

Infiltration of Evangelicalism, IV

Father, we thank You for this time that we have together. As we think about the influence of Your Word and Your Spirit and Your people on society, we pray for Your wisdom and for Your understanding. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We have been looking at what Schaeffer regarded as various examples of accommodation. The one we spent our time on last session was what we called slipping morality. And then I think we had a helpful discussion about two kinds of problems. The one is where we regard present culture as our authority in moral issues, and the other is where we regard the traditional culture as equivalent to biblical teaching and become subject to the authority of traditional culture rather than to the authority of Scripture itself.

Today I want to move on to the next point, which I think is point number 12. This will be our last point. Point number 12 is what I have called the devaluation of Reformation influence and Christian influence in general on the culture. That is really the denial that Christians have had any serious impact on the law, the moral values, or the institutions of Western culture. In *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, Schaeffer deals with this issue. He speaks of the influence of the Reformation on European and Western society in general and then the influence of the Reformation heritage on the founding of the United States. He also speaks of the Reformation heritage influence in other ways on the political and social structures of various Western European and American cultures. And Schaeffer writes this:

There are those within evangelical circles today who would, under the guise of scholarship, belittle all of this and act as though the Christian consensus was always in a total muddle. Just how far this may be taken may be shown by the example of one Christian historian who carries the muddle all the way back to the Reformation itself. He writes, "Schaeffer's confusion rests on his inability to see Protestantism as the religious form of Renaissance humanism. To be sure, Protestants said their consciences were informed by the Bible, on which alone authority rested—*sola Scriptura*—yet we all know of Protestants' inability to agree on what the Bible said or even on what kind of book it is. In his triumphalism, Schaeffer cannot see the ironic and tragic in the Protestant movement because he refuses to see it as an aspect of the humanist movement itself. In his various works, Schaeffer repeatedly invokes the Reformation as the answer to the problem of humanism when in reality it is part of the problem."

Schaeffer then goes on to comment on this issue. But it is obvious, if you read *How Should We Then Live*, for example, or see the films, or if you read Schaeffer's *Christian Manifesto*, that he was very profoundly convinced that Protestant Christianity had had an enormous impact on the life of Western Europe and on the life of the United States and on the development of its political and cultural institutions.

Now, Schaeffer gives one example here of the devaluation of this notion. But that kind of devaluation or attack on the idea of any kind of Christian influence on Western culture is one that you can find repeatedly. I remember reading a review of the *How Should We Then Live* series, written by Jack Rogers from Fuller Seminary. In his review, he attacked this idea very, very strongly that the Reformation had had this kind of impact on Western society, as Schaeffer suggested. But this is a criticism you will find very often made. Now, this becomes particularly important in the discussion at the moment that is going on in the United States about the political structures and the moral values of this culture.

I want to make some points here about what Schaeffer was saying. First, Schaeffer was not arguing that there was a golden age, not even after the Reformation in Western Europe, say, for example, in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, England, or Germany. He was not arguing that there was a golden age. Nor was he arguing that there was a golden age at the time of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. When Schaeffer writes or speaks about the Reformation, he readily acknowledges mistakes the Reformers made. For example, they tied state and church too closely together. Luther's attitude toward the Peasant Revolt was wrong, as he encouraged the nobles to smite, stab, and slay the peasants. And they failed to take up the challenge of missions beyond Europe. And you could find other points as well where Schaeffer points out some of the inadequacies of the Reformation. Thus Schaeffer was not arguing that there was some perfectly Christian past, or that where Christians have influenced society everything they did was good, or that they really created a culture one could call completely Christian. So that is the first point.

The second point is this, Schaeffer also was not arguing that all people, or even the great majority of people, were at one time real Christians, either in Western Europe after the Reformation or in the United States at its founding. Rather, what he was arguing is that there was at one time a consensus of opinion in, say, Switzerland, Holland, England, or the United States at its founding. In these places there was at one time a consensus of opinion that was shaped by a biblical worldview.

