

## SHORT NOTICES

# Schaeffer's Apologetics<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article presents Francis Schaeffer's apologetics through a consideration of his work and writings. It starts with an overview of his books and lectures, which reveal a passion to present biblical truth in a way relevant to the questions of his interlocutors. Compassion and encouragement, motivated by his view of the dignity of all, characterized his approach. The article then answers some common criticisms of his method. Persuasion, life, and prayer were key, as illustrated by the work of L'Abri. Schaeffer's apologetic methodology was presuppositionalist, yet he was more an evangelist than an academic apologist.

### Keywords

*Francis Schaeffer, apologetic methodology, truth, evangelism, prayer, encouragement, compassion, dialogue, L'Abri*

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## I. **Books, Lectures, and Evangelism**

**F**rancis Schaeffer said that the heart of his apologetics could be found in these three books: *The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. These three books together set out an outline of Schaeffer's apologetic approach, the way he defended and commended the truth of Christianity.

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*Escape from Reason* and *The God Who Is There* are primarily an analysis and response to the dominant ideas in Western thought and culture. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* also deals with many of the ideas set forward today as alternatives to historic biblical Christianity; in addition, it presents a basic Christian worldview in a more systematic way than do the other two books. Other summaries of his apologetic approach can be found in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, *How Should We Then Live?*, *Death in the City*, *Genesis in Space and Time*, and by audio in many of the lectures that are still available on tape through L'Abri and from the tape ministry Sound Word. See, for example, a basic lecture entitled "Apologetics."<sup>2</sup>

A lecture series that stands behind *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* is entitled *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions*,<sup>3</sup> which is an example of Schaeffer's apologetic method put into practice. These lectures were given several times at L'Abri in Switzerland during the decade of the 1960s, and that is where I first heard them. He also gave them as special lectures at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, when he came as a visiting lecturer while I was a student there between the years of 1968 and 1971. I remember the lectures very well as I took them for one hour of seminary credit and consequently took thorough notes (notes I still possess). I have them before me as I write this.

The primary reason I remember the lectures so well is that the lectures were open to the public (though they were not widely advertised), and all through the week, a handful of visitors would join us in the tiny seminary chapel. I remember that one man, an unbeliever, came faithfully to the whole week of lectures. Schaeffer covered the three areas of existence, morals, and knowledge and showed how in each of these areas "modern man"—he used the term "modern-modern man" (today he would say "postmodern man")—is left only with the hell of alienation. Christianity, on the other hand, gives answers in each of these areas, answers that are satisfying both intellectually and personally. At the end of the week, he finished by saying that with the Christian answer, there can be true beauty in each of these three areas. The young man who had attended so faithfully became a Christian as the last lecture finished.

I mention this story here both because it is a precious memory and because it reveals something about the way Schaeffer approached his lecturing and

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Schaeffer, "Apologetics," L'Abri England, <https://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-apologetics.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Schaeffer, "Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions," L'Abri Suisse, <https://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-possible-answers-to-basic-philosophical-questions--part-1.html>.

his writing. The title of the lectures, *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophic Questions*, probably sounds abstract to many when they first come across it. However, Schaeffer was not interested in either abstract or purely academic apologetics. He was an evangelist—that is how he thought of himself and how he spoke of his ministry.

Those particular lectures—and indeed all his lectures and apologetic books—were developed to answer the questions of both Christians and non-Christians who came and sat at his table in Huemoz-sur-Ollon in Switzerland, the village where he and Edith had founded the work of L'Abri. I personally know many people who became Christians listening to his lectures, either when originally given or by listening to them on tape as they studied at L'Abri or in other settings all over the world. He would use the same approach found in his lectures and books when he discussed the truth of Christianity with unbelievers or doubting Christians at mealtimes (as Edith served delicious food to meet their other needs). Or, if the weather was good, as he sat on the bench outside their chalet and talked with visitors to L'Abri, he would urge them to consider the truth claims of the gospel using the same approach. Or, as he walked through the forests, fields, and mountains of that lovely part of Switzerland, he would encourage his companions to raise their questions and doubts about the Christian faith and would seek to give them answers to their questions.

