

Question and Answer Session

Our Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for the wonderful way You work in our lives, and that You touch us through other people as well as directly by Your Spirit and through Your Word. Father, we think of all the people You have used to impact our lives over the years and the wonderful way You have sovereignty over our lives, to bring us into contact with those people we need, and then to make us in turn a blessing to others. Father, Your Word is truly a fragrance of life, which spreads all around this world. As we think of this, we think of the ministry of the Schaeffers and the way You used it to be a fragrance for life to so many people. We praise You for that, and as we continue to think about the way You used their work, we pray, Father, that You will teach us to glorify You for the wonderful things You do among us and that it may give us confidence, as well, to know that You can work in our lives and enable us to be a blessing to other people. We ask this, Father, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We will be dealing with various questions in this lesson. The first question is related to Schaeffer's books. If you read them, you find material from different sources, and he talks about different writers, painters, and musicians and all kinds of people. These books show a great depth of understanding across many fields. Yet in the previous lesson, I described the busy life he led. When did he have time to study? He certainly did live an extraordinarily busy life. He would read all the time that he was not doing other things. He was a hard-working man. That is one of the things he got from his father. Throughout his life, he was a hard-working person. He had studied hard in college. He had a good memory. He was probably the top graduating student in his seminary. He won prizes at his college. So when he was formally studying, he was studying hard.

Then he always read widely. When he went to Europe on that first trip, it sparked a latent interest, which had not had a chance to flourish before, in the arts. He had all kinds of fascinating books in his room, and people were always sending him things. He would try to keep abreast of magazine and journal articles, both ones he got and others that people sent him. On many of his days off, and on their holidays, they would regularly visit museums and other things that he normally did not have time to do. He enjoyed that. It was a great source of pleasure for him to go to museums or read about some artist or musician. He carried on becoming an ever more cultured person throughout his life.

Yet this is an important question, because it raises an issue we will have to return to when we consider some of his books. One of the criticisms of Schaeffer given most strongly by other Christians, though not so much by non-Christians, is that he was not academic enough. You will find that criticism in all of the critical essays or books that have been written about him. There were not enough footnotes in his books. Sometimes he would summarize a person's work in a way that did not do him justice. There are particular examples that have come up many times. Two of them are what he said about Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas. He has been quite strongly criticized by other Christians for what he has said about both of them.

There are several responses one could make. First, he never claimed to be an academic. He was not writing an academic history or Western culture, with all the necessary footnotes. He was a popular writer. He understood himself clearly that way. Second, his gift was in painting in broad strokes rather than in dealing in minute detail with the development of a particular thinker or period.

Let me give you an illustration. When I first heard him speak he came to lecture at Manchester University where I was a student. I was not a Christian at the time. I was studying literature. I am sure that even as a graduate student in English Literature I had read more in that field than he had. That was

my field. Yet his lecture, even though it did not have much detail, was like an illumination of the history of English literature. It was far more helpful than anything I had heard from any of my lecturers at the university, even though it did not have the detail. What my lecturers had refused to deal with as typical, modern, secular men was the meaning of literature. We spent all our time looking at structure, form, and language, but nobody ever dealt with the ideas that the great writers had themselves struggled with. That was simply because those writers may have been raising questions that my teachers did not have answers to themselves. Therefore they were not prepared to look at those issues. In my three years at the university in England, studying English literature, I found myself increasingly frustrated by the fact that we spent all our time thinking about the details and never dealing with the issues of the literature. By the end of our three years, we were no closer to understanding what the literature was about. We had only started. That was where Schaeffer's lecture was helpful, even though he was not a specialist in English literature. It was not one of his fields; he knew far more about philosophy, the arts, and painting than he knew about English literature. Yet what he said was extremely helpful, because he painted in broad brushstrokes. He gave a kind of summary of what had happened in English literature over a 500-year period that was accurate as a broad summary. You could find individual exceptions to it, and he would acknowledge that. He was describing the direction in which English literature had flowed over those 500 years in terms of its approach to reality.