I want to make several points here that are fundamental to that biblical worldview that affects the nature of a society. One would be that there is indeed a God in heaven, a God who exists and to whom we are answerable. Second, we live in a created universe, a world made by this divine being with an order to it and structure that can be examined and understood. Third, there is a moral order in this universe, a moral order that finds its source in God. And good stands over against evil. Fourth, there is what Schaeffer would call *antithesis*, that is, the truth stood over against falsehood. Again, this idea of *antithesis* found its source in God. Fifth, there is a morally accountable human race and there are absolute distinctions between good and bad behavior. There is a morally accountable humanity with distinctions between good and bad behavior and between innocence and guilt. There is such a thing as subjective guilt before God. Sixth, all human beings stand on level ground before God. All are made by Him in His likeness. And seventh, people—all human beings—are sinners and need restraints on their sin.

Now, those seven points—to which others could be added, but these are the fundamental ones—were the consensus of opinion in Western Europe after the Reformation and in North America at its founding as a nation. It is not that everyone was a Christian. That is not the point. But the vast majority of people held these views. Now, holding those views—and holding them not as religious truth in a separate category from normal life as people often do today—but holding them as the truth about what life is about and who we are, had a very profound effect on the kinds of societies that developed.

Let me make several points here. What did this consensus of opinion give? It gave several things that are a tremendous blessing to the human race. The first is the idea of the rule of law. That is, there is a law given by God that rules all human beings and every human society. Now, that is very important, because much of the human race has been ruled by the idea that “might is right,” that whoever is in power decides the law. Wherever biblical Christianity has had any influence on a culture, it has given this gift: that there is a rule of law that comes from God Himself and stands over all people.

A second consequence of this is, therefore, accountability—the accountability of those who govern. That is, they stand under the law as well, just like the peasant. The peasant and the prince, the peasant and the president, the ordinary man and woman in the street and those in Congress, all stand equally under the

law. They are all accountable to God and to the law. And those in power are accountable to the governed as well.

Third, the idea of truth is a gift from Christian influence, that there is truth that can be found and that ought to govern a society and its people and every discipline. Now, because this is a created universe, it can be examined and understood—again, truth can be found. This is God’s world, thus we can study and understand it. In other words, this is the foundation for science, we might say. And science has not developed in all cultures, because many cultures do not have an idea of an objectively existing created order that has a rational structure to it and that man can understand. But where Christianity has shaped the consensus, there is that confidence that truth can be found, that there is a world that can be examined and understood.

Fourth, this Christian or Judeo-Christian consensus has within it a democratic impulse. That is, if all people are equal before God and stand on a level plane before Him, then all people ought to have some say in their government. As I said before, those who govern are accountable not only to the law but also to those whom they govern. Thus there is a democratic impulse within the Christian understanding of the human person.

A fifth consequence of this view is the idea of restraint on those in power. Because there is the recognition that everyone is sinful, there is also the recognition that power corrupts people and therefore there have to be restraints on human authorities. Only God’s authority is absolute. All human authority is derived from Him and accountable to Him and to the people. And because of the sinful tendency of the heart, power will corrupt people, and there must therefore be checks and balances—separation of powers, restraints on those in power, however we want to express it.

The sixth consequence is the idea of objective guilt and of human responsibility. People are accountable for what they do before God, before society, and before one another. And there is objective guilt that can be punished and ought to be punished.

Now, there are many other things one could say as well, but these are some of the fundamental gifts, one might say, of a Judeo-Christian worldview to a culture. And this is really what Schaeffer was arguing. After the Reformation in Northern Europe and in North America at the time of its founding, there was a consensus of opinion shaped by a biblical worldview that deeply affected the institutions and the understanding of the society.

