

## PROFILES IN FAITH

### Francis Schaeffer (1912–84)

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Francis August Schaeffer was born on January 30, 1912 in the small town of Germantown, Pennsylvania. His life, books and Switzerland-based ministry L'Abri have had immense and wide-ranging impact on this generation, personally touching many people, including me. How was Francis, together with his wife Edith, able to impact so many people?

First, he was able to get people to think about the large issues of life and reality. I remember when Schaeffer came to speak in a chapel service at Seattle Pacific University where I was an undergraduate. Like most of my classmates, I had been brought up as a believer, but I had never heard anything like what Schaeffer was discussing. He dealt with the Trinity, the nature of the Creation, the reality of the Fall, and the intellectual credibility of faith in Christ. In many ways, it was over my head at that time, and I can even remember that my mind hurt as I tried to follow him. However, I was so fascinated by what he said that, following his talk, I attended the question-and-answer time in the Student Union. That first exposure later led to my reading his books *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who is There*, both of which opened new arenas for exploration.

Over the years, as I have met and talked with others who encountered Schaeffer, my response seems to have been typical. Like me, many believers had been exposed to a more narrow perspective on the faith and had no idea of the comprehensive implications of that faith or how the Biblical worldview answered questions in a uniquely persuasive way. In many ways, life is like a key chain that contains many keys, only one of which unlocks the lock. Faith in Christ is that key according to Schaeffer; no other view is adequate to explain the nature of reality.

Schaeffer's method was to push the nonbeliever to the logical conclusion of their false assumptions. Alternately, he would push the nonbeliever to an adequate basis for their highest aspirations. For instance, one young man arrived at L'Abri an atheist, although passionately committed to social justice. He was gently persuaded to see that if his atheism were true there was no secure basis for any absolute value, including

justice. He could either give up claim to knowing what was just or find a basis for it in an absolute standard of right and wrong, most adequately grounded in an infinite-personal God.

Schaeffer often argued that, when it comes down to it, our options are few. Our origins arise out of: 1) Nothing, 2) The Impersonal, or 3) The Personal. Schaeffer argued that the Personal-Infinite God alone was the key that unlocked the secrets of the Cosmos.

A second reason for Francis Schaeffer's enormous impact was his emphasis on both the dignity and fall-  
enness of mankind. In one of his classic sermons, "No Little People," he says:

*Though we are limited and weak in talent, physical energy, and psychological strength, we are not less than a stick of wood. But, as the rod of Moses had to become the rod of God, so that which is me must become the me of God. Then I can become useful in God's hands. The Scripture emphasizes that much can come from little if the little is truly consecrated to God. There are no little people and no big people in the true spiritual sense, but only consecrated and unconsecrated people. The problem for each of us is applying this truth to ourselves . . . only one thing is important: to be consecrated persons in God's place for us, at each moment. Those who think of themselves as little people in little places, if committed to Christ and living under His Lordship in the whole of life, may, by God's grace, change the flow of our generation.*

One way in which he demonstrated this respect for the dignity of individuals was through hours of listening and lovingly speaking the truth of Christ to people he met. In fact, his wife Edith maintains that much of his education was from discussions with other people rather than from books alone. Edith writes in *L'Abri*:

*Rather than studying volumes in an ivory tower separated from life and developing a theory separated from the thinking and struggling of men, Fran has been talking for thirteen years now to men and women in the very midst of their struggles. He has talked to existentialists, logical positivists, Hindus, Buddhists,*

*liberal Protestants, liberal Roman Catholics, Reformed Jews and atheist Jews, Muslims, members of occult cults... brilliant professors, brilliant students and brilliant drop-outs! He has talked to beatniks, hippies, drug addicts, homosexuals and psychologically disturbed people.... The answers have been given, not out of academic research (although he does volumes of reading constantly to keep up), but out of this arena of live conversation. He answers real questions with carefully thought out answers which are real answers....*

Francis Schaeffer believed in involving himself in life – in answering the real questions of real people.

Third, the very foundation of his life was a passion for Christ, shown in his book *True Spirituality*. At one point, having arrived in Europe after a number of years as a pastor in a conservative Presbyterian church, he had a crisis of faith. For several months, he wrestled with whether his faith was “true truth,” not just his own perception of things but objectively real. At the end of that period, he strongly reaffirmed his faith and a passion to live by trusting in Christ. One of the ways this was demonstrated was by praying about finances but not sending out any letters asking for money. Many times God answered their prayers at just the right time giving them the exact amount needed. Prayer was a way of life at L’Abri. Anky Rookmaaker writes: “What impressed me most... was that the Schaeffers believed in prayer, and that their prayers were answered often in a very direct way.... It was so different than prayer so often is – not just a blind hope, but in faith, believing that God did hear and that He would answer....” Schaeffer not only involved himself in the lives of real people, he also demonstrated faith in a real God.

Fourth, Schaeffer manifested a place for the significance of the arts and artists. I can vividly remember hearing Schaeffer speak at Geneva College on what later became a short book, *Art and the Bible*. He spoke to the tragedy of many Christian young people who had a passion for music, painting, sculpture, film, etc., but were discouraged from that pursuit by well-meaning parents and church leaders. They were unable to see a vision for truth, goodness and beauty that was not merely focused on specifically Biblical and redemptive themes, but on all of creation. For instance, Schaeffer noted that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs. He especially pointed out that Solomon “spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he also spoke of animals and birds and creeping things and fish” (I Kings 4:32-33). In other words, his topics were not merely “religious” but included all of creation. Thus, there is a place not only for “Christian music” but also for music

which can give glory to God. Schaeffer also pointed to the importance of listening to contemporary culture – plays, music, movies, and literature – as an act of love enabling us to speak more compassionately to our generation.

Fifth, Schaeffer emphasized the importance of antithesis. The biblical view, he contended, involves acknowledging a contradiction between true and false prophets, right and wrong, good and evil, salvation and judgment, the broad way and the narrow way. J.I. Packer writes, “For Schaeffer the most tragic – because the most anti-human – thing in life was willful refusal by a human being to face the antithesis or rather the series of antitheses, with which God in Holy Scripture confronts us, and in this perception I think he was right.”

Schaeffer has gotten much criticism for being either wrong on details of philosophy or over-simplistic on the history of art or other areas. He was an evangelist not always concerned with the nuances of the specialist scholar. His was the place of the crusading “cartoonist” whose simple sketches give valuable insights into life. Again, Packer writes: “My guess is that his verbal and visual cartoons, simplistic but brilliant as they appear to me to be, will outlive everything else. I am sure, however, that I shall not be at all wrong when I hail Francis Schaeffer... as one of the truly great Christians of my time.” Although he could deal with the details of academic discussion, Francis Schaeffer’s greatest gift was to identify the larger religious and personal issues which lie behind the various intellectual smokescreens. In his focus on what was truly important and in his refusal to let his listeners remain on the level of the superficial, his legacy will endure.

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