## **II. God's Truth**

Schaeffer passionately believed that Christianity is the truth about the universe in which we live. God is indeed there, and he is not silent. God, he would say, is not an idea projected from our minds, or our longings, onto the giant screen of the heavens, a kind of superhuman created to meet our needs. God is not a thought in the system of a philosopher who cannot cope with having no answers to the dilemmas of our human existence. No, God truly exists, and he has spoken to us in the Bible to tell us about himself, ourselves, and our world. He has made known to us what we could never discover by ourselves in our questioning and searching.

God has revealed to us the truth about the world in which we live, our human existence, and himself. He has spoken this truth to us in his Word, and therefore the message of the Bible fits with the nature of reality as we experience it: it fits like a glove on the hand of reality. Christianity is true to the way things are. Schaeffer was deeply convinced of this, and indeed every believer should be convinced of this. When we stand up in a worship service and declare the affirmations of the Creed, we are saying what we believe to be true:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth;  
 And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord  
 Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
 Born of the Virgin Mary,  
 Suffered under Pontius Pilate;  
 Was crucified, dead and buried;  
 On the third day he rose again from the dead,  
 And ascended into heaven.

These affirmations are not like cartoon balloons floating loose in the air. No, they are statements about the way things truly are. The Christian is saying, “This is the truth about the world, about God, about history.”

Schaeffer often used to say, “I am more sure of God’s existence than I am of my own!” That may sound a little strange or extreme, but he was simply acknowledging that if God did not exist, then we would not exist. His existence is prior to ours—in time, of course, but also because he is our Creator. Human life is possible only because the Christian Triune God lives.

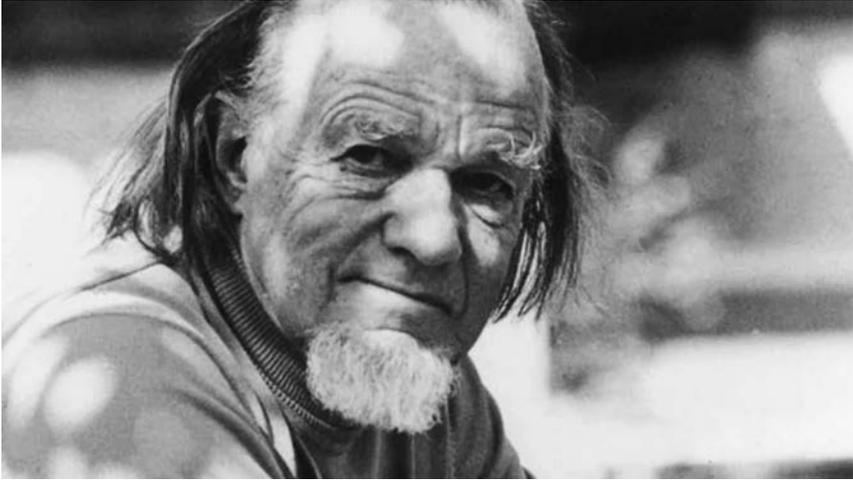
In the same way, God’s moral perfection is prior to our understanding of morality. God’s character has always been one of holiness, goodness, and justice. It is because God is good that we can affirm that there is a difference between good and evil. It is because God is good that we can commit ourselves to the pursuit of moral beauty. Morals are possible for us because God is moral.

In the same way, God’s love is prior to our love. The members of the Trinity have loved each other for all eternity, from “before the beginning,” as Schaeffer used to say. Because we are made in the image of our Creator, we are designed to love, and we are designed for relationships: a relationship of love with our creator and relationships of love with one another. Love is possible for us because God is love. I remember a wonderful wedding sermon Schaeffer preached from John 17 entitled *Before the Beginning*. In this sermon he spoke of the eternal reality of love and communication between the members of the Trinity as the sure foundation for all human relationships.<sup>4</sup>

In the same way, God’s knowledge is prior to our knowledge. God knows all things truly—indeed he knows all things “exhaustively,” as Schaeffer would say. We humans are created by God to have knowledge: knowledge about the Lord, knowledge about ourselves, and knowledge about our world. We will never know exhaustively, for we are finite, but we can know truly, otherwise we would not be able to function at all in this world. Even

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<sup>4</sup> See his sermon “Before the Beginning” available from Soundword.com: <http://www.soundword.com/l-abri-schaeffer--francis-before-the-beginning.html>.



