

**Francis Schaeffer:  
The Last Great Modern Theologian  
(and the reason why I have a goatee!)  
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Francis Schaeffer

**Standing at the melting point**

The reader may wonder why I would write an article about the “last great modern theologian” in a publication that so proudly dedicates itself to post-modern thought and inquiry. In truth, we should not be so arrogant about what the modern legacy has left to us.

The contributions of faithful disciples and scholars from previous generations can be of great worth.

I would go so far to say even a book review of Augustine’s *The City of God* or Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* would fit nicely into what we are trying to accomplish at Next-Wave. The goal is to re-communicate the worth of our Christian tradition and experience to a postmodern culture. However, the work of Francis Schaeffer is so recent; it is questionably whether his thoughts even need to be re-communicated to a new culture.

I would like to persuade that Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) stands at the melting point of the modern and postmodern discussion. In some ways, every “modern” theologian after him is increasingly out of date. And any “postmodern” theologian ahead of him was unfortunately out of place in discussing issues of spiritual importance. Why? Schaeffer was deeply concerned with a shift in epistemology (how we know what we know). He observed the shift during the 1960s. While he never labeled it as such, this shift is what we now call postmodernism. (Note: This term was already in existence when discussing

art, architecture, philosophy, and literature; theology really didn't jump into the discussion until postmodern thought proliferated in the 1980s, 3 years after Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.)

Francis Schaeffer is the last of the modern theologians, but not the first of the postmodern theologians. He still strongly argued for rationalism in apologetics. By this, I mean Francis Schaeffer believed one had to be converted to the appropriate set of presuppositions, namely the law of non-contradiction ("A" cannot be "non-A"), first, in order to believe and experience the God of Christianity. The Bible is viewed as a propositional argument from God to His people, which can only be accepted by the correct presuppositional vantage point. Francis Schaeffer also was skeptical of the increase of Platonism in culture (identified with mysticism) and leaned more towards an Aristotelian view of reality (identified with rationalism). These ideas mark a clear modern thought pattern.

Despite his modern view, Schaeffer offers us many insights in ministering to any culture of believers. And a thorough study of his work would benefit any believer greatly.



### **How I met Francis Schaeffer**

When I first came to college, I experienced a massive faith crisis. Raised in a consumer friendly, experience crazed society, I doubted the reasonableness of the Christian system. My understanding of God did not find a home in rationality. I could not give my life to a system, just because someone told me if I say a prayer—God would come down from distant Heaven and have coffee with me (metaphorically speaking, of course).

I needed answers. I read Josh McDowell's *More than a Carpenter* and C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Both of these inspirational works satisfied my craving for common sense soundness...until I became a student of philosophy. Anyone who has studied philosophy knows that "common sense soundness" does not go very far. I needed more. I needed philosophical answers. Sorry, but Lewis and McDowell just do not cut it against thinkers like Nietzsche, Sartre, Schopenhauer, Russell, Husserl, and Heidegger. These philosophic

heavy weights are playing different games and speaking a different language. Francis Schaeffer, however, knew the language; and I am convinced he could stand toe to toe with any of them.

My campus minister Keith Boone introduced me to the work of Francis Schaeffer. He encouraged me to read the trilogy: *The God Who Is There*, *Escape From Reason*, and *He Is There And He Is Not Silent*. These three books outline the basic premise of any arguments he would develop in later books. Schaeffer was culturally, philosophically, and scripturally informed. He wrote with compassion and fire. I often stayed up late in the night reading and pondering his ideas. Each sentence blowing my mind and causing me to re-evaluate my own hidden agendas for Christianity. He moved me to understand a deeper and truer Gospel than what I had known before.

And in my own postmodern superficiality, I will admit, I also liked him because he just looked cool. Francis Schaeffer has the image of an eccentric academic freak. I really resonated with that—call it my personal image goal. Yes, he is the reason why I grew a goatee. (I can hear my friends, who know me too well, laughing out loud.)

All of his writings exist to prove a basic, and yet radical point, God is really there. He's not just a concept or an idea. He really exists. But not only that, God is speaking to us. Schaeffer believed humankind was created with dignity and is still formed in the "image of God." We all have worth and value which is innate with our standing in the universe. We are not just specks of dust on a larger speck of dust circling the sun. From this point, true restoration can take place in the souls of men and women.

Francis Schaeffer wrote to provide intellectual healing to a world in transition. He realized the old models were fading. There are some points we should observe in communicating Schaeffer's timeless message to postmodernism.

### **Francis Schaeffer was concerned with being relevant to his time**

Francis Schaeffer wrote because he saw the ideas of logical positivism and existentialism being introduced into popular culture in dangerous ways, displacing God from our understanding. Schaeffer noted in his article "How I Have Come to Write My Books" (Inter-Varsity Press 1974): "In my reading of philosophy, I saw that there were innumerable problems that nobody was giving answers for...the Bible, it struck me, dealt with man's problems in a sweeping, all-encompassing thrust." Schaeffer knew these philosophic problems affect the everyday life of believers. These ideas have a flow of influence from philosophy to art to music to general culture. Schaeffer wrote to get ahead of the ideas to positively affect general culture, replacing deceptive philosophy with the answers of scripture.

