

Criticisms of Schaeffer

It is very difficult to cover a person's life and ministry or even half of a person's life and ministry in a two-hour class during the course of a semester. So, I thought that in these last few lessons, since we are coming to the end of this class and I feel that there are so many things that we have not covered, I would consider the charge that has been made against Schaeffer by many people. This charge is that his whole ministry changed direction during the last 10 or 12 years of his life's work—from the early 1970s up until his death in 1984.

That is what I want us to look at. There have been many articles written in Christian magazines, books, and various theses by students doing graduate work that have leveled that charge against Schaeffer: that his whole ministry changed direction. One writer puts it this way, "Sometime in the 1970s, a considerable shift began, only slightly apparent at first but later unmistakable." Now, as you read these various articles, books, and theses that make this suggestion, I want to start by looking at how they contrast the early and later Schaeffer. We will start with what they say about Schaeffer in his early years. They say that earlier his commitment was to be an evangelist proclaiming the Gospel, an encourager of young Christians to develop a Christian world and life view, a challenger to young Christians to become salt and light in the world as scholars, artists, lawyers, business persons, politicians, and so on. But his ministry was on the one hand evangelistic and on the other hand a challenge to live out a Reformed understanding of culture and life in general. It is suggested that in his earlier years he was opposed to, or at least wary of, any kind of political involvement. It has been said that he was in those early years a writer of "serious and energizing books"—that is how one man puts it. It is suggested that in those early years systemic evil was not part of his analysis, meaning that he was not interested in seeing that there was institutional, structural evil in society. It is suggested that in those early years he was not interested in meaningful social change but rather simply in the transformation of individuals by the power of the Gospel. It is stated that he was, as one writer puts it, "comfortable in his North Atlantic world" and that "he cared little for the Third World." It has also been said that he was not interested in issues like war and peace, the arms race, or the structural injustices or excesses of capitalism or institutional racism. They are saying that these things did not really matter to him.

So that is one way in which his early years are presented. And now let us look at how his later years are presented. I will come back to the early years in a moment and seek to answer some of these understandings of his early years. In his later years, as one writer puts it, "His present fixation is with political action and social protest." It is said that "he became a purveyor of simplistic analysis of America's problems" and that "he accepted the agenda of the Moral Majority and tied himself completely up with them." Also, "He became a man of single-issue causes. He was committed to special pleading for conservative political and social causes." In other words, it is charged that he became completely enchained by the New American Right. He had the fault of what is called an innocent acceptance of the Moral Majority's synthesis of evangelical Christianity and cultural religion—a special kind of American civil religion, one might say, a cultural evangelical religion. They say that he was naïve in his suggestion that there was a Reformation base for the freedoms and understanding of justice that existed in the past. He is accused by some of being subject to that virulent Protestant disease—Anglo-Saxon anti-Catholicism and that he endorsed that virulent Protestant disease. It is suggested that he was guilty of intellectual dishonesty. That is certainly the implication of quite a few of these articles. It is said that "he gave into the siren song of media popularity and the slick programs of production companies" and that he was guilty of name dropping. It is also said that he had a kind of messianic consciousness about himself in terms of his place in the American scene. It is also charged by some that his book, *The Christian Manifesto*, ought to be called a *Fundamentalist Manifesto*. It is also suggested

that he regarded the American past as a kind of the golden age of Christianity and that he regarded the time of the Reformation as a golden age of Christianity. It is suggested that he was a theonomist, committed to a theocratic view of America, and that he is a reconstructionist in a kind of Rushdoony mold. And that he is a triumphalist in terms of his vision of Christian influence on the culture. At the same time, I have read people who suggest that Schaeffer was really just a fundamentalist dispensationalist, a kind of doomsayer, and that he was a Jeremiah, one who delighted in being gloomy about the state of America today and its future, and that as a dispensationalist he did not really believe that any change in the society was possible but that things would just get worse until the end. It is suggested that he was naïve, that he believed in a kind of conspiracy of humanists, of liberal theologians, of liberal and political left-wing people, to crush the Christian church. Or, to put it simply, that he was a rabble rousing popularizer. So those are some of the criticisms that have been made. I could add many more to them as well, but those will give you a flavor of some of the things he has been accused of.