The third response to this criticism is that some of the areas in which he has been particularly criticized, such as with Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas, you will find many scholars who have studied those subjects in great detail who would agree with Schaeffer's position. Regarding Kierkegaard, he is a person over whom there is a huge amount of disagreement about where he stood. What Schaeffer said about Kierkegaard was that he was the father of both secular and theological existentialism. Then he made some careful qualifications about Kierkegaard himself and that he probably would not approve at all of some of the things that have been done with his approach.

Many Christians have taken exception to that and said that Kierkegaard was really a faithful, believing Christian. He was simply reacting against dead orthodoxy. Kierkegaard is such an outstanding figure as a human being that many evangelical Christians want to say that he is "one of us," because he had so many wonderful insights. If you study secular existentialists, however, they will tell you that they see Kierkegaard as the father of their thinking. Schaeffer's insight is not inaccurate. He was quite correct. The same is true with theological existentialists. They see Kierkegaard as their father. There is no question about it. Schaeffer was not making a judgment about whether Kierkegaard was individually a Christian or not. That is another issue.

The same is true with Thomas Aquinas. You can find many scholars who agree with Schaeffer's analysis of Thomas Aquinas. There are others who disagree, but the points about which he is most strongly criticized are areas over which there is academic disagreement anyway. It is not simply that Schaeffer has made some gross error.

It is easy to dismiss what he says as an error because he paints with such broad strokes. Having said that, however, I think that in the great majority of what he said, he cannot be faulted. Yet it is true that he was not an academician. He did not do much detailed work. There is no doubt, however, that most of what he said was an accurate representation of what other people thought. It was certainly an accurate description of the effects of their thinking on the generations that came after them.

He did study a great deal. He took the time whenever he had it. People used to ask me the same thing when I was working at L'Abri. When do you study? How do you have time to prepare these lectures? I would say that, to be quite honest, I studied when I went to the bathroom. I studied when I was in the

bath. I studied on holidays. Whenever I went on a train or plane anywhere, I took books to read. I studied whenever I could. In that kind of life, you do not have formal time in which you can say, "I am going to study for four hours today." Schaeffer never had that. His study was squeezed in everywhere he could fit it.

I believe God gave Schaeffer a gift of being able to see very clearly and quickly the heart of an issue. He could see past the details. That sometimes led him to make mistakes. Yet he clearly had a gift of being able to see the heart of an issue that came before him. That is why many people have spoken of him as a prophet. He said things about what was happening in our society long before most evangelical Christians were even aware of what was happening. Somebody would send him an article from *Time* magazine, and he would see the value in it and use it for the basis of a lecture. Many people would read it and think it interesting but not give it another thought. He would say, "That is where our culture is going." He wrote something in 1945 or 1946 after the first Kinsey report on sexuality in the United States. It was an article called "Sin is Normal." He looked at the way the Kinsey report basically said that what the American people do is right. There is no sin, and what is natural is what is right. There are many Christians who still do not think about that issue today. He saw it clearly in 1945. That was a gift that God gave him. He had the ability to discern what the fundamental issue at stake was in a writer, a painting, or music.

The other thing I should add, however, is that when you find him making generalized statements about somebody, it is important to remember that he was not thereby dismissing the person or saying that was all the person said. He was trying to say something that could accurately be said, but it did not tell you everything that could be said. He would have acknowledged that himself. You can sometimes find little notes to that effect in his books.

