

The *SBJT* Forum: Dimensions of Schaeffer's Life and Thought

Editor's note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Chad Owen Brand, C. Ben Mitchell, Russell D. Moore, and Gregory A. Thornbury have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Will the legacy of Francis Schaeffer endure? Should it?

D. A. Carson: These are surprisingly difficult questions. Before offering even a feeble attempt at an answer, I should make three qualifying remarks.

First, it will be easier to answer the question about whether or not this legacy will endure if we stipulate how long. Some people read Augustine, more than a millennium and a half after he wrote, and Calvin, almost five centuries after he wrote. I doubt that the kind of contribution made by Francis Schaeffer has that sort of staying power. So let us limit our horizons to a century or two. On the assumption that Jesus does not come back before then, will Schaeffer's legacy last that long?

Second, because there are different estimations of what a legacy is, I must specify my "take" on that matter, or the reasons for my judgment will be obscured. Schaeffer's legacy lies primarily in the field of apologetics. While retaining a robust orthodoxy, he sought to understand and address Western culture, especially the more intellectual and "front edge" elements of that culture.

Third, most prognostications about the future are nothing more than extrapola-

tions of present trends. But trends can change rapidly, provoke reactions, and veer off in new directions. It is not impossible that much of Western evangelicalism, snookered by the most subjective features of postmodern epistemology, will veer off into communal and subjective notions of truth, and dismiss Schaeffer as at best quaint and old fashioned. Alternatively, in his mercy God may raise up a robust reaction to such trends, and in that case Schaeffer will come back into his own.

That brings us to the answers to the pair of questions.

(1) As much as I admire Schaeffer's work, its focus means that it is unlikely to be read as long as some read, for instance, the best commentaries, or the best theologies, or the most pivotal books on Christian theology, or the finest devotional works. This is not in any sense to disparage Schaeffer. Rather, it is to recognize that the focus of his contribution is primarily in the domain of apologetics. That, of course, is why his legacy will not endure half a millennium: apologetics tends to have a fairly short shelf-life, precisely because cultures change.

(2) On the other hand, Schaeffer was one of the first to understand the drift of Western culture toward a kind of episte-

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mological nihilism. Although he died before full-fledged postmodernism took a firm grip on the dominant voices in Western media and intellectual centers, Schaeffer understood the direction in which Western thought was pressing. Moreover, he understood that Christians must simultaneously expose its futility, and offer a full-blown alternative worldview, a worldview that is determined by the Scriptures, by the turning points in redemptive history, by God himself as he has disclosed himself to us. As long as postmodern epistemology fosters various forms of absurdist frames of reference, *Escape from Reason* will remain relevant; as long as the predominant cultural voices insist that all human “knowing” must be disconnected from an omniscient Mind, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* will be read with profit.

(3) More importantly, Francis Schaeffer’s approach to such questions is perhaps more important than the answers he gave. That approach *should* last for a long time; whether or not it will, I cannot say. That approach was characterized by a combination far too rare: on the one hand, a robust orthodoxy that did not flinch in its eagerness to maintain the whole counsel of God, and, on the other, an extraordinary commitment to “listening” to the culture.

His was the listening that sprang not only from wide reading of books and thoughtful study of trends in art and literature, but, even more importantly, from endless conversation. He listened to people, and engaged them where they were. An entire generation of young people, squeezed between evangelical clichés and cultural malaise, taught him what they were thinking, and learned from him how the gospel transforms

every world—not least theirs.

Some of his would-be heirs and successors simply repeated his answers. That is helpful, of course, but not as helpful as what he himself did: he generated fresh answers out of his deeply-rooted Christian orthodoxy precisely because he kept listening, kept thinking his way through what he was hearing and reading. And we best honor his legacy if we not only listen attentively to the answers he himself gave, but also listen attentively to the dominant voices of our own day, and learn to craft faithful responses.

In short, Schaeffer modeled what Paul well understood. The apostle could preach, on the one hand, to Jews and to Gentile proselytes and God-fearers in the synagogue in Pisidian Anitoch (Acts 13), and then, on the other, to biblical illiterates in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), precisely because he understood both groups, and knew how to shape his proclamation to their need. In retrospect, some of the very freshness of Schaeffer’s language, a freshness that was no small part of the impact he made on many of us thirty years and more ago, already seems slightly strained and artificial. In other words, his actual locutions and formulations are unlikely to endure as long as, say, the more prosaic writings of a John Stott. But I earnestly pray that the model of how he engaged men and women without fear or compromise, with respect yet with boldness, with a listening ear and a faithfully proclaiming voice, will be repeated again and again for many generations.

(4) There is another sense in which his work will endure, of course, and thoughtful Christians must not forget it. Jesus insisted that even a cup of cold water given in his name will receive its reward. How much more a raft of books and tapes

that taught a generation of young men and women how to integrate biblical faith into their lives, so as to be able to respond to a culture teetering on the edge of epistemological nihilism. In the aeons to come, there will be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of redeemed men and women who will rise up and call him blessed for helping them to escape from various intellectual and moral quagmires. That is rebuttal enough of some critics, who have occasionally displayed a finer technical scholarship than Schaeffer could muster, but little of his grace and even less of his passionate ability to communicate the gospel to a generation that cries out for bread, and not for the indigestible stones of mere technical competence removed from the grace of God in the gospel. I can introduce you to mature Christian leaders today who began their Christian pilgrimage under the influence of Schaeffer's writings. I cannot find people who have been similarly transformed by the odd carping critical essay that rather condescendingly writes Schaeffer off because of his generalizations and his occasionally disputable historical or artistic judgments. The transformed lives are part of his legacy. And fifty billion years from now, they will be the most important part.