Let us come back and look at the understanding of his early ministry. Certainly he saw himself as an evangelist, and that was true until the end of his life; that never changed. However, quite a few writers suggest that from the early 1970s onward that sort of dropped out of his commitment and understanding. I meet people all the time, all over this country, who have become Christians through the ministry of Schaeffer at all points in his work—not just before the early 1970s but all the way through. He saw himself as, first and foremost, an evangelist to the very end of his life. Certainly he was an encourager of young Christians, wanting to help them develop a biblical world and life view and to be salt and light.

Is it true that he was wary of, or opposed to, political involvement in the beginning but changed in that regard the last 10 or 12 years of his ministry? I would say yes and no to that. He was always wary of political involvement, because he saw the tremendous dangers to Christians who become politically involved, especially the danger of wrapping oneself with a Republican or Democratic tag. He warned of that until the very end of his life. I have here a speech he gave in the last couple years of his life where he warned quite explicitly against that and of the dangers of identifying yourself too easily with one or the other side of the political spectrum. He was very wary of the way that power corrupts people, including Christians who get involved in high political offices. He was very wary of the way political parties are always ready to use the church for their own short-term ends. This was always something he was wary of. I remember him talking about this in the late 1960s and again during the period of the Moral Majority. He was acutely aware of the way the political right was using the Moral Majority for its own purposes without a great deal of commitment to much of what it stood for. So I would say he was always wary of political involvement, but all through his ministry there was a commitment to political involvement.

Is it true that in those early years he was not aware of the importance of structural or systemic evil? That was not part of his analysis. I think if you were to look through our tape collection in the library and see some of his critiques of relativism in public law in the United States that he made in the late 1950s and early 1960s, you would see that that simply is not true. That is an element that is present right through his ministry—he was aware not only of individual evil but of systemic evil in societies.

Is it true that he was not interested in meaningful social change? I would say look at *Death in the City*. That is one of his great concerns there for the brokenness of our culture and its radical need for social change. Or you could even look back to that little pamphlet, *Sin is Normal*, written in 1953 in Switzerland. Or you could look at *The Bible-Believing Christian and the Jew*, where he is very concerned about anti-Semitism. This goes right back to the 1940s when he was a pastor in Saint Louis.

Is it true that he cared little for the Third World at any point of his ministry? That is really the accusation, that he never really cared about the Third World. I would say again that if you look through the tape list you will find, for example, a series of lectures on African socialism. He had a personal correspondence with Léopold Senghor, who was the leader of Senegal back in the late 1950s and early 1960s. And if you look at those tapes or, for example, the tapes he gave on India on the development of Indian culture and society from the years BC up to the present time, you will see that he most certainly did have an interest in the Third World. Did he care about the needs of the Third World? Let me just give you one illustration. Anky Rookmaaker, with her husband, founded the Dutch branch of L'Abri and throughout their life together and since her husband's death has still been very closely involved with L'Abri and with the Schaeffers. She started an organization with the Schaeffers' great encouragement, called Help a Child. That is a ministry that is committed to starting orphanages in India and in various parts of Africa, in Kenya, in Uganda, in Zambia, etc. It is a wonderful ministry, and it was deeply encouraged by the Schaeffers. Having gone to L'Abri in 1967, it was very evident to me at that time that the poverty and the injustice in the Third World was something that was really close to Schaeffer's heart.

