

The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer (Part 5- the Turn to Activism)

by Francis Schaeffer

Francis Schaeffer's ministry took a dramatic turn in the 1970s and 1980s as he became increasingly involved in the pro-life movement and called for civil disobedience and resistance to the government.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 4:7

Topics: "Christian Activism", "Evangelical History"

Description

Francis Schaeffer embarked on a new ministry direction with the project 'How Should We Then Live?' in 1976-77, which was a successful Christian response to the decline of Western culture. Despite its success, the project caused dissension within L'Abri due to the decision-making process and fundraising methods. Schaeffer's work, although criticized by some academic circles, played a significant role in shaping evangelical scholars and raising awareness of Christianity's intellectual richness. His later project 'Whatever Happened to the Human Race?' focused on abortion, leading to grassroots mobilization against abortion and influencing prominent figures like C. Everett Koop and Jerry Falwell.

Transcript

In 1974 Franky, now 21, propelled Francis in a new ministry direction that would end up leading toward an old ministry style. Franky dreamed up a ten-part documentary film series with the working title "The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture." It was to be a Christian response to Kenneth Clark's widely viewed Civilisation series. The project How Should We Then Live? (1976-77) -- was a resounding success in bringing to the general evangelical public Schaeffer's message about the rotting intellectual pilings of Western culture. The film series and book were both bestsellers, and an 18-city seminar tour drew tens of thousands of people.

Less happily, the project caused real dissension within L'Abri. The community had always discussed and prayed over major decisions before they were made, but in this case, the Schaeffers asked for prayer after making the decision to go ahead. They also broke precedent to solicit funds directly from their supporters in order partly to defray a budget that exceeded \$1 million.

The project added voices to the chorus of Schaeffer's critics. During his first talk at Wheaton College, the faculty had been much more skeptical than the students. Philosophy professor Arthur Holmes had been put off by Schaeffer's summary dismissal of the entire field of analytic philosophy, and he was later quoted

in Newsweek to the effect that he used Schaeffer's books in his classes as examples of how not to do philosophy. Even in his more careful early work, Schaeffer ranged so widely over disciplines and broad periods of time that specialists could not help noticing embarrassing errors of detail and facile oversimplifications. *How Should We Then Live?* brought even more criticism because it was essentially a reprise of the early Schaeffer material boiled down into an even simpler form.

The academic critics seldom, however, grappled with the role of what might be called "stepping stone" scholarship. Like the great popularizers H. G. Wells and Will Durant, Schaeffer placed accessible versions of academic subjects into a coherent, meaningful framework that highlighted broad connections through time and across disciplines. Durant wrote *The Story of Philosophy* "to pour warmth and blood into the fruits of scholarship"; this is what Schaeffer did for evangelicals. The result for innumerable high-school and college-age readers was a first awareness of the significance of ideas in history and culture and the intellectual richness of Christianity.

As far away as Pakistan, secondary students in a boarding school for missionary kids eagerly read and reread a package of the Schaeffers' books brought in by Youth with a Mission outreach workers in 1971. Church youth leaders and campus ministers introduced their brighter students to Schaeffer's books, launching scores of evangelical scholars on their careers. Philosopher Jerry Walls of Asbury Theological Seminary recalls,

Reading Schaeffer transformed my understanding of Christianity. He helped me to think of my faith in a much more comprehensive fashion than I had done before. My faith was becoming a more or less complete world-view, which embraced all kinds of things I had never associated very clearly with spirituality.

The major departure in *How Should We Then Live?* was its extended look at legalized abortion as a case study in arbitrary government and the imminent threat of authoritarianism. Schaeffer had always opposed abortion, but the matter only became prominent in his work after February 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared abortion a constitutional right.

Beginning in 1977, Schaeffer began devoting his full attention to the issue. Francis, Franky, and their old family friend C. Everett Koop (at that time a nationally known pioneer of pediatric surgery and one of the best-known evangelical opponents of abortion) collaborated on a five-part film series with accompanying book, action handbook, and international lecture tour.