Let us come back to our main points. First, Schaeffer was not arguing that there was a golden age. Second, he was not arguing that all people were Christians. Third, he was also not arguing that all the founders of the United States, of its constitution and declaration, were personally Christians. He knew very well that some of them were deists and rationalists. But even though some of them were deists and rationalists—some, not all, because some were Christians—they were indeed shaped in their thinking by a Christian worldview. When you look back at someone like Jefferson, for example, it is important if you say, “This man was a deist” or “This man was a rationalist,” it is important not to regard him as a twentieth-century rationalist. A twentieth-century rationalist in 1990 does not believe there is truth to be found, does not believe there is a moral law in the universe, and does not believe in sin. Jefferson was not a twentieth-century man. He was not a Christian, but he was not a twentieth-century man, either. His understanding of the world, like the Christians around him, was shaped by a Christian worldview. He profoundly believed there is truth to be found, there is a moral law in the universe, and there is sin that needs restraint. In addition to their own thinking being shaped by a Christian worldview, these men recognized the Judeo-Christian worldview around them and appealed to it. And they understood that this

Republic would only flourish and endure with a religious underpinning, with the underpinning of that Judeo-Christian worldview and morality. That is important, because when you look at someone like Jefferson and say, “This person was a deist” or “This person was a rationalist,” do not try to understand them in a twentieth-century context.

The fourth point is that it was the loss of this Judeo-Christian consensus that made Schaeffer so concerned for the future of the United States and the future of Western Europe. He pointed out over and over again that what remains now in our culture is the idea of freedom, but only of what he called “merely freedom” or “bare freedom.” What he meant by that was freedom without any definition of what it means, freedom without a sense of moral obligation or moral accountability to God and one’s fellow human beings. Rather, now we have the pursuit of freedom for its own sake.

If you have seen the film series, *How Should We Then Live*, you have seen how he makes this point very strongly in episodes nine and 10. That is, it is this belief or pursuit of mere freedom that he regarded as the hammer blow that would destroy this culture. Freedom without responsibility and freedom without a sense of moral obligation is totally destructive to a culture. What it creates is a society that has to have more and more government to control it. And we see that all around us. This is because you have to replace people’s sense of obligation, people’s sense of responsibility to God, to one another, and to society with more and more rules and laws and more and more government officials controlling every sphere of life. And the more excessive freedom you get, the more power has to be given to those in authority.

Germany in the early 1930s gives us a very constructive example of a society that had become extremely decadent and that pursued without any kind of form. And the reaction to that was Hitler. That man was seen as one who would provide the structure that was missing within the society. Thus Schaeffer was very concerned about the future on the basis of the loss of the Judeo-Christian consensus. Now, he was not a pessimist, because he believed there was a sufficient interest in the economic sense, a sufficient interest from the Judeo-Christian consensus of the past to appeal to people and to work on as a basis on which to call people back to that consensus and to the gifts that it gave.

That brings us back to our main points, now point number five. Why is this important? Why was Schaeffer so concerned about the denial by Christians of any positive influence from the Reformation or of any positive influence of Christians at any point in our past on the development of this culture? Why did he think it mattered? I can think of several reasons here as I think about this. One is that it undercuts the need for Christian involvement today. If you suggest that Christians in the past have had no influence, it seems to devalue the importance of Christians seeking to have some influence today. If when they held more of the consensus they still had no influence, what chance do we have now? And, perhaps more fundamentally, second, this view appears to deny that God has been active in history at least in the lives of nations since the New Testament era. This view appears to suggest that even when there were many Christians, God was not able to enable them to have any impact, to be any kind of salt and light in the society in which they lived. Thus it seems to remove God from the arena of society.

Thirdly, such a view seems to accept a sacred-secular division. Now the concern of Christians is only for some narrow, “sacred” realm rather than understanding that we have a calling to influence the culture in which we live, wherever we live at any moment in history. And related to that, fourth, it appears to suggest that there is different truth in different areas. Again, it seems to suggest that Christian truth only affects the individual as a person rather than the lives of nations, social structures, political structures, economies, law, etc.