Is it true that Schaeffer was not interested in issues of war and peace? It is suggested, for example, in one article that I read that he was really not concerned about the war in Vietnam. The article said his response was this: "Well, at least there are Western Christians there able to preach the Gospel," but that he did not really see any wider than that. Again, I would say that is completely inaccurate. I remember him speaking about Vietnam. People may have disagreed with his position—I certainly found it difficult, having come from a Marxist background myself. But he very strongly believed that America was right to be in Vietnam. And he warned before America's withdrawal of what would happen in both Vietnam and Cambodia. In a communist takeover, the consequences would be far worse than anything that had happened before. Now, one may disagree with his views, but it is quite untrue to say that he was not concerned about what was happening there or that he did not have strong views about that. He made them very, very clear. And whatever one thinks about his views at the time, there is no doubt that what he was afraid would happen did happen. Between one and two-and-a-half million people, nobody knows how many, were killed by the communist government in Cambodia. And tens of thousands of people at the very least were killed in Vietnam. And tens of thousands more felt compelled to leave the country in the exodus of the boat people. Again, one may disagree with his views, but it is inappropriate to say he was disinterested or that he saw as the only value of America being there the fact that there could be missionaries there during that period.

Is it true that he was not against institutional racism? I do not think so at all. I remember him speaking very strongly about civil rights and racism in the United States. You will remember from the early days, those of you who have taken that course, when he was a young Christian and a student in college he worked every weekend in a little black church right outside the town where he went to college. I did not ever see the slightest sympathy for any kind of racism in his ministry. I think if you have ever seen "Whatever Happened to the Human Race" or "How Should We Then Live?" you will be able to say that he was very strongly opposed to institutional racism as it was expressed in slavery and later on in American life. I know personally that he was deeply criticized for his commitment to the rightness of interracial marriage. I had two dear friends who were at L'Abri at the same time I was. One was an English woman and the other was a black American from Tulsa. They were married, and the father of the British girl, who was a pastor, refused to ever see the husband or the children. He has never met them yet, and this was 23 years ago. The parents wrote and telephoned Schaeffer and accused him of aiding and abetting interracial marriage. This was an accusation that he was quite happy to accept. Thus to suggest that he was not against institutional racism I think is really groundless.

Is it true that he said nothing about the structural injustices of industrial capitalism? I find that an interesting criticism, as when I first went to L'Abri in 1967 coming from my Marxist background I found some of the things he said certainly hard to swallow in terms of his defense of capitalism. But I would say throughout his ministry he spoke against the injustices of capitalism. This particular criticism intrigues me because I remember coming here to the United States when "How Should We Then Live?" first came out. It was really striking when I was taking a seminar on the film in Washington, D.C., and other parts of the United States, that one of the aspects of the film that people did not like was the fact that he was so strongly critical of racism and of the excesses of capitalism. I remember several businessmen and ripening politicians in the conference I was leading in Washington, D.C. being really upset with what he had to say about greed and injustice in capitalism in "How Should We Then Live?" Again, I think this is hardly a fair criticism. He certainly believed in a fair market, but he was not committed to *laissez faire* capitalism. Rather, he saw the necessity of laws that would restrain injustice. You will remember, those of you who took the other course, that when he was working in a factory he was actually one of the leaders of a strike as a young man. You know, he never forgot his own working class background. It simply is not right to stick him in some extreme right-wing camp where economics are considered before anything else, although he certainly believed that capitalism was an economic form that would create the greatest wealth and the greatest freedom for people. But he spoke strongly against a kind of *laissez faire* capitalism in the sense of a kind of a survival-of-the-fittest approach to the market. These are some responses to the understanding to his early years.

Is it fair to criticize somebody for the things they did not say rather than for the things they did say, particularly when not everything they said has been published? I think that is a good question to ask yourself. The criticism is coming particularly because he really committed himself very strongly to speaking and working against abortion. That is why he is criticized as being a single-issue person. And I want to answer that criticism a little later. Was he actually a single-issue person? Why did he put such a strong emphasis on abortion? He answered that question himself on many occasions, but I would make two responses. No, it is not fair to criticize somebody for what they have not said. And it is even more unfair to say that somebody has not said something when in fact they have. But if you made the attempt to actually read everything he wrote or listen to all the tapes of lectures he gave, you would find that in fact he did deal with many of these issues.

