

Where is Francis Schaeffer going?



The Church at the End of the 20th Century by Francis A. Schaeffer

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Reading Francis A. Schaeffer's latest book, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, I found myself oscillating between joyful excitement and deep disappointment. Intertwined with genuinely Biblical insight were ideas ultimately derived from classical and modern humanism. Schaeffer's scholastic reformed-evangelical traditionalism drastically limits his vision of the Kingdom of God, because that tradition is infiltrated with rationalism and individualism, derived from the secular philosophies of the 17th and 18th centuries.

This results in life being divided in two—a "christian" area and a "worldly" or "neutral" area. That is why he says that we find ourselves ". . . in the midst of a culture cut loose not only from God and revelation, but also cut loose from reason. . ." (Preface). The Bible, seems, is a handbook for inter-personal relations and ecclesiastical affairs which the rest of life, Schaeffer maintains, must be ordered by "reason". Listen to this: "The New Testament itself says that, must strain through the grid of reason, everything that comes into our mind" (p. 104) or to this: "If. . . God made man in His own image and part of this image is reason" (p. 18). I can find this sort dangerous nonsense in the writings Aquinas, in Locke's *Essay on the Hum Understanding*, or in Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*, but not in the Bible. Not only so, but ". . . the world was created by a reasonable God and therefore we could find out the order of by universe by reason" (p. 9). Certainly this was *the faith* of Galileo, Copernicus, Bacon, Kepler and Newton . . . a Descartes, Leibnitz, and the deistic thinkers behind the American and French revolutions, producing the mechanistic vision of reality which has led the one hand to behaviourism and the other, by way of reaction, to atheistic existentialism. [11]

It is tragic that brilliant evangelical men like Schaeffer (and Clark Pinnock and John Warwick Montgomery) really believe that as Christians we must choose between rationalism and irrationalism and that we ought to choose the former. But what on earth (if that's where it is situated. . .) is "reason"? They will not be able to tell you, for it is a myth, a vain imagining, a hollow idol which deserves our laughter. Dooyeweerd has called it the "dogma of the autonomy of theoretical thought" and has shown how it prevents us from submitting every thought to the obedience of Jesus Christ and having our minds remade so that we understand what is good and acceptable in how we act before the face of God.

But one who really believes in "reason" (even if he also believes in God) cannot understand this—he will be *sure* that if we attack "reason" then we

must be "irrationalists", "existentialists" or "subjectivists" in spite of the fact that we strongly repudiate these views too. We need to break with both rationalism and irrationalism before we can ever consider even the possibility of a genuine Christian philosophy free from the empty traditions of men. Only in that we have a Biblically driven (systematic) philosophy are we able to present an adequate account of the nature, norms and conditions of human analytic activity without either idolizing or trivializing it.

Because Schaeffer believes in "reason", he naturally maintains that good science is "neutral" or "objective" science (pp. 91 & 92) with the result that there *cannot* be integrally Christian scholarship. Consequently he does not call to repentance the tens of thousands of university students (belonging to IVCF) who will be reading this book for the unbelieving ways in which they have pursued their studies-failing to develop a Christian mind and Christian academic tradition.

When Schaeffer comes to look at the political situation in the Western world, he makes a number of perceptive comments. Listen to these good strong words for example, "if the church is identified with the Establishment in the minds of young people, in the minds of those who will come forth to be men and women in the next 20 years, I believe the church is finished. . . Does having two flags in your church mean that Christianity and the American Establishment are equal? If it does, you are really in trouble. These are not two loyalties. The State is also under the norm of the Word of God" (p. 82).

Schaeffer does not ask us to choose between the Establishment and the New Left. He rightly wants to distance himself and wants the church to distance itself from both for he sees clearly that both follow a road to totalitarianism. But, Schaeffer never tells us what the *norms* are for the relation of the state to business, education, family life and church institution. He vaguely appeals to "Northern European Reformation culture" (p. 22) (Calvin's Geneva?) as if it were the Golden Age lost beyond recall and strongly intimates that we can merely steel ourselves for the more or less inevitable totalitarianism.

Part of the reason for this is Schaeffer's virtual identification of the Church with the church institution. Indeed the whole book does little more than advocate some rather minor ecclesiastical changes (like the times of services) and urge more loving authenticity in interpersonal relations. This precludes any full vision of the Kingdom of God embracing the whole of life, and it prevents him from getting excited about desperately needed Christian organizations in politics, the arts, business, labour and education. At times one feels as if he is saying that *the answer* to the present world crisis is for Christians to have orthodox theology in their heads and more love in their individual hearts. But isn't this precisely the outlook which has brought the evangelical churches into their present unbiblical irrelevance, and has made it possible for them to make peace with the Establishment? The Establishment - whether in North America or the U.S.S.R. - isn't going to persecute people who merely advocate an other-worldly, personalistic mysticism. But once Christians wake up to the fact that they are authorized ambassadors of the coming Kingdom of God, required communally to call the nations to radical repentance socially, politically, educationally and economically, then there will be persecution against those Christians who threaten to "turn the world upside down."

I have pointed out mostly the weaknesses of Schaeffer's new book. Many of his better ideas are derived, I suspect, directly or indirectly from Dooyeweerd whom he has never mentioned in any of his six books, although there have been two passing references to Kuyper. In many ways I have the greatest admiration for Schaeffer - he speaks radically, and yet within certain cramping limits. I'm sure evangelical students will be "challenged" by this latest book - but I fear that many of them will sink back into their comfortable middle-class tradition, feeling that now that they've read Schaeffer they are really "with it", and can now undertake some radical action like planning a pilgrimage to L' Abri. Yet there will certainly be others who are moved in the direction of a fully reformational Christianity. Buy this new book-weep and rejoice over it as I did. And then move beyond it.



Professor Richard Russell, a self-effacing but sharp Britisher, teaches philosophy at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois. While deeply appreciative of Schaeffer's formative influence in his thought, he now feels it necessary to lovingly critique his former mentor.