**FRANCIS SCHAEFFER**

1912-1984

despite our fallenness, we can still have true knowledge because of God's commitment to care for us and for all creation and because of his kindness in granting his wisdom to the whole human race. Knowledge is possible for us because God knows all things and because he upholds all things and has designed us so that there is coherence between us and everything around us. Because we know God—or rather, because God has made himself known to us—it is possible for us to know ourselves. Schaeffer's statement that he is more sure of God's existence than of his own is very similar to the words of Calvin: "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face."<sup>5</sup> We can only know ourselves truly when we come to know God.

### **III. *Compassion and Encouragement***

Because Christianity is the truth about the world in which we live and about our lives, it is proper for us as Christian believers to encourage one another, to encourage our children, and to encourage unbelievers to ask

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<sup>5</sup> "Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him. Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 37 (1.1.1-2).

their questions, express their doubts, and raise their objections against Christianity. We do not need to say to the doubting Christian or to the unbeliever, “Don’t ask questions—just believe!” We do not need to say to a Christian who has struggles and uncertainties about their faith, “Just pray harder!” Schaeffer would say, “If you try to load every doubt, objection, and question on the donkey of devotion—eventually the donkey will lie down and die, for it is being asked to bear a load God never intended it to bear.”

God has made himself known in his Word in such a way that we can think carefully about what he tells us—that is why, said Schaeffer, the Reformers were so eager to get the Bible translated and into the hands of all the people—so that they could read God’s Word for themselves. In addition, God has made himself known in the created order and in human nature in such a way that we can think carefully about what he has revealed. What God says, to quote the apostle Paul when he is defending the message of the gospel, is “true and reasonable,” and it is not “hidden in a corner” (see Acts 26:24–29).

In the same way, the apostle Peter encourages Christians to always be prepared to give a reasoned defense of their hope in Christ (1 Pet 3:15–16). Schaeffer saw this calling to be able to give a reasoned defense as part of the birthright of every believer—not just of pastors or some specially trained apologists. Schaeffer was terribly distressed when people would come to his home at the point of giving up their faith because no one in their church would take their questions seriously or because they would be rebuked for asking questions or expressing doubt.

I remember one young woman who came to L’Abri filled with pain because of the response of her parents when she raised questions about the Christian message. Her father was a pastor, but as a young teenager she began to have doubts and wrote down some of her doubts and questions in her personal journal. One day her mother started reading through this journal (though it was private) and was horrified to read there the struggles her daughter was having. She shared the journal with her husband, and they threw her out of her home, declaring that she must be “reprobate” because of the doubts she had expressed. She was then just sixteen years old!

This is an extreme example, but all of us who worked at L’Abri with Schaeffer could share many horror stories like this. This kind of situation broke his heart, and he would devote himself to listening for hours to the struggles and questions of those who came to his home. He would say, “If I have only an hour with someone, I will spend the first fifty-five minutes asking questions and finding out what is troubling their heart and mind, and then in the last five minutes I will share something of the truth.”

I am often asked, “What about Schaeffer made the greatest impression on you?” I think all of us who had the privilege of working with him would respond to such a question, “His compassion for people.”

Some who came to the Schaeffers’ home were believers struggling with doubts and deep hurts like the girl above. Some were people lost and wandering in the wasteland of twentieth-century Western intellectual thought. Some had experimented with psychedelic drugs or with religious ideas and practices that were damaging their lives. Some were so wounded and bitter because of their treatment by churches, or because of the sorrows of their lives, that their questions were hostile, and they would come seeking to attack and to discredit Christianity.

But no matter who they were or how they spoke, Schaeffer would be filled with compassion for them. He would treat them with respect, he would take their questions seriously (even if he had heard the same question a thousand times before), and he would answer them gently. Always he would pray for them and seek to challenge them with the truth. But this challenge was never given aggressively. He would say to us—and model for us—“Always leave someone with a corner to retire gracefully into. You are not trying to win an argument, or to knock someone down. You are seeking to win a person, a person made in the image of God. This is not about your winning; it is not about your ego. If that is your approach, all you will do is arouse their pride and make it more difficult for them to hear what you have to say.”

Schaeffer believed and practiced the conviction that it is God who saves people. Indeed, he would frequently encourage people to leave L’Abri for a time and go off by themselves to think through what they were hearing. He would say that we do not have to try to push and to pressure people into the kingdom. He loved the words of the apostle Paul: “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor 4:2). Because Christianity is true, and because God is the one who delights to draw people to faith in Christ, we do not need to put emotional pressure on unbelievers, nor do we need to try to manipulate them into responding to our message. Rather we commend the truth to them by seeking to show them that it is indeed the truth, and we pray for the Spirit to open their hearts to that truth.