For example, there are the tapes I mentioned on African socialism that show his concern for the Third World. I am sure most people who know anything about Schaeffer have no idea whatsoever that Anky Rookmaaker's ministry, Help a Child, which now cares for probably tens of thousands of children in Africa and India, really has its roots in L'Abri. That was so much a part of the Schaeffers' concern, trying to do something practical about poverty. I think the man, an Indian Christian, who was here to speak at the seminary last year for the Francis Schaeffer Institute, would protest very strongly against this kind of accusation against Schaeffer. He himself would say that his own understanding of Christianity and his own commitment to working in India for social justice was deeply shaped by his indebtedness to Schaeffer. And I think you would find many other people working in Third World situations who would say the same thing. I think this is simply an inaccurate criticism on several levels. I think another thing you would say is that often when you see people making those criticisms, it may be simply because Schaeffer did not stand for their own particular political agenda. And you can disagree with Schaeffer and say, "Well, my personal agenda would be different." But that in itself does not stand as a valid criticism. Criticism has to be made at a deeper level.

Have these criticisms come mostly since his death or were they prior to it? Both. There were some quite strong negative articles written in the early 1980s about him. One article I have been quoting here is by Ronald Wells, and it is called "Whatever Happened to Francis Schaeffer?" This is exactly his analysis,

that there was this two-period part to Schaeffer's life. In the first period he was doing a wonderful job, and in the second he sort of got trapped in this kind of media circus and right-wing politics. That is basically his critique. There have been many articles, of course, written since his death, as well as some books and theses. What strikes me in several theses that have been sent to me to look at—which I have to try to respond to when I have the time—is that the people have not done their work well enough. They have not even made the effort to read all of his books or to listen to everything he had to say, because much of what he said was never put into book form. What I meant by saying he was wary of the dangers of political involvement was that he was very aware of the corrupting nature of political power because of human sinfulness. He had seen that so acutely in his own church background. Even in synods and denominations and Christian organizations, when people get power it goes to their heads, and they start doing all kinds of things they should not do. So he was very aware of that in the political scene as well, and that was something he spoke about quite often. And he was aware, too, of the tremendous seduction for Christians who began to be listened to by people in political leadership. For himself, for example, in the last years of his life, he spent quite a bit of time in Washington, D.C., speaking to senators, congressmen, and even presidents and vice presidents and so on.

One of the things that he is accused of in some of these articles is name dropping. I never heard him talk like that in public. Most people are not even aware that he did get to know any of the presidents or any senior political figures. There were quite a few who did get to know him and asked for his advice on all kinds of issues, but he just simply did not talk about it. He was very wary of the way Christians can personally be sucked into that kind of media circus that surrounds the whole political edifice in Washington. And even though he was warmly received there and asked to speak there on many occasions, he very self-consciously tried to avoid the kind of media circus elements that went along with that or to take advantage of it in terms of support of his own ministry or support of L'Abri's ministry. He never wrote letters, saying, "I have an audience with the president. I have seen this senator, that congressman. These people are listening to me; I am having an influence on them." He just simply did not talk about it. He did not even talk about it in the context of those of us who worked together at L'Abri with him unless people asked him direct questions. It just simply was not something he boasted about.

But beyond that, he was very aware of the corruption of political power and the tremendous compromises and ambiguities that are involved in political power. That is why he warned Christians very strongly against tying themselves too easily to any political party or group. In some of the things I read about him, it was suggested that he saw the Moral Majority and the election of Reagan as the final hope for the United States, but that simply is not true. He was aware that there were all kinds of problems with the Moral Majority. There were all sorts of points where he wished to distance himself from some of its leaders and some of the evangelicals who were the leaders of it. Specifically, he disagreed with the materialism, the kind of Madison Avenue and Hollywood style of the programs, the personal aggrandizement and all the trappings that went along with that in that scene. He was aware that very often there was not a deep enough analysis of what the problems were in the culture by parts of the New Christian Right. And he was very aware that the political right, including humanists on the political right, were quite happy to use Christians in the Moral Majority for their own short-term political aims, with no intention whatsoever of putting into reality some of their agenda.

