

Review of a Review

Father, we want to thank You for the comfort and warmth of Your love for us. We thank You for the knowledge we have each day of Your existence and of Your care for us individually. We thank You for forgiving us each day and always receiving us. We thank You, Father, that Your creation speaks so clearly of Your existence and power, of Your divine nature. As we begin to think together today about apologetics and how to approach those who are not believers, we pray, Father, that You will be with us and help us in our understanding. We thank You for the contribution that Francis Schaeffer made in this particular way. We pray that You will give us wisdom and understanding of his thoughts. Help us to see where they are right and where they are helpful and biblical. Teach us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

I thought it might be helpful at this point to spend the day examining an article entitled, “A Review of a Review.” This article is the first statement I have been able to find of Schaeffer’s approach to apologetics. Let me give you a little bit of background on why he wrote this particular article.

In the little magazine, *The Bible Today*, which had been coming out regularly for several years from Shelton College with J. Oliver Buswell as its main contributor and editor (and also many articles by Allen McRae, George Seville, Mrs. Schaeffer’s father—in fact, there was a series of fascinating articles by him on various missionaries throughout history). In that little magazine there was a whole series of book reviews and articles by J. Oliver Buswell expressing his approach toward philosophy and apologetics. It was in response to one of these articles that Schaeffer wrote this reply, “A Review of a Review.” The original article was from *The Bible Today* in May, 1948. The original article, the review by Buswell, was called “The arguments from nature to God” with the subtitle: “Presuppositionalism in Thomas Aquinas, a book review with excursions by J. Oliver Buswell, Jr.” The book he was reviewing was *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* by Edward John Connell. There was a long review of Connell’s book by Buswell. Connell was basically taking what came to be called a presuppositionalist position. It appears from the article that it was, in fact, right at that time that the term “presuppositionalism” came about. Buswell says in the article, “The term ‘presuppositionalism’ was given me by my good friend Dr. Allen A. McRae in a casual conversation some months ago. I caught up the term immediately as an accurate designation for a significant school of thought.”

It is fascinating just to read that little bit of the history of how the term “presuppositionalism” came about. It is now, of course, the name of one of the major schools of apologetics in Christian and in Reformed thinking. Over that year and the next year in *The Bible Today* there is a whole series of articles by Buswell and Van Til where they write quite strikingly against each other. In fact at one point there is a fascinating little poem someone wrote to the magazine begging them to stop this debate because it was becoming acrimonious. It is a really amusing little poem that was written by a contributor, by a reader of the magazine, about this debate. I will bring it for you next time. It is really rather interesting.

It was into this discussion that Schaeffer wrote this little article. What is intriguing about this, I think, is that if you examine what he writes and if you examine what J. Oliver Buswell and Van Til write in these articles, there is a striking difference in what Schaeffer writes. There is a really ironical spirit in this article. He does not anywhere criticize either presuppositionalism or evidentialism. He tries to see some common ground between them, whereas, if you read the other articles, you will see there is fairly none of this. Acrimonious is perhaps too strong a word, but it was a fairly heavy debate between these two schools about the nature of apologetics. I think I have said to you before that in later years when Schaeffer was asked to give his view of Van Til and the presuppositionalist school or to give his view of

Buswell and the evidentialist school, he would usually refuse to answer the question. Rather, he would say simply, "I do not feel it is my calling to get involved in academic debates about the nature of apologetics. I see my calling as to be an evangelist, one who is seeking to communicate the Gospel to non-Christians. It may be someone else's calling, I do not want to make a criticism of that or say it is not a worthwhile calling. But I do not feel it is mine." He would always avoid getting into the discussion. Thus this article is particularly interesting because it is an article in which he responds to an article by J. Oliver Buswell and refers back to what he understands Van Til to have been saying. Of course, Van Til had taught him in seminary, and he makes that very clear here. You will notice in the statement at the top of the article it says, "We are delighted to present this article by the Reverend Francis Schaeffer, a former student and a friend and an admirer of Dr. Van Til's."