Regarding study time for the workers at L'Abri, most of the branches now close for several weeks each year. That gives the workers time to study and work on lectures. That leads to the question about how those of us who worked at L'Abri chose what to study. It also helps me to say something extra about Schaeffer. In the early years of L'Abri, there were patches when there was nobody there. Those became increasingly infrequent. In the first few years of L'Abri, however, they had people every weekend, but there were often patches during the week when there were very few people or even nobody except one or two people who were staying with them as helpers. During that period, Schaeffer had far more time to study. For instance, he made some tapes on the Second Vatican Council. He traveled down to Italy several times to attend some of those sessions. He read a great deal about it at the time. When he came back, he gave a series of lectures on the Second Vatican Council for which he did a great deal of thinking and studying on modern Roman Catholicism at that time and where it was going. So during those early years he had far more time to study than he did later. Much of the foundation for many of the things he said later was laid during the 1950s and early 1960s, before L'Abri became packed out all the time.

When we started the English L'Abri in 1971, we had no time when nobody was there. We always had people, all the time, all the year round. L'Abri operates by a tyranny of the immediate. The most important things are the people who are staying with you and their needs. That means study gets squeezed out. For Schaeffer, in the early years of L'Abri, he had patches when there were not people around all the time. When most of the people of the second generation of L'Abri got there, my generation, there was never a time when there were not people there. It was about 1983 or 1984 when we decided that we would have to start closing. If we had not, I think we would have all died. It was not just an issue of needing time to study, but it was also an issue of simply needing time. We needed time to be human beings, to be with our families, or with ourselves, or our children, or wives. We needed

time to do the ordinary things that people need to do in order to function as human persons. I think we all would have had nervous breakdowns if we had not started closing. It seemed like a radical idea at first. Before that we were open all the year round except for a week during Christmas.

The holiday times were the worst times of the year. We would go away for three weeks holiday and when we came back all of our colleagues would be on holiday. So, all of the effects of going on holiday were demolished within two days, because you were doing three times as much as usual because everyone else was on holiday. Since it was the summer, there were more people there than usual. So, you would die as soon as you got back.

The suggestion that we should start closing, which actually came from Richard Winter at the English L'Abri, at first seemed like a radical suggestion. There were people who said we were being completely unfaithful to the history of L'Abri. Yet, it saved everybody's life. It also gave people a chance to study. In some of the branches, the quality of the lectures has risen dramatically since that time.

What do people study at those times, and how do they choose what to study? Sometimes it is a matter of studying in an area that a person is particularly interested in. More often, however, it is a response to the kinds of questions that people are asking. Almost all the lectures I gave throughout my years in L'Abri were in response to somebody's question. I would often sit at the table on Monday morning at breakfast and ask what they would like to have a lecture on. I did not guarantee that I would give the lecture the next day, but at some time I would do something with it. That is stretching, because people would ask you things that you had never thought about. You constantly have to stretch your own thinking and reading. It is a good discipline, and I recommend that every pastor and teacher in the church do that. Ask what the people want to hear, what they need to hear. It is not what I feel like saying but what you need to hear. That is how I always did my own study. I found out where people had questions, where they were struggling, where they had their doubts, and where they felt they needed a lecture. Then I would go and work on it. I would work on it immediately and in the long term. I realized that there were areas in which I had to do some reading in response to some questions.

Was Schaeffer criticized by people in the established church for being too involved in the culture? He was criticized by a few, but he spoke so clearly about having some careful guidelines. I was in Switzerland in 1967, which was the year that the Beatles released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. It was a wonderful album. We all went down and listened to it one evening with Schaeffer, and then we had a discussion about it. He said very carefully that when you listen to something like that you need to take a bath afterward. Then he explained what he meant.

People often asked him about his writing and speaking about Bergman's films. Bergman's film *The Silence*, when I went to see it as a non-Christian, almost made me commit suicide on the spot. It was so devastating. When you see a film like that, Schaeffer's response would have been that you need to have a spiritual bath afterward. What he meant by that was that you need to both pray its effect on you and you need to sit down with somebody and talk about it. What is being said in this? How is it being said? How effective is it? Is my thinking like that already, since this is part of the culture in which I live? What is the truth that stands over against it? Schaeffer recommended that one should always do that.

