevered in faith through prayer and waited on God for direction. God led them in 1955 to start L'Abri (French for *shelter*) as a safe place for doubters and seekers. Hundreds found their way to a few humble cabins in the Swiss Alps over the years. They worked, studied, dialogued, and experienced deep hospitality, largely through the ministry of Edith. From this platform, Schaeffer engaged in ministry projects that took him around the world.

We may sum up Francis Schaeffer's contributions according to four roles he played. He was a pastor, evangelist, apologist, and prophet.

PASTOR

Schaeffer spent ten years in the pastoral ministry before starting L'Abri. He and Edith started Children for Christ during this time, an evangelistic curriculum that was widely and successfully implemented around the world.

Schaeffer continued as pastor at L'Abri, preaching every Sunday and counseling hundreds of inquirers about Christianity. He was known for his kindness and self-sacrifice for the students at L'Abri and for all who met him. A young and troubled black man named Sylvester Jacobs met Schaeffer after a lecture. He reports, "What I remembered most was that he was kind to me."³ Jacobs later went to L'Abri, where he found his calling as a photographer. After spending an afternoon with Schaeffer, he found that it was Schaeffer's day off. He writes, "If I, a black, matter to these people, could it be because I matter to God?"⁴

His strengths as a profoundly pastoral man were rooted in his adherence to historic orthodoxy (as he put it) and in his theology and practice of the Christian life. *True Spirituality*, Schaeffer wrote, was the foundation for all his other books, although it was not the first written. This small but revealing work came out of a crucible when Schaeffer, disappointed with the Christians in his denomination, went all the way back to his teenage agnosticism in order to rethink his Christian faith.

EVANGELIST

After a talk, Schaeffer was once asked about apologetics. "Dr. Schaeffer: Are you a presuppositionalist or an evidentialist?" He replied, "Neither. I am an evangelist." Schaeffer, the apologist extraordinaire, had a mind for what mattered in the moment. Apologetics was not a subject to debate but a way to engage "the watching world" (as he put it) with the truth and rationality of the Christian worldview.

Schaeffer used apologetics as "pre-evangelism." Os Guinness affirms that Schaeffer was the best one-on-one evangelist he has ever encountered. William Edgar writes that Schaeffer was conversing with a woman who had an objection to Christianity. She could not endorse a religion that in the Old Testament required animal sacrifice, since this was cruel and needless. Schaeffer made no progress until he looked down at her shoes. "Are they made of leather?" he asked. After she said, "Yes," the conversation opened up, since she tacitly affirmed that humans could use animals for some purposes.⁵ This skill of improvised evangelism cannot be put into a formula. It can only be practiced through loving our non-Christian neighbor while depending on the Holy Spirit for wisdom.

APOLOGIST

An apologist defends Christianity as objectively true, rational, and pertinent to all of life. While not an academic, Schaeffer developed an apologetic method that was adaptable to any situation. He presented Christianity as the best explanation for how

we know, how we got here, who we are, and who we should be. This approach was applied through careful observation of twentieth-century culture, both in America and Europe. Schaeffer engaged in negative apologetics by arguing that naturalism, secular philosophy, relativism, existentialism, and pantheism could not account for what mattered most. He was a master at exposing contradictions between a person's worldview and how he lived. For example, the avant-garde composer John Cage created music through chance mechanisms, such as using the I Ching (a Chinese divination tool). Yet Cage was an accomplished mycologist, an expert in mushrooms. Schaeffer noted that Cage himself admitted that if he approached mycology as he did his random music, he would likely die from eating poisonous mushrooms!⁶

Schaeffer brilliantly discerned that modern people usually separate faith and reason. They put matters of faith into "an upper story," immune from rational analysis. "The lower story" is the realm of fact, logic, and science. This realm is voiceless to speak of anything outside itself, since questions of meaning, value, and significance cannot be settled by rational investigation. Therefore, one must take a blind leap of faith into the upper story or simply affirm nihilism. Christianity, on the contrary, affirms that no one needs to "escape from reason" in their Christian commitment, since all truth is unified in the reality of the infinite-personal God of the Bible.⁷

Schaeffer's apologetic method is articulated most clearly in *The God Who Is There* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. He does not presuppose the truth of Christianity, but offers the Christian worldview as a self-consistent, factually adequate, and existentially profound system of thought and way of life. Christianity best explained the universe and its form and the uniqueness of man. Schaeffer practiced apologetics in relation to rival worldviews, particularly existentialism and Eastern mysticism, the most compelling alternative to Christianity during his ministry.

