

The God Who Is... Where?

A Comparison of Two Book Titles and the Thirty Years that Separate Them
by John Fischer

I have always considered myself fortunate to have been in the formative years of my life when Francis Schaeffer was having his greatest impact on evangelical Christianity. His visits to Wheaton College, two of which I witnessed as a student there during the last half of the sixties, became the watermarks of my college experience. It was during those visits that Schaeffer presented the material that was to later become his most comprehensive philosophical work, *The God Who Is There*.

Almost 30 years later, in an issue of *Christianity Today* that celebrated Schaeffer's influence in an article by Michael Hamilton, I noticed a coincidental ad for a book by Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, titled, *The God You're Looking For*. The similarity of these titles made their key differences stand out. Something about these two titles speaks volumes about the way thinking has changed over the years that separate their respective releases.

The God Who Is There

Francis Schaeffer spoke to a generation that cared enough about the concept of God to despair over its loss. In Schaeffer's analysis, drug use, pornography, existentialism and even madness were not merely sin and debauchery for the fun of it, they were the logical conclusions of philosophical ideas that had been crossing the ocean from Europe for decades and surfacing in the works of American artists, writers and film makers. Piece by piece, the old ways of thinking were being stripped away by philosophers and theologians until God was nothing but a memory. And yet a memory was more than nothing, and it was that memory of God and propositional truth that Schaeffer was always seeking to retrieve.

Francis Schaeffer spoke to young people from families that still prayed to God, in a nation that still pledged its allegiance under Him. Many of these students made the long trek to L'Abri, Switzerland, to find if there was any validity to their childhood beliefs about God and the meaning of human existence. So when Schaeffer gave credibility to both, and even a historical context as to why they had doubted God in the first place, many were persuaded to believe.

Thirty years ago, it was enough to prove the existence of God and the reliability of the scriptures. Belief would follow the evidence. *The God Who Is There* assumes that people care enough to do something about God should it prove to be a rational thing to believe in him.

Reading Schaeffer again today makes one long for such a mind-set. It also makes despair seem almost attractive when compared to the moral relativism and self-absorption that characterizes most of western culture in the nineties. Would that people cared enough today to actually despair. Would that truth meant enough for people to lament its absence.

Would that proving the rationality of the existence of God would assume the embracing of that God as its logical consequence.

The God You're Looking For

We now live in a generation that lies beyond the rational boundaries of Schaeffer's day—even beyond despair. Hope is fantasy. Truth is whatever anyone wants to make it. God is a concept to be used only when useful. Religion is a preference. There is nothing beyond self to appeal to; only the subjective desires and felt needs of human existence are left. The God Who is There is about as relevant to today's thought processes as Francis Schaeffer's knickers. Not that the truth is no longer true, it is just that the postmodern mind does not possess the thought-forms necessary to grasp truth as absolute. Announce the God "who is there" today, and people will want to know which God you are talking about. On which channel? Representing which ethnic group? Which religion? And if he is "there", just where is he? Is he out on video? And before anything else, people would want to know what this God could do for them, for whether God is or is not there, the operative question is, what can belief in God do for me?

In this context, The God You're Looking For is a fitting title. There is simply no other way to address a postmodern mind except by way of the expressed needs, longings and desires of people. And the churches who are adopting this approach are currently finding much success. But in doing so, are we not now facing a new dilemma for ministry?

Schaeffer himself has stated that each generation of the church "has the responsibility of communicating the gospel in understandable terms, considering the language and thought-forms of that setting." [Escape from Reason, p.94] But what if the language and thought-forms of a generation are inept at holding the kind of belief systems necessary to sustain a relationship with God over the long haul? Then we will have to teach people to think in thought-forms that are foreign to them—that are outside their cultural experience. To some degree then, in teaching people how to follow God, we must now teach them how to think all over again.

For instance, we keep hearing how the postmodern mind cannot grasp the idea of absolutes. Well then, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the postmodern mind is incapable of grasping the idea of God. Something has to give here: either the postmodern mind, or the God we preach, and I don't think God is very interested in making too many adjustments in his nature or his character in deference to our inadequate minds. People, in order to grow in their understanding and relationship with God, are going to have to somehow graduate from a God they once met on one level, to a God who demands they stretch their minds in order to meet him in ways they have never thought of before.

Actually, this process is not unlike one common to all believers. We all begin a relationship with God on a subjective level through our own personal salvation. But our growth (or sanctification) is the process of discovering that God does not exist for us; we exist for him. "True worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth (John 4:23)"—speaking not of my truth, but of his truth to which I adjust myself and my thought processes. New believers have come to God because he has met their need; mature believers come to God regardless of their need. They come because he is God and he is worthy of their worship and allegiance.

The Current Task

If I am right about this, then the current task that faces the church is a difficult one that poses some rather ticklish questions. Having convinced people to embrace a God who is relevant and contemporary, will Christians still love God when they find he can also be irrelevant and old and sometimes difficult to follow? What do we do when the God who is there is not the God anyone wants? Do we still preach him? Will we be tempted to continue giving people a God they are looking for when the God who is there no longer holds their interest?

One can readily see how addressing this generation with the truth about God is a more formidable task than it was thirty years ago. If people no longer have the thought-forms to grasp absolute truth, then we have to teach and challenge them until God forms in them a new mind. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)” takes on new significance in this regard. It will take a new mind to even believe.

In reality, both these titles are true and necessary. The God You’re Looking For is a good way to start people thinking about God today, but at some point, the God you are looking for has to become The God Who Is There—the God who was there all along, and the God who will be there forever. He is the absolute we will all eventually bump into, regardless of our ability or inability to conceive of him. This is the God who deserves our praise whether or not he fits our description or meets our needs. Somewhere in me, I hear God saying to us all today, “If you are looking for God, I am the God you get, because I am that I am.

May we not shrink from telling the whole truth.

©1999 John Fischer, all rights reserved

For more information and other articles by John Fischer visit <http://www.fischtank.com>.

This article is posted at The Shelter - A Francis A. Schaeffer Site

<http://www.rationalpi.com/theshelter/>