I can use the illustration of John Stott, who does the same thing all the time. He has a group of friends that he meets with every month or two in London, and they choose a film, book, or piece of music, and they experience it together. It is always something contemporary that many people in the culture are seeing or reading. Then they go have an evening to discuss it.

That is what Schaeffer was saying. It is not that you need to do that in a formal sense, although I would recommend it. Get together with your peers and go watch a film or a play together and discuss it afterward. If you are married, go with your spouse and a couple of other friends and discuss it afterward. Do not merely see it as entertainment. That is where Christians make a mistake. If I go see a Woody Allen film, it is entertaining. He is my favorite filmmaker. Yet I do not see it just as entertainment. I know I need to think about it afterward, because he is a profound creator. He is wrestling with profound ideas, and if we do not think about them, they will affect us. Communication does not have to go in directly through your mind in a rational way to affect you. Sitting in front of television or movies all day, or listening to music all day, will change the way you think, especially if you do not think about it. It will change you far more if you do not think about it, because it will shape you unconsciously, while you are completely unaware. That is what Schaeffer meant by taking a bath.

Schaeffer repeatedly emphasized that way of thinking with the people at L'Abri. With young people, it is especially easy to overreact. Suppose you are coming from a situation in which the culture was considered a complete no-no. In other words, it was completely ungodly to go to movies. You should never listen to rock music because it is of the devil. There are many young people who have had that experience. Schaeffer was careful to be responsible and say, "Do not simply kick over your parents' rules and your church's rules. You must be responsible yourself. Yes, Christ has set us free for freedom. But do not use your freedom to react against other people and hurt them. That is not loving. Schaeffer always emphasized speaking the truth in love. He also said that for yourself, to realize that it is dangerous to throw yourself into something as a matter of reaction. You need to be aware of your own spiritual health and the powerful effect of these things. He spoke about that repeatedly. It is something to be careful about.

I am sure that some young people left L'Abri and went overboard. There were a few people who criticized him strongly for thinking that understanding the culture was important. Even Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for example, whom Schaeffer knew personally, thought that his emphasis on culture was a complete distraction from evangelism. Lloyd-Jones said so publicly. Yet, so many people in America, who might have been otherwise critical, were thankful that so many of their own children and young people from their churches were really helped by going to Switzerland. So, they did not criticize him. There were many people who felt that their children were drifting away from the faith. I am talking about seminary professors and Christian college teachers and pastors who felt that they were losing their children. Then their children went to L'Abri, and they were helped. Then those people were no longer ready to criticize, for they were so thankful that somebody had helped their children when they felt they were losing them.

I think that most people saw that Schaeffer had a balanced and thought-out position in this area. Schaeffer would even say that he had never seen some of the movies he talked about. He had read reviews of them. He was quite honest about that. He saw some of them, but he did not see every movie he spoke about. It is interesting, because coming out of the separatist background that he came from, these things were an absolute no, yet his own background was as a non-Christian. He never bought into that personal legalism. Edith had a real problem with it as a young Christian. She loved to dance, which was a complete no-no. Yet she never bought into that mindset. They learned very early on to have a sensible attitude toward these things.

Where do we draw the line when it comes to finding out about culture? Where did Schaeffer draw the line? He would have made several responses to that question. I will try to think in his shoes. The first thing he would have said is that you must be aware of what is happening to you, in terms of your own

state as an individual and your own thinking as a person. That will vary depending on your maturity as a Christian and many other things.