The project, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979), coupled Francis's familiar explication of how secular humanism led inexorably to the devaluation of human life with Koop's devastating testimony about the widespread practice of infanticide in hospitals and its links to abortion. Koop later wrote that his involvement in this project was his first step toward becoming President Reagan's surgeon general.

The outcome of the project itself was mixed. The lecture tour drew disappointingly small audiences and in some locales lost money. Francis blamed

an attitude among [evangelical] leaders to keep people away from the seminars so that their own acceptance by the surrounding culture would not be disturbed.

Compounding the disappointment were the physical stress and attendant depression that Francis experienced in the chemotherapy treatment he was receiving for cancer, which had been diagnosed at the

Mayo Clinic in 1978. However, even though audiences and church showings were smaller than hoped, they still represented a considerable grassroots mobilization against abortion. Many individuals mark this film and the seminars as the beginning point of their personal involvement in pro-life activities, and it may well be that the actual impact from this project was greater than that of the better attended seminars in conjunction with *How Should We Then Live?*

The Schaeffers' disappointment magnified their growing frustration with mainstream evangelicalism for its apparent unwillingness to defend inerrancy and take up the pro-life cause. For instance, the celebrated "Chicago Declaration" of November 1973 -- a call to social action spearheaded by evangelicals from the counterculture generation -- never once mentioned abortion. The Schaeffers therefore began to keep company instead with the leaders of the New Christian Right, which was coalescing around the pro-life movement.

Francis's writings helped convince Jerry Falwell to take a stand against abortion. Francis also tutored Falwell in the concept of cobelligerence (Schaeffer's belief that Christians ought to stand with non-Christians against social injustice), which led Falwell to try to bring Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and others into the Moral Majority in 1979. Francis and Franky both made public appearances with Falwell and with Pat Robertson.

Francis's *A Christian Manifesto* (1981) defined abortion as the hinge issue for American society, called Christians to civil disobedience, and even broached the idea of resisting the government by force. The book is one of Robertson's all-time favorites, and it inspired a young man at Elim Bible School named Randall Terry to start a new kind of abortion protest employing passive resistance techniques used in the civil-rights struggle. According to Terry

If you want to understand Operation Rescue,
you have to read Schaeffer's *Christian Manifesto*.

By this point, several people from the counterculture generation began to wonder publicly what had happened to Francis Schaeffer. In 1970 Francis had written that "one of the greatest injustices we do to our young people is to ask them to be conservative," but in *Manifesto* he wrote that

with the conservative swing in the United States in the election of 1980 . . . there is a unique window open.
. . .

Let us hope that the window stays open, and not on just one issue.

In 1970 he had warned against wrapping Christianity in the American flag, but in *The Christian Manifesto* he took the unprecedented step of praising the Moral Majority -- a group whose genuine passion to defend the unborn was conjoined with an equal passion for intertwining loyalty to God with loyalty to America.

The countercultural Francis Schaeffer seemed to have disappeared.

The relationship between Francis and mainstream evangelicalism got even rockier in the early 1980s when Franky published several sarcastic books that attacked the "pathetic servility" of prominent evangelical figures and institutions. Francis never reined in his son -- partly out of family loyalty, but partly because Franky was saying things that Francis thought needed to be said.

Francis's final book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1984), approvingly cited Franky's "incisive critique" of evangelicalism and went on to follow Franky's lead in naming names. The book warned that

evangelicalism's accommodation to culture

in the 1980s had led it to the brink of apostasy.

In early 1984, Francis had just enough strength left from his battle with cancer to complete a 13-city tour lecturing on this theme. A month after the tour was complete, he died at home near the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

Edith carried on the work at the L'Abri in Rochester, where she continues to live and write. The original L'Abri in Switzerland remains in operation, as do L'Abri sites in Massachusetts, Australia, Holland, England, India, South Korea, and Sweden.

All three daughters and their husbands are still involved in L'Abri work around the world. Franky -- now Frank -- turned from berating evangelicalism to filmmaking; he then wrote a novel about his family that is well-crafted, funny, charming, and cruel. More recently he left evangelicalism for Eastern Orthodoxy, and he now speaks and writes about his conversion with the same kind of intensity that marked his father's work.

Source:

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