Now, that gives us a little bit of background about the context. Perhaps I ought to define the terms "evidentialism" and "presuppositionalism" for you before we go any further. These will not be academic definitions but simple definitions off the top of my head. Evidentialism is understood to be that approach to apologetics that says we may reason from the evidences, from the facts, from the information that is available in the world. We may reason from that and appeal to the reason of the non-Christian to seek to demonstrate to him that Christianity is true. Now, if you read Buswell's article, you will see that he very carefully denies that evidentialism is simply making a rationalistic approach to the Gospel. He insists that he believes and that Thomas Aquinas and Calvin believed (he traces this very carefully) in acknowledging that there is an intuitive knowledge of God in every human person. So Buswell very carefully denies that he was saying we can simply start with the facts out there and the bare reason of man and come to a knowledge of God. He does not accept that as evidentialism. The evidentialist approaches the non-Christian by appealing to the facts that are in the world, appealing to the reason of the person, taking for granted he has some intuitive knowledge of God, and seeking to convince him of the truth of Christianity. Now, the presuppositionalist argues that the non-Christian is starting from an assumption or a presupposition that is radically opposed to Christianity. The presuppositionalist argues that the non-Christian has a worldview or way of seeing things that denies the knowledge of God and the possibility of the knowledge of God. The presuppositionalist argues that all of the non-Christian's thinking and all of his or her life is shaped by that basic assumption, that basic presupposition. Presuppositionalism has traditionally accused evidentialism of allowing too much to the reasoning power of non-Christians. They also accuse evidentialism of suggesting that there are bare facts that are accessible to everyone rather than acknowledging that everything we see is determined by our worldview. The accusations against evidentialism have been very, very strong, extremely critical. Basically, the presuppositionalists have accused the evidentialists of not preaching the Gospel at all because they allow too much to fall on man, to his power of reason, and so on.

That is just a little introduction to this debate, which carries on right up to today. It is into that debate that Schaeffer writes this little article, "A Review of a Review." Perhaps I should add here one other introductory comment. That is the comment Edith Schaeffer makes in her book *The Tapestry* on page 314. She says this, "This review, although short, amazingly enough was to give all the basic ideas which years ahead were to help Francis first in his own struggles concerning truth, and which later still were to be formed into a larger study called by some people 'Schaeffer's Apologetics.' In his review of Buswell's review, the framework of what would come later can be recognized immediately. The striking thing is that everything that is distinctive and all that has made it possible for Fran to talk to thousands of individuals in a living way, everything that lifted what he had to say out of the dry dust of theoretical, slogan-like words, was there in 1948 in embryo." I think she is absolutely right. When you read this article, it is fascinating. It is very short, but it has a summary of what became the way he spoke to thousands upon thousands of non-Christians over the years.

Now, I want to divide my comments on this article into two parts. The first is really irenical (“irenical,” not “ironical”). Irenical means peace-making, conciliatory. These are comments he makes that suggest there is an area of agreement between the two groups, between the evidentialists and the presuppositionalists. He does not use those words in the article. But he is suggesting there is a ground of agreement between the two. I want to make four points here that he suggests.

He says that both agree, first, that we cannot simply argue someone into the kingdom of God. The work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for regeneration. Now, it is very important to acknowledge that both sides say that. He carefully quotes Buswell saying that, because the accusation from the presuppositionalist side is that evidentialists deny the power of the Holy Spirit and deny the necessity of the Holy Spirit’s work. This simply is not true. And Schaeffer is very careful to point that out.

The second point he makes is this: both sides agree that, because of the Fall, we cannot by reason alone, examining nature, come to a saving knowledge of God. Now, he does not expand on what he means by that in this article. If we ask what he means by that, I would suggest there are two things he may mean. One is that the Fall has affected the reasoning ability of the human person and the will of the human person so that we have prejudiced thoughts. We do not see or think clearly, particularly with regard to God against whom we are rebels. The second aspect of that is that, of course, the world itself is no longer perfect. The world is now under a curse. As you look at the world, you see the consequences and effects of sin. That is why many non-Christians ask, “Well, how can God be good if the world is bad?” Just by looking at the world as it is now, after the Fall, you cannot come to a saving knowledge of the God of the Bible. This is both because of the problems in your own mind and heart and also because of the problems in the world. Now, he does not suggest those two reasons here. But I am suggesting one really cannot have much else in mind if you say that because of the Fall we cannot come to a saving knowledge of God by reason alone, examining nature. Man is a rebel and the world is damaged, to sum it up. Again, Schaeffer is suggesting that both sides would agree on this. Both Buswell and Van Til and Connell would have said this—both the presuppositionalists (Buswell) and the evidentialists (Van Til and Connell). Everyone acknowledges that we are affected by the Fall.