In addition to his deep compassion for people in their struggles and in their lost state, Schaeffer also had a strong sense of the dignity of all people. The conviction that all human persons are the image of God was not simply a theoretical theological affirmation for him; nor was it just a wonderful truth

to be used in apologetic discussion. It was a passionate shout of his heart, a song of delighted praise on his lips, just as for David in Psalm 8:4–5:

What is man that you are mindful of him,  
 the son of man that you care for him?  
 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings  
 and crowned him with glory and honor.

The truth that we are the image of God, a truth that is at the heart of all Schaeffer’s apologetic work, is for him a reason to worship God. This conviction of the innate dignity of all human persons had many consequences for him. He believed, and he practiced the belief, that there are no little people. He invited people into his home who were damaged in body and mind and treated them with the same dignity and compassion as the most brilliant or accomplished visitors. He was just as willing to spend time with the maid or the janitor in a hotel as he was to go and talk to someone considered important in the eyes of the world or of the church. He took a conversation with one damaged and needy young person as seriously as when he was talking with the president or lecturing before an audience of thousands.<sup>6</sup>

This same conviction of the dignity of people and his compassion for them led him to desire to avoid aggressive confrontation with unbelievers. His refusal to “debate” with anyone, including a radical liberal like Bishop Pike, was an example of this. He insisted that their meeting should be called a dialog. Those who attended that dialog said the most impressive part of it was that it was evident that Schaeffer could have demolished Pike’s positions and his arguments and made him look foolish and extreme—but he did not. What was evident was his compassion for this man and his commitment to treat him with dignity. One friend shared with me how he went up to talk to Schaeffer after the public meeting was over. When he arrived behind the stage, Schaeffer was surrounded by people eager to congratulate him and to ask him questions, but Bishop Pike was standing by himself on the other side. When Schaeffer realized this, he politely excused himself from his questioners and went over to talk to Pike. As a consequence of this occasion they became friends and corresponded with each other until Pike’s death while he was searching for manuscripts in the desert.

This conviction of the dignity of all people also led Francis and Edith into their work of child evangelism, for to the Schaeffers, children were just as

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<sup>6</sup> See his sermon, Francis A. Schaeffer, “No Little People, No Little Places,” in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 3, *A Christian View of Spirituality* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 1–191.

significant as adults, just as precious, just as worthy of receiving our time and effort. In “The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord,” he wrote, “There is a certain gentleness about really great Christians. There are many ways to observe this, but perhaps one of the best is to notice the tenderness for children in some of the great warriors of the past.”<sup>7</sup>

While he was in St. Louis as a pastor in the mid-1940s he and Edith started a ministry to children, Children for Christ. This work eventually became international and was greatly used by God to reach many children with the gospel. He and Edith wrote the materials for the meetings, and Edith designed flannelgraphs to be used with them. These materials were translated into many languages, and he and Edith traveled extensively teaching others how to lead children’s meetings. They would model this by leading a study with the adults as if they were a group of children. If one is able to find a copy of these materials (there were, for example, studies on Genesis and on the Gospel of Luke, the latter published in a different format under the title *Everybody Can Know*), it quickly becomes clear that Schaeffer takes the same basic approach to communicating biblical truth to children as he does with adults. I had the privilege of leading an evangelistic study for inner-city children while I was a seminary student in St. Louis, and I managed to find a copy of the studies on Genesis to use in my teaching. The study was, in essence, a beginner’s version of *Possible Answers to the Basic Philosophical Questions* and *Genesis in Space and Time*, and I found it very helpful in communicating God’s truth to those young African-American city-dwellers.

#### **IV. Responses to Criticisms**

Obviously in this context the communication of truth to children is taking place with the use of different language and with other appropriate adjustments—but children need precisely the same truth and ask just the same questions: indeed, some of the most difficult questions I have ever been asked were asked by little children. In these Bible studies for children, the Schaeffers were dealing with the same fundamental questions about the nature of human existence and with the same wonderful answers that the Bible gives to these questions—the very same questions and answers that he presents in *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. This is an important point to notice for several reasons.

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<sup>7</sup> See Francis A. Schaeffer, “The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord,” *The Sunday School Times* (July 1 and 8, 1951): 539–40, 555–56.