Schaeffer's goal was not to become "modern," but to minister to the modern person. Likewise, in an ever-changing society, we should be careful not to adopt postmodernism, but instead, give eternal hope to those people lost in the disparity of postmodernism. "Relevancy" has become a popular sell-word for churches nowadays. But this word has

to imply more than just using movie clips in a sermon. Relevancy strikes to the heart of how we think and live.

### **Francis Schaeffer addresses the issue of a shift in epistemology**

Epistemology may not be everyone's favorite topic of discussion, but for Schaeffer this issue was of utmost importance. He recognized if our thinking is off, everything else will surely follow. Schaeffer observed a shift in epistemology which involved a false belief that God is simply a concept or theory. We take an unfortunate existential "leap of faith" which is not rooted in the direct experience of God. We do not see God working in daily life. Schaeffer cited Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) as the initial cause of this trend. According to Schaeffer, Aquinas separated nature from grace in theology. The spiritual world and the earthly world became separated. The earthly world became what was "real" and the spiritual world was the "hypothetical."

Today we still encounter in the consequences of this shift, especially when referring to a secular versus spiritual society. We create a Christian sub-world that was never meant to exist. Instead of being in the world, we live the hypothetical faith world. We fail to realize that everything is spiritual. Everything is bathed in God's touch and presence. "For you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." (Revelation 4:11, quoted at the beginning of Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There*.) Schaeffer hoped to give his readers understanding of a world in direct connection with a God who is really present.

### **Art and culture mattered to Francis Schaeffer**

Francis Schaeffer was deeply concerned with how art impacted our thoughts and actions. In the trilogy, Schaeffer displays a thorough knowledge of art history. He shows how art has developed along a theme of separation between nature and grace. Schaeffer also is well versed on the contemporary arts, musicians, and filmmakers. He carefully analyzes these influences. Interesting footnote: He was quite possibly the first theologian to intelligently evaluate the punk revolution in Europe.

Schaeffer wrote passionately about the Christian's ability to worship God through art. In the day of the great evangelical preachers, when such a strong emphasis was placed on teaching, Schaeffer ideas of art as worship reflected the wisdom of the ancients and were simultaneously revolutionary. Schaeffer's book *How Should We Then Live* gives a good overview on his ideas about art.

Among postmodern pilgrims everywhere, the subject of art and worship is a very popular topic of conversation. Francis Schaeffer introduces this idea to a new generation of disciples, an invaluable resource to any community interested in created art with meaning and transcendence.

### **L'Abri: An example of the "community apologetic"**

When Francis Schaeffer and his wife Edith moved to Switzerland, they decided to open their house to any believers traveling through. These travelers could come for healing, conversation, instruction, and service. They re-named their home L'Abri, French for "the Shelter." People from all over came to be part of this transit community. Remember my campus minister Keith Boone?

L'Abri expanded to a number of branches throughout the world. Even today, L'Abri receives people. His wife Edith wrote the book L'Abri telling of this community's development.

Francis Schaeffer did not just live as a hermit scholar. He worked daily with people, and frequently strangers, sharing with them God's message of peace at L'Abri. He believed strongly that community is the place where God speaks. Not only that, but community is its own apologetic for the Gospel. People can live together in meaningful relationships, sharing, working together with the Spirit's power.

What is community? How do we "get" it? Schaeffer's L'Abri was a Christian response to the hippy communes that sought desperately to have community and meaning. L'Abri can also illustrate our own need to re-define church and the gathering of the saints. L'Abri was not just a Sunday morning institution. We need to carefully evaluate the condition of our own local churches from a programmatic institution to a community of believers.

### **The lasting impact of "The Last Great Modern Theologian"**

In my opinion, Francis Schaeffer is the last of the relevant and the truly great modern theologians. He stood at the melting point between modern and postmodern. While he never addresses postmodernism, Schaeffer's influence will be long lasting in the postmodern culture we minister in. A culture that looks longingly for heroes and role models, beyond the celebrities and pop stars.

This past summer I worked at a camp in Glen Rose, Texas. On the first day, I met a boy named "Schaeffer." He wore a Cowboys cap to cover his blonde matted hair and his big grin revealed two missing teeth. As he was making his bunk, trying to smooth out the sheets while standing on the bed (a difficult task no doubt), I commented to his mother about Francis Schaeffer. She smiled and said, "I know about Francis, we named our son after him. Francis really influenced my husband and me, when we first met." Imagine that? Schaeffer was my favorite camper for that week. Maybe it was his grin, maybe there is just something in a name.

### **For more information on Francis Schaeffer:**

I believe "The Shelter" [[www.rationalpi.com/theshelter/](http://www.rationalpi.com/theshelter/)] is the best Schaeffer site on the Internet. The site contains weekly quotes, a list of books and articles, biography, photos, and links. The Shelter also has an email list, which I am a part of. If you sign up, they send a Schaeffer quote, plus some links on web from all areas of interest.



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