One should note, incidentally, that a great many non-Christian historians do not hesitate to acknowledge that Christianity had a huge impact on the development of American culture. I will always remember reading a fascinating book by Jeremy Rifkin who was one of the radicals in the 1960s. It is called *The Emerging Order: God in the Age of Scarcity*, and it was written in the 1970s. In this book, although he is not a Christian, Rifkin looks back at the history of the United States and notes that at every point of crisis in this society there had been an evangelical revival that was the impetus for the radical changes that came about and really shaped this culture. And he looks at evangelical Christianity today as the only source of hope for providing a basis to deal with environmental problems. This is because Christianity has within it fundamentally an idea of humans as God's stewards, stewards of this creation rather than simply exploiters of the world in which we live. Again, this is a non-Christian writing. But you would find in many, many different contexts the acknowledgement of Christian influence on the development of American culture and of Western European culture.

This is one of the areas where Schaeffer's thinking is particularly under attack at the moment. Here are the five main points again, briefly. One: he was not arguing that there was some Christian golden age (either at the Reformation or at some point in America's past). He was ready to acknowledge the mistakes that were made and the lack of consistency on many points. Two: he was not arguing that all people were Christians individually, that all were born again, but that there was a consensus of opinion that was shaped by a biblical worldview. Three: he was not arguing that all founders of the United States were individually Christians. He recognized that some were deists and rationalists. But he would have said they were shaped by a Christian worldview; they were not twentieth-century rationalists. Four: the loss of this Christian or Judeo-Christian consensus was what made Schaeffer very concerned for the future of the United States and of Western Europe. Incidentally, Solzhenitsyn makes exactly the same point if you read his *Harvard Address* from several years ago. He makes exactly the same point about the understanding of freedom and the loss of a sense of obligation in our culture. Solzhenitsyn argues very strongly that the sense of obligation before God is what shaped the whole development of Western democracies. Five: why is this important? Why is the idea that Christians did indeed influence the development of Western cultures so important?

It has been asked whether there is enough of a consensus now to stop the breakdown of our society? That is a very difficult question to answer. But I would say there is enough of a consensus to appeal to people now. If you consider the work that Os Guinness has done on the Williamsburg Charter, he attempted there to contact Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, humanists, and people all across the board religiously to come to the defense of the religious liberty clause. And the way he did that work, if you look at the Williamsburg Charter, is it carries with it the idea of respect for other people and a sense of obligation to other people as well as to oneself.

Os is currently at a non-Christian college, dealing with this issue, and it is a very serious problem. You have probably read articles in the newspaper about what is called the sensitivity issue, how on college campuses people on the left have prevented people on the right from speaking. They say, "What you are saying, if you are from the right, is offensive to minorities, to women, to this group and the other. Therefore you are not allowed to say anything." This has created a real problem, and a couple of universities here in the United States recognize they have lost the freedom of speech because of this high concern for sensitivity such that no one ends up able to say anything controversial at all. And this is a kind of tyranny, actually, that prevents many people from saying anything. This is not to say that people should not be sensitive. Of course they should. When you look at some of the advertisements from the political race of a few weeks back, some of them were absolutely shameful in terms of appealing unashamedly to racist tendencies in people for the sake of the election. Sensitivity, then, is important, yes. But sensitivity must not be used to deny freedom of speech. Os was invited by a group of college

presidents to give lectures on this issue. The president of one of those colleges wrote to every member of the faculty and student body to personally invite them and encourage them very strongly to come hear Os. This is because this college president recognizes that something very profound is happening when you lose freedom of speech in a culture. And hopefully there will be enough of a consensus there to appeal to. If you can help people to see what they are doing and how precious the ideas of freedom of religious expression and freedom of speech are in a society, I think there is still something there to appeal to. But I think it is becoming less and less. You could say that the Judeo-Christian ideas such as who we are, who God is, the reality of sin, the existence of truth and of good evil, and so on, are capital. The interest, in this little metaphor, are the points that this gives, such as that there is a rule of law, or that you need checks and balances, restraints, on those in power. Those consist of the interest that comes from the capital of a Christian consensus. Now, I think we would have to say that where perhaps the majority of Americans and Western Europeans are concerned, the capital has gone. What you are left with is the interest.