First, Schaeffer was sometimes criticized for being too intellectual. Some have said that he was dealing with issues that “ordinary people” do not wrestle with in the course of regular life. That the same questions and truths could be used (and used very powerfully, and in a way that was greatly blessed by the Lord) to communicate the good news to little children shows the inappropriateness of such a criticism of his apologetic work.

Second and in similar fashion, Schaeffer was accused of making the gospel too complicated. Why did he not simply tell people the ABCs of the gospel? You are a sinner; Christ died for you; repent and believe in him.

His response was that all people (including little children) have to understand and respond to the truths of the biblical worldview and to turn from their idols and from whatever false ideas they have put in place of God’s truth. They have to believe “that God exists” (Heb 11:6), to accept the truth of who God is and who they are as human persons before they can understand that they are sinners and that Christ died for them.

If people already share a Christian worldview because of growing up with a church background and with knowledge of the Bible, then, of course, we may begin with the ABCs, for the ABCs will make sense to them. But, if they are like the people of Athens whom Paul addresses (Acts 17:16–34), then we will have to start with the true nature of God, and with the false ideas and idolatry of the pagan thinkers if we desire to make Christ known to them.

Schaeffer recognized that there are fewer and fewer people in the Western world who truly hold to a biblical worldview. Consequently, he saw that it is absolutely essential with the majority of people we meet to begin at the beginning. The beginning for modern and even more for postmodern people is denial or doubt about the existence of God and denial or doubt about the existence of truth. While these might seem like abstract issues, they are not in fact abstract. Rather, they are very practical. Nothing is more practical, nothing is more basic, than the conviction that there is truth that can be known. Without this conviction life becomes more and more intolerable and more and more filled with alienation. The more consistently people live with the loss of truth, the more their lives will fall apart, for the center does not hold.

Another response that should be made to this criticism—that he was making the simple gospel too complicated—is that he did not develop his apologetic approach in a study far removed from the lives of real people. He developed the answers he gives in all his apologetic writings and lectures in the heat of battle, so to speak. His home was filled with people seeking answers to the questions of existence, morals, and knowledge.

I worked for almost twenty years at L'Abri, many of those while Schaeffer was still alive. Our pattern was to tell those who came to our homes that "no questions are off limits." For if we believe that Christianity is indeed the truth, we do not need to be afraid of any questions or objections. Consequently, almost all the lectures that were given (and that still are given at the various branches of L'Abri) were given in response to the questions, doubts, and struggles of those staying with us. The issues addressed in Schaeffer's apologetic works are the questions of real people.

My own conversion bears on this issue. As a non-Christian, I wrestled with several of the problems that are addressed repeatedly by Schaeffer. I wondered how any meaning and value can be given to human life. "Who am I, and is there any ultimate meaning to my life?" were questions that plagued my soul. I did not see any basis for being able to make a distinction between good and evil. I felt there was a difference, and I longed for there to be a difference, but I could find no reason for such a difference. Does not the same end come to those who seem morally upright and those who devote themselves to wickedness? Does it ultimately matter, or is it just an illusion to think that moral integrity is important? I was haunted by the reality of suffering. Is there any reason for suffering, any ultimate explanation for it, or is it meaningless in the end? Is it just that we live and die, we win some and lose some, we have fleeting moments of joy and longer periods of sorrow, but none of it makes any sense? And is there any resolution to suffering? Or do we simply have to endure it, either with passive resignation or with bitter rage, following Dylan Thomas's urging to "rage against the dying of the light"?<sup>8</sup>

When I was a teenager growing up in England in the sixties, many of my friends struggled with such questions, but most of them attempted either to drown their anxious thoughts with alcohol, drugs, or promiscuous sexual encounters or to bury themselves in pursuit of a life that would give them "personal peace and affluence" (to use Schaeffer's expression). I found myself unwilling to take either of these routes, for both seemed a betrayal of everything I treasured (largely thanks to my parents, who were truly good people and who were excellent parents with a genuinely happy marriage).

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<sup>8</sup> See the poem of Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night":

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

See Dylan Thomas, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2003), 239.

For me, the lack of answers drove me to the very edge of suicide. I was prevented (Thank God!) from throwing myself over a cliff one January day by the glory of creation even in the middle of winter. I felt constrained to keep searching just a little longer before taking such a final step.