Third, he suggests that both sides agree that faith is more than knowing facts. There has to be a personal response to the facts that we know. He does not mean “more than” in the sense that there is reasonable knowledge and then a great gap that you have to jump over, and faith takes you over that gap. This is often the way Christians speak, that reason will get you so far and then faith will jump the gap. He does not mean that. He means that knowledge of the facts is insufficient, even if we had all the facts right. There has to be a personal response to those facts. This is like James saying, “Even the demons believe that [there is one God]—and shudder!” They know, but they do not have saving faith. They know who Christ is. They do not have any doubt about it. Thus he is not putting reason and faith in opposition to one another when he says this. Rather, he is saying there must be a personal response to those facts. Later on Schaeffer would come to call this “bowing before God.”

Later on he would come to say that there are three bows necessary for the unbeliever. We all, everyone, acknowledge there is a moral bow that must be made. We have to acknowledge we are sinners who need the grace of God in Christ. We have to bow before God and acknowledge our need before Him, that is what he means by the moral bow. We have to bow before God, acknowledging our need of His forgiveness in Christ. And all Christians will acknowledge that. But he says there is a second bow that you must make as well. He called this a metaphysical bow. That is, you have to acknowledge that God is God and you are a human person. He is the Creator, and you are a creature. And that bow is also essential for someone becoming a Christian, for the very essence of sin is the refusal to acknowledge God as God, to insist, “I am my own god,” and to worship the creature rather than the Creator. Thus to

become a Christian there must also be a metaphysical bow, acknowledging that God is the Creator. (Now, he does not develop this here. It was many years later that he expressed it this way.) Third, Schaeffer said there is an epistemological bow. What he meant by an epistemological bow is that we have to acknowledge that knowledge is only possible because God knows everything. We can know anything only because God knows everything. Thus we are completely dependent on God for knowledge. I have to acknowledge that my reason is inadequate and that all true knowledge comes from God. Again, that is a much later development of what he means here about faith being more than knowing facts.

Fourth, he suggests that there is an agreement between the two sides on this issue: it is possible to communicate with unbelievers. He says, "Surely both sides do that. I know Dr. Van Til talks to non-Christians, and I know Dr. Buswell talks to non-Christians. They both know that language makes sense and that God uses the spoken word to reach people, so they both do it. No matter what they may think about how that is done, they end up in practice talking to people." That is actually a very important point. I remember I had an apologetics class with Dr. Buswell his very last year teaching here at Covenant Theological Seminary (CTS). He said at that time that he thought Van Til had put himself in the position of not being able to talk with non-Christians. He thought that Van Til was regarding the non-Christian as so much in his own world, so totally shaped by presuppositions, that language was meaningless. I remember his expression exactly. He said that, following Van Til's argument, "As I understand him, really what he means is that one might as well say the word "lily" or "tulip" to the non-Christian as "Christ died for you," because language is meaningless to [the non-Christian] if he is living in a totally different world than you as a Christian." Now, we may want to come back and question that later. But Schaeffer is saying here that whatever they may say about their views, in actual practice both Buswell and Van Til communicate with non-Christians and take for granted that language makes sense. They really agreed on this, in practice if not in theory.

Those are the four points that he makes, which I suggest are irenic. He is saying that there is common ground here between evidentialism and presuppositionalism. Now, what does he propose in terms of how we develop an apologetic? I want to set this out here carefully, because it really is the essence of what is developed much more fully in his later lectures and books over the next 20 years or more. I want to make several points about this.