Most people, if you push them, will still say they believe in a rule of law, although there is a real tension here. If you talk to the average Western man or woman, you will get double answers here; you will get ambiguous answers. If you ask them about this issue, they may give you different answers, depending on how you ask the question. If you ask them certain questions, they may say, "Well, what is basic in our society is the freedom of the individual to choose." That is, that law comes from the individual person. But if you ask them different kinds of questions, they may say, "Well, it is really a question of democracy." And by democracy they mean what the majority thinks. Thus we ought to have a referendum, this issue ought to be on our ballots. What do the majority of the people think? What is the consensus? Do they think homosexuality is right or do they think it is wrong? Do they think this other issue is right or wrong? Thus you will find people appealing to both the freedom of the individual and to the majority opinion as their basis for law. But if you ask them other questions, if you push them a little bit, I think you will find that most Americans will still say that a rule of law is necessary, that there really are objective moral and legal standards that ought to govern everybody, from the president down to the person on the street. I would say we are in a situation where these two views, the one that is based on the human person as the source of law and the other that is based on God as the source of law, are in real conflict with one another. But I think most people, if you help them to see what that leads to, will opt for a law with God as the source, even without a basis for it.

In other areas it would be more obvious. If you started talking about restraints on power because power corrupts because people are sinful, if you worded it right, you could get almost everyone to agree with you on it almost immediately. While people may say in theory that people are basically good and that there is no real problem of evil, when you start talking about those in power, everyone recognizes clearly that power corrupts people and that there are all sorts of greedy tendencies in members of our government. You could get them to acknowledge with no problem at all that there is a need for restraints on those in power.

Thus, again, there is something to appeal to. But what we have to realize is that not only is the capital disappearing in more and more people, but in many people some of the interest is leaving as well or at least has been cut off from its source. And the work we have to do as Christians is several-fold. One part is appealing to people about these gifts that have come from a Judeo-Christian worldview, helping people to see their importance. The second part is rebuilding the foundation at the level of persuasion, really teaching people in our society what is true and pointing out that these gifts come from a Judeo-Christian worldview.

It has been asked what Os Guinness' position on the Williamsburg Charter was. Well, he was the director of it, basically. I have forgotten what his title was. But he is the person who worked full time with others on its production. This is really something he gave three years of his life to. One of the things the signers of this charter are trying to do is to get people to recognize that Christianity did indeed have a profound influence on the development of this culture. And they want this to be recognized in the public school curriculum, which is why they are developing educational programs that have been taken up by many different states. That is something that is being denied. There are many textbooks that have been written for school children that have left Christianity out completely. This is partly because some of the publisher—Os points this out—were afraid of being taken to court by the American Civil Liberties Union or other groups who do not have much interest in defending the influence of Christianity on this society. But there were several decades when Christianity was not mentioned at all in connection with the development of the institutions, the moral values, or the legal structure of this society. One of the hoped-for effects of the Williamsburg Charter is to get that reversed, to get people to acknowledge that this was indeed an historical reality. Regardless of what they think about Christianity, this is an historical reality.

The second element is this: does the fact that the Williamsburg Charter, Os, and these school curriculums they are developing speak of different religions, does this mean relativism or the denial that there is truth? Os' reply to that would be that this is not a question of relativism at all. It is simply a question of acknowledging that we live in a pluralist society. He gives the example that you can go to some schools (such as in Los Angeles, California) where there may be 90 different religious positions represented in the student body. And evangelical Christianity may be a minority of those. Do we really believe in the separation of church and state? Do we think that those children in the public school system should all be taught Christianity, not just that Christianity influenced the development of this culture? Or should there be recognition that in the student body and in the population as a whole there are many different religious positions and it is not the school's business to teach the Christian faith or the Islamic faith or humanism or Buddhism or Judaism or anything else?