How did he encourage people? He had a very strong belief in the individual calling of each person to a place in God's service. To L'Abri over the years came many people who were from every different walk of life: political, medical, legal, the arts, etc. He simply challenged all Christians to go and serve God in that place where God had called them and that our calling, all of the members of all our churches, is to serve God in our own particular places of work. He also said that political involvement was a place

where there was a desperate need of Christian involvement at that present time. He said this precisely because there is so much corruption and abuse of power in the political scene, particularly in Washington, as we have been talking about. And where he was able to directly talk to politicians who were Christians, he really challenged them to personal righteousness. He challenged them to resist the temptations of political power and to do everything they could for questions of justice and mercy where the laws of this country were concerned. And, clearly, in the last four sections of *How Should We Then Live?*, the segments from the Reformation onward—the Age of the Reformation, the Age of Revolution, the Age of Personal Peace and Affluence, and Final Choices—in all four of those sections he speaks very powerfully about the influence Christians can have in their culture if they are prepared to really work within the various political and social institutions. He really spurred Christians to do that. But at the same time, he was realistic about the difficulties of that in terms of the time it took, in terms of the hardness of heart of the culture, and in terms of the dangers of power to the individual personally. I would say you would probably find many individual Christians in Washington today who would say that they are there working as Christians because of the encouragement of Francis Schaeffer. Similarly, you would find many Christians working in the arts, trying to be writers, dancers, singers, musicians, or painters as a consequence of the encouragement of Schaeffer. This is not something that Schaeffer would talk about.

It seems an indication of the shallowness of the criticism that he can be accused of being a reconstructionist by some people, a theonomist committed to theocracy, and accused by other people of being a fundamentalist dispensationalist. I just read that in a thesis yesterday, and it really amazed me. I thought, “That is one criticism I do not see how anybody could make with the greatest stretch of the imagination.” I think it is a superficial criticism. It arises from the fact that the writer of the thesis was a pre-millennialist. The writer of the thesis strongly believed that there would be a literal millennium on earth after Christ comes back. Schaeffer would have said very carefully that he was not a dispensationalist but rather a Reformed pre-millennialist. And he would point to an honorable tradition of Reformed pre-millennialists. He certainly was not into the kind of dispensational speculation about what is happening in Israel and the rest of the world and that kind of thing. He resisted that completely and said over and over again that we simply do not know when Christ is going to come back. Jesus said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). If Jesus does not know, we certainly do not know.

To suggest that like some of the dispensationalists he did not believe there was any point to try to change society but just to rub one’s hands by the fire while society gets worse, that he was just a doomsayer and a Jeremiah, is extraordinary. In one of the last speeches he gave, which I happened to be reading this morning, he said, “I really do believe it is possible for there to be a revival of the church and a reformation of American society.” He was passionately committed to that. He did not know if that was happening, but that was what he thought our calling was—that is, to be devoted at every moment of history to the revival of the church and the reformation of society no matter what our views happen to be about the second coming. He certainly was not a dispensationalist.

Was he a theonomist or reconstructionist? No, he was not. It is interesting that, when he was a pastor here in the United States, he would not allow the displaying of the American flag in his church. He was very opposed to any kind of civil religion. It may interest you to hear that. One can assume simply because he spoke about the necessity of America returning to a biblical understanding of law and a biblical understanding of the value of human persons that he was a theonomist, but he was not. He was not in agreement with Rushdoony and his whole program for recreating a kind of theocracy. He very passionately believed in freedom of speech. It was interesting, I was reading something this morning that was very similar to what Os Guinness was speaking about in his lecture on The Williamsburg

Charter. This article showed that Schaeffer was committed to the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion for everybody—not only for Christians, but for everybody. And he said that Christians had to be prepared to speak the truth and let the truth stand in the marketplace of ideas on in its own feet. Thus he had no desire to silence people who were humanists or who were Muslims or who were Hindus or anyone else. He very passionately believed in the freedom of speech and the separation of church and state. He did not think that Christians should be prevented from having an influence in the public arena, quite clearly, as this was something he worked for very strongly, but he did believe in the freedom of speech.