First of all, people have presuppositions. Non-Christians have a presumption, or assumption, or a worldview: they deny that God exists. They deny that the God of the Bible exists. They start with the exclusion of the knowledge of God. They begin simply from themselves to work out their understanding of reality. Schaeffer adds that logically, the non-Christian's worldview leads to irrationality, to amorality, and to personal meaninglessness. Let me repeat that. Schaeffer is saying that the non-Christian's presupposition or worldview, if followed through logically and consistently, leads first of all to irrationality; he cannot even demonstrate the value of his own reason or that the world is an orderly, rational world. This is a point that was acknowledged hundreds of years ago: by reason you cannot demonstrate reason or, because of cause and effect, even the existence of the external world. Thus this leads logically to irrationality.

Such logic leads to, second, amorality. This is not immorality, but amorality. That is, it leads to not being able to really give a basis for distinguishing between good and evil. In a recent discussion between one of our professors and a Hindu man, this point came out very clearly. Starting from his presupposition, the Hindu man had no basis for saying that there is a final distinction between good and evil. No non-Christian does. The humanist, the materialist in our Western world, has no basis in the end for saying there is a distinction between good and evil. That is why relativism is so rampant in Western

societies. It is as simple as that. It follows necessarily that there is no final distinction, no universal, no absolute by which we can say, "This is right, and that is wrong." There is simply what individuals choose to do, what the majority thinks. William Golding put it, "If God is dead, good and evil is decided by majority vote." Or it can be what the powerful decide. Thus the non-Christian's worldview leads to amorality, to no morality.

Third, it leads to personal meaninglessness. Schaeffer does not use that expression in this article, but that is what he means when he says that the person will ultimately choose suicide if he is consistent in his worldview. He will realize that his own personal life has no meaning at all, that he as an individual has no meaning, and that death is the only way out.

So first, then, people have presuppositions. If they follow the presupposition that God does not exist through logically and consistently, it will lead them to this complete impasse of irrationality, amorality, and personal insignificance. It will lead them to suicide. Christianity, on the other hand, begins with the presupposition that the God of the Bible exists. And on that basis, worked out consistently, it answers every question that we face, and it fits the world we find around us. It makes sense. It answers our questions. It provides us a way of understanding the universe. It shows the value of human reason—we are made in the image of God, with rational minds, and our minds cohere with the shape of the universe that is there. Schaeffer does not say all this here, but this is what he comes to express later on. This is clearly what he means. And it simply makes sense of the world in which we find ourselves. It provides a basis for morality, provides a basis of personal significance, and so on.

The second point he makes is this: thankfully, non-believers are very rarely consistent to their worldview. They are rarely consistently irrational. They are rarely consistently amoral. In fact, nobody is consistently amoral. Nobody is consistently irrational. You have to live, after all. And only rarely do they come to the conclusion that their own life is completely insignificant and absurd, though sometimes they do, of course. So thankfully non-believers are rarely consistent. Now, we would have to say that if they were completely consistent, communication would be impossible between the believer and the unbeliever because we would be in two totally different worlds. That is just a little point I am adding in there, but I think this is clearly implied here. If they were completely consistent, if a non-believer lived totally consistently to his or her assumption that God does not exist, communication would be completely impossible between the believer and unbeliever. This is because we would actually be living in two quite separate universes. Thus inconsistently (or irrationally, as Schaeffer called it, or illogically as in this article), inconsistently, non-believers are often rational—they value their own reason even though they cannot demonstrate its value. They think about the world as rationally ordered even though they have no basis for thinking it is. They are moral rather than amoral. That is, they think there is a final difference between good and evil. Everyone will if you talk to them. You will find it. They may insist that morality is totally personal, but if you get to the bottom of it, they will say that Charles Manson was wicked. And they will really mean it. Or they will say that the Holocaust was totally wrong, that was not a personal choice. If you push them, you will find that they will insist that certain things are right and other things are always wrong. They may say they are relativists, but you just have to push a little bit to see that they are not, or at least only very rarely. They are not only moral in that sense that they distinguish between good and evil, but they also sometimes choose the good. They are not amoral, and they are not totally immoral. And, also inconsistently, they often find life meaningful and carry on living. Thus that is the second point: thankfully, unbelievers are rarely consistent. Much of the time they are quite inconsistent with their own assumptions, their own view of reality.