Let me use an illustration from my own life. Before I was a Christian, I had two favorite kinds of music that I often listened to. One was rhythm and blues. Much of that is extremely sad, and it speaks painfully and acutely of the brokenness of the human condition. I listened to it because I identified with it completely. It described where I was as a person. The other kind of music I often listened to was classical music from composers such as Richard Strauss, Mahler, and Debussy. I listened to that for some of the same reasons. Again it laments the human condition in an acute way. If you have ever heard, for example, the music from Strauss' opera *Elektra*, which is from that famous Greek story, it is partly about the futility of life in this world and about the way people are driven to desperation by feeling trapped in their existence. In the end of that opera, if you remember that Greek story, Orestes must kill his mother. He is required to do so because she has committed adultery and had her husband murdered, his father. By his culture, he is required to put his mother to death as an act of justice. Yet it is also a sin to kill your mother. He was caught in his culture, caught by the gods. He was driven to madness by the furies. There was no escape for him. All Greek drama is like that. People are absolutely trapped in a web of fate from which they cannot escape. They have a duty that they must carry out. If they do not do it, then they will be punished. If they do it, then they will be punished anyway. There is no escape.

That music summarized where I was as a person. As a non-Christian who was in an existentialist position, I listened to it because it confirmed my understanding of reality. You might say that it was morbid to make myself more miserable. Yes, it certainly was. I think that for anybody in that position there is an element of an ugly kind of self-centeredness and self-pity that is bound up with digging yourself deeper into the mire in which you find yourself, yet, I did not know anything else.

When I became a Christian I was not able to listen to either of those kinds of music for several years without them immediately having the same kind of impact on me that they had before. Music is powerful. It evokes all kinds of feelings in you over which you have very little control. It is particularly so when you have given yourself to the music, as I had done. As a young Christian I had to stop listening to it, because it was destructive to me personally. It sank me into a state of despair and self-pity. Within five years, however, I could listen to it with no problem at all. It did not have the same kind of effect. I was able to be more objective about it.

I used that illustration to make the point that it is important that we understand how things affect us. I must not think that my Christian freedom means that I can go to any movie or listen to any music no matter what it does to me. We need to be aware.

I remember another young man who came to stay with us who had come from an existentialist position, and he loved to read Camus and Kafka. Again, when he was converted, he had to stop reading existentialist literature for a couple of years. It had shaped his whole understanding of reality. He admired those writers so much that to start reading them again had the same effect. You have to be sensible.

I would also say to all of us, whether you have any particular background like that or not, we all need to be aware of our own sinfulness. I have seen movies, for example, that I wish I had never been to see. Movies are a powerful medium, and they create images that stay in your mind. They can make your mind dirty. Some of them we can do without.

Let me give you an illustration. I went to see James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I wish I had never seen it. I cannot forget it. I wish I had not seen it because of some of the images that are in that movie. I do not need that. All of us are sinful enough anyway without having things paraded on a screen in a dramatic way that we will never forget. There are certain films I simply will not go to see. I have no desire to see them because I am aware of my own weaknesses. I think it is very important that we acknowledge that. Schaeffer said that very strongly. Freedom must never become a basis for the indulgence of one's sinful nature.

Schaeffer also would have said that we must be careful not to put a stumbling block in the way of other people. He tried to be careful how he expressed this, because the Pharisees in the church used that argument to impose their views on everybody else. The legalists say, "We do not think you should do this, so nobody should do it, and you are causing me to be offended if you do it." They turned Paul's argument about not causing an offense on its head when they did that. What he was talking about was mature Christians who know they have freedom, like he did himself, not being a stumbling block to young struggling believers who would offend their own conscience if they joined in with a certain behavior. Paul was not talking to the Pharisee who was making rules for everybody and who would not stumble at all but would use it as a means to judge somebody if they did something.

I am not saying we should not be concerned about the legalist. We ought to love everyone, including the legalist. Yet sometimes we need to challenge them with their legalism, rather than allow them to dictate to the whole church how everybody should live. Paul's argument about being an offense is addressed to make sure that we do not cause other people to stumble who are not clear in their own conscience about what is right.