Schaeffer excelled in "taking the roof off" of non-Christian worldviews. Non-Christians must be held accountable for the logical implications of their false worldviews, no matter how horrible they may be. Schaeffer often did this in conversations, as well as in books or lectures. While on a boat ride, Schaeffer conversed with an atheist who got more than he bargained for. Schaeffer noted that he was much in love with his young wife. When the discussion was over, he reluctantly asked, "When you take your wife into your arms at night, are you sure she is there?" The man shouted back, "No!" and withdrew.⁸ Schaeffer does not fill in the details, but he surely showed that apart from the Christian worldview, there is no solid basis for knowledge, even of one's beautiful wife.⁹

PROPHET

A prophet in the biblical sense speaks truths that burn deep—disarming pretense and awakening the sleeping conscience with a call to repentance and action. The prophet is countercultural without being anti-cultural. His impassioned burden is reform and renewal. Schaeffer was such a man. His critique of culture was never pedantic but issued from a godly desire that the lost be reached and that the saved be alarmed and animated to bring Christ's truth to a lost culture. Like Abraham Kuyper, Schaeffer taught that Jesus Christ was the Lord of every area of life; thus, Christians must bring their lives into alignment with the Bible and work to bring Christian truths to bear on every institution, vocation, and individual. As he forcefully stated it in *A Christian Manifesto*: "True spirituality covers all of reality. There are things the Bible tells us as absolutes which are sinful—which do not conform to the character of God. But aside from these the Lordship of Christ covers all of life and all of life equally. It is not only that true spirituality covers all of life, but it covers all parts of the spectrum of life equally. In this sense there is nothing concerning reality that is not spiritual."¹⁰

Schaeffer the prophet drew from themes in Jeremiah and Romans in *Death in the City* to warn the church that the future of Western culture was in jeopardy because of its betrayal of its Judeo-Christian foundations. In his ambitious book and film series, *How Shall We Then Live?* (1976), Schaeffer traced the development and decline of Western culture from the Romans to the contemporary world. This was no mere survey, but a call to reclaim the Western heritage by restoring a biblical foundation in all areas of life.

Whatever Happened to the Human Race?, coauthored with Dr. C. Everett Koop, explained and warned of the loss of human rights due to a secular worldview that has no place for inherent human dignity. This book and film series sparked much greater evangelical engagement with the abortion controversy, and it jolted me awake to the war on the unborn. Schaeffer and Koop's predictions that euthanasia and even infanticide would be tolerated are sadly coming true. One academic article speaks of the legitimacy of "after birth abortion."¹¹ Oregon, Washington, and Vermont allow for doctor-assisted suicides under certain conditions. The Affordable Health Care Act allows monies to go for abortion. There will likely be state-controlled rationing of health care. If so, "the least of these," as Jesus put it, will be the first to be crossed off the list of the deserving of state funds for medical care (Matt. 25:31–46).

How does this godly man speak to us today? In a time of theological compromise and worldliness, he calls us to affirm and live out "true truth," come what may. "Truth carries with it confrontation. Truth demands confrontation; loving confrontation, but confrontation nevertheless."¹² In a time when the state is bearing down hard on religious liberties, Schaeffer reminds us that God is above the state, and the time may come for civil disobedience when Caesar plays God.¹³ In a world in which no religion is supposed to judge others, Schaeffer affirms both the antithesis between Christianity and

all other worldviews and the philosophical and existential superiority of biblical religion.

Surely, this man must be heard and heeded today. I will keep listening.

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NOTES

- 1 See Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).
- 2 He recounts this in *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971), 1–2.
- 3 Sylvester Jacobs with Linette Martin, *Born Black* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 104.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 5 William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2003), 55.
- 6 Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 30th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 70–74.
- 7 Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968).
- 8 *The God Who Is There*, 63–64.
- 9 *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 30th anniversary ed. (1972; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 33–80.
- 10 Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1981), 19.
- 11 Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, “After-Birth Abortion: Why Should the Baby Live?” *Journal of Medical Ethics* (February 2012); <http://jme.bmj.com/content/early/2012/03/01/medethics-2011-100411.full>.
- 12 Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 37.
- 13 *Christian Manifesto*, 89–130.