Why is this? That brings us to point number three. Schaeffer says that this inconsistency is a result of common grace. God has not abandoned the world or unbelievers. God has left a testimony to Himself in

creation. Creation witnesses to His existence. God has left a testimony to Himself in providence; He sends His rain and sunshine to come on the just and the unjust. And God has left a testimony to Himself in the heart of man, because man is created in God's image with a conscience. Thus the inconsistency that you see in the unbeliever is a result of God's grace in the world. Schaeffer puts it this way: he says, "The reason that people have the morals they have and the meaning they have are actually borrowed from Christianity. They are not part of their own worldview. They do not have any basis for morals, but they insist on being moral. They do not have any basis for meaning, but they insist that life has meaning. They do not have any basis for rationality, but they insist that life is rational and their reason has value. But that is all borrowed from Christianity; it is all borrowed from a Christian worldview." That is the third point: why is there inconsistency? Because God has not given people completely up to evil. He has not given them over totally to a totally darkened mind.

Fourth, this means that the unbeliever is living in tension. He or she is caught between two worlds at the same time. The one world is his or her own worldview, his or her denial of God's existence, and whatever goes with that in their particular view, their particular religion. Whether it is thought through or not, everyone has a worldview. He is living in that world, but he is also living in the world that God made. This is because, in fact, God did make this world, and here the unbeliever is living in this world whether he likes it or not. In fact, to live at all and not to die, not to commit suicide, to live at all, the unbeliever has to live in the world God made. Schaeffer calls this cheating. The more inconsistent the unbeliever is to his own worldview, the more he is cheating by living in God's world and living on what it gives (rationality, morality, and meaning). The less he lives in God's world and the more he gives himself up to irrationality, amorality, and meaninglessness, the more honest he is being and the more consistent to his position. Thus the person who has reached the end of the road, who has reached the point of being suicidal is being most consistent, is cheating least. In a way, he is being most honest. The person who is living almost entirely within a Christian understanding, holding onto Christian values, a Christian view of reality, and a Christian view of rationality, he is the person who is cheating most. There are lots of people like that in Western culture. My parents were like that. They assumed you could have everything the Bible gave while doing away with the first half of the Ten Commandments. Lots of people are like that, that you could believe that this world is meaningful, orderly, rational, and purposeful, that their personal life is meaningful, significant, and valuable, that what you do really matters and counts, that there is real love and purpose in relationships, in family and marriage, that this is a moral universe, and it really matters whether you do right or wrong. My parents did not have any basis for any of those things, but that is what they lived with. But it was all borrowed from Christianity, and they had no right to it, really. That is the point Schaeffer is making here.

Every individual in the world, every individual who exists, has their view of reality that they have developed from their own head. They make up their own view of the world about who they are, what their purpose is, what the meaning of life is, how to know the difference between good and evil, what to do with their life, what matters to them, and so on. But everybody actually lives in God's world. They cannot escape from it. They drive down the road on the right-hand side in America and on the left-hand side in England. They live in the world God has made. And they have to in order to function; if they did not they would crash immediately. This simply takes rationality for granted. They make moral judgments all the time, even if they have no basis for them—even if they deny them theoretically and say, "Morality is purely relative. It is entirely up to the individual to choose what he wants." But all the time he listens to the news and in his heart he is making judgments, saying, "It is terrible that this person was killed." People do that all the time. No matter what they say in theory, in practice they make moral judgments every moment of the day about every person's behavior. And even sometimes they do things that seem good. In fact, quite often they do things that are good. As Paul says, their conscience sometimes accuses and sometimes excuses them. Thus they are actually living in God's world all the

time or much of the time. They cannot escape it. That is the reality that is there. To the extent to which they are consistent with the worldview they have developed, to live within it, the more they live in it, the more honest they are. That is what Schaeffer is saying. The more they move over into God's world and take for granted biblical morality, the rationality and coherence of their own mind and the universe, and their own personal value, the more they are cheating and taking what Christianity gives, its benefits. That is the point that Schaeffer is making.