Let me use an illustration. Suppose that I think that it is perfectly all right for a Christian to dance, drink, go to a movie, or whatever it happens to be. Suppose that I do those things in moderation, but I have a young Christian coming to stay with us who has been brought up in a home and a church in which he has been told that all of those things are sinful. I may discuss the subject with the person who comes to stay with me, but the last thing I will do is serve him wine at the dinner table or take him to a movie or to a dance. When somebody is first dealing with an issue like this, his or her own conscience is not clear. Paul says that if you sin against your own conscience, even if your conscience is wrong, that is a sin. You must not offend your own conscience, even if it is misinformed. So, you must always be careful for the younger Christian that you are not doing things that would put trouble in somebody else's life and cause him to offend his own conscience.

Schaeffer would also say that it is very important that we never go out of our way to offend people. There it becomes a matter of prudence to know when to stand on a principle and when to give up whatever it is that one does, or whatever one knows one has the freedom to do, for the sake of others. You can think of Paul, and Schaeffer used this example many times. There was one occasion on which Paul had Timothy circumcised because the Judaizers would be offended if he was not. Did Paul do that because he believed everybody should be circumcised? No. He said that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything. Yet he did it because he did not want to upset anybody. So, he was prepared to do all kinds of things that were not necessary for the sake of the Gospel. He would be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks for the sake of the Gospel. That was the case even if it meant doing all kinds of things that he would not normally do himself, things that he had the freedom not to do.

Some people, however, would make it a principle and say that everybody must be circumcised. Others say that nobody should ever go to a movie. Others say that nobody should ever drink a glass of wine. There are many issues. Those are the times to stand up and say, as Paul did, "You are preaching another

gospel.” There is only one way of salvation, and that is through Jesus Christ. There is only one measure of spirituality, and that is a person’s relationship with the Lord. It is not whether the person does a particular thing or not. It is not about having somebody circumcised or going to a movie or not going or obeying some other rule that somebody set up. One has to stand on the matter of principle when it becomes an issue that threatens to cloud the nature and freedom of the Gospel. That is why we are to pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to know when to stand and when to quietly go along and do whatever one is going to do. Paul said, “I will not eat meat until the world ends, even though I have freedom to eat meat.” If they make it a principle, however, and say that anybody who eats meat cannot be a true believer, then we must say that is not the Gospel at all. So, we need to be wise and prudent when dealing with issues of offense, and we need to pray for God’s wisdom about one’s freedom as a Christian to be involved in culture.

Another area is equally important, which is that it was precisely because Schaeffer was willing to be involved in the culture that he was able to communicate to so many non-Christians. There is a biblical command there. If we are going to communicate to people then we have to understand the culture in which they live. There is no way to understand it if I say I will never read anything written by a non-Christian or never listen to any music produced by a non-Christian or never go to a movie unless it is made by a Christian. That is one of the serious problems of the church today. It has built a wall around itself of involvement in only Christian things to keep ourselves safe from the world, to keep ourselves safe from this wicked culture around us. It is no wonder that evangelism is so difficult. Somebody must break that wall down and start trying to understand the culture to communicate with people. That is what Schaeffer did. It is important to be able to do that. Yet we must keep those other provisos in mind all the time.

If somebody says, “I do not care how many non-Christians you reach out to. No Christian should ever have anything to do with this culture at all,” you must reject that and say there is something quite basic at stake, which is the fulfillment of the Great Commission. That is far more important than men’s rules. In the end, it demonstrates a serious insecurity about the Gospel if we do not think it has the power to confront the culture and deal with it. The Gospel is the truth. We do not need to be bothered by what other people are saying. We should have every confidence. The more we begin to understand the culture in which we live, and the more we read, see, and get involved in what our culture is producing, the more we will become acutely aware of the power of the Gospel and its liberating nature and how little our culture has to offer people. I believe that exposure to the culture strengthens Christians rather than weakens them. We see what the alternatives are.

I would add, finally, that it is a matter of compassion to the unbeliever. I am very thankful that there were some Christians like Schaeffer and Mike, the person I was converted through, who were prepared to understand the culture. I would not be a Christian today if there was not somebody who had done that. There are many other people in the same position.