Os made one illustration. He said to take a fundamentalist from Louisiana who may be protesting public education and the fact that his children are not being taught Christianity in the public schools. If he moves to Utah, he may be thinking very differently, because he does not want his children taught Mormonism in the public schools. He will suddenly recognize that the separation of church and state and the removal of religion from the curriculum, in terms of a religious perspective being taught as the truth, may be a good thing. This is because the religious perspective that is taught would have to reflect the religion of the majority of the parents of the school children, which in Utah would be Mormonism. Then what do you do for the evangelical child who is there? Why should they have to learn Mormonism? I think it is also important to listen to Jewish people. They do not want a Christian position taught in the public schools. They would argue that it is the responsibility of the parents to teach their children Christianity or Judaism or Mormonism or whatever. Now, that issue does not touch the question of what is true. The question is simply, is it the place of public schools to be teaching in a pluralist society—and we have to acknowledge that we live in a pluralist society—a particular conviction about who God is, who Christ is, who we are, what our dilemma is, and what the solution to that is? I would say from the British situation that one of the reasons for the great strength of American Christianity is that religious education has not been seen as the responsibility of the schools.

In England where I come from, where the church is a tiny minority and where we have an established church, we had and still have compulsory religious education in every state school. But it is worse than useless. It had the effect of inoculating all the children against Christianity. That was one of its consequences. The reason for that was simply this: most of the people who taught it were not personally

Christians. Consequently, what they taught had absolutely no conviction. I remember all the way through school, growing up in a non-Christian family, I regarded Christianity as the most boring lesson of the week. Everyone did. We hated having to take it. We all resented it. And it had the effect of convincing us never to think about the Bible or have anything to do with Christianity. It was profoundly unhelpful. Now, we may lament the fact that we are no longer living in a society where Christianity is the consensus for the great majority of people. We may lament that—we ought to lament that. But we need to come to terms with the fact that we are actually living in a pluralist society. And acknowledging that is not the same as relativism. Being tolerant of other people's convictions is not the same as saying that they are true. I must recognize, for example, that there are people on my street who are Jewish. There are people who are Roman Catholic, there are people who are humanists, there are people who are into the New Age—there are people with all sorts of different convictions. There are probably people who are Muslims. Should I not tolerate their presence or their convictions? Of course I must.

I think there is something very fundamental here in terms of the very nature of biblical Christianity itself. God Himself respects human significance. And God Himself does not force people to be believers. He reasons with them. He seeks to persuade us and to convince us of what is true. That is our challenge. And it is a real challenge before us, living in a pluralist society.

But I would think the last thing we want in America is Christianity taught in the public school system. Of course sometimes you would have Christians teaching it. I remember one Christian who taught religion when I was in school in England. His classes were different from everyone else's. But he was the one Christian out of the 30 religious teachers I had while I was in school. He was the only one who really made any sense, who I could see had conviction about what he was teaching. But what has happened in England today is that the religious instruction has been forced to come to terms with the pluralistic nature of the British society. So what is taught now is comparative religion, where nothing is true. Again, one does not want that either. It is best to take religious education out of the school system entirely and say it is the responsibility of parents to raise their children to know what is true, to love God, and to serve Him. And it is the responsibility of Christians to seek to persuade other people, children and adults in the society, that Christianity is true. But it is not the responsibility of schools.

I know this is a sensitive issue, and it certainly is a difficult one. But I would say from the British perspective, do not hark to the answer that what we need is publicly legislated Christianity in the school system. It will not help. It will actually make the task of evangelism much more difficult, because people become hardened. That has certainly been the effect in Britain. And you always have to take that into account when you are talking to someone: here is someone who has a perception of Christianity shaped by what they heard in school. Somehow I have to get through that and behind that and get back to the issue of what is true, that I am not talking about something religious, but that I am talking about what is true. I am not talking about something that is imposed on people against their will. I am talking about something that, by its truthfulness, by its power, and by the beauty of its life, demands attention. But there are some very big questions there.