About two weeks after this, I met a Canadian, Mike Tymchak, a doctoral student at Manchester University where I was an undergraduate. He had studied under Schaeffer at the Swiss L'Abri and had discussions, Bible studies, and sessions listening to Schaeffer's tapes in his apartment each week. The first of these evening meetings that I attended after I met Mike, he led a reading and reflection on the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. It pierced me to the heart, for here was a man, Mike, and here was a book, the Bible, that took my questions seriously and began to give me answers. Over the next months, Mike played tapes by Schaeffer that covered some of the ground covered in the book *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* and in other of his basic apologetic books and lectures on tape. Mike's own approach to my questions was the approach that Schaeffer takes. Within a little over a year and a half Mike led me in a prayer of commitment one Tuesday evening in November 1966 as we knelt side by side on his kitchen floor. God had brought another reluctant sinner to himself!

A third criticism that is sometimes made of Schaeffer's apologetic approach is that he believed that he could argue people into the kingdom of God. Nothing could be further from the truth. He stated categorically many times that argument alone will not save people.

He did not acknowledge this because the reasons that demonstrate the truth of Christianity are inadequate. They are not inadequate; rather, they are fully sufficient to persuade an open-minded person. People, however, are not open minded. We are all rebels against God, with wills resistant to his truth. Schaeffer would say, as he says in several of his lectures, that to come to the truth men and women have to bow before God three times.

First, we have to bow as creatures, acknowledging that God is God, and that we are not the source and origin of our own life. Rather, we are dependent. Our hearts resist this.

Second, we have to bow morally, acknowledging that we are to see God as the lawgiver, that we are people who consistently have disobeyed his commandments, and that we deserve his judgment. We are dependent utterly on his mercy in Jesus Christ.

Third, we have to bow in the area of knowledge. God is the source of truth and we are not. We are dependent on him for understanding of the world and even of our own existence.

## **V. *Persuasion, Life, and Prayer***

In addition to this recognition of the problem of the hard heart, Schaeffer understood that there are three elements, all equally important, to the demonstration of the truth of Christianity: persuasion, life, and prayer. This understanding was not merely theoretical. His life's work was built around the practice of these three elements.

We are called by God to make his truth known and to demonstrate that truth to unbelievers by giving them compelling reasons for faith. These reasons are found in God's own revelation in Scripture and in creation. They are not the clever inventions of our minds. Schaeffer believed his apologetic method was faithful to Scripture and that he was using the approach of Scripture.

We are called by God to live the truth, to demonstrate the truth of the gospel by our lives. Schaeffer called the life of the Christian "our final apologetic"—and he sought to show in his own life, "in some poor way," as he put it—the reality of "supernaturally restored relationships." He believed that the New Testament teaches us that the non-Christian ought to be able to see a difference in our lives and thereby draw conclusions about the truth of the message of Christ that we proclaim.

We are called by God to pray that he would demonstrate his existence in the reality of his answers to our prayers. Francis and Edith Schaeffer prayed that God would bring the people in whose hearts he was at work to L'Abri. Schaeffer knew, and constantly repeated to those who worked with him, that the work of saving people is impossible for us, but it is indeed possible for God. He was a man of prayer who humbly believed that without the work of God in the hearts and minds of people all our labors are in vain.

Actually, of course, I ought to have set these three points in the reverse order, for Schaeffer believed, and spent his life practicing the belief, that prayer is the most important work that we do whether in the task of apologetics or in any other area of our Christian obedience. In one sense he would say, "Prayer is an activity that must be central to our lives," but then he would quickly add, "In prayer we are holding out the empty hands of faith to the God who is there and who can do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine!"

## **VI. *Appendix—Schaeffer's Apologetic Methodology***

Where did Schaeffer fit in the classification of different apologetic methodologies? Robert Reymond declared that Schaeffer was a classical or "empirical"

apologist.<sup>9</sup> Classical apologetics seeks to demonstrate God’s existence and theism as the only correct worldview to believe. This demonstration is given through the use of the “theistic arguments” (made famous by Thomas Aquinas) and is then followed by appeal to historical evidence to establish other important matters, such as the deity of Christ, his historical resurrection, and the reliability of Scripture. Proponents of this view are usually said to include Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, William Paley, B. B. Warfield, R. C. Sproul, Norman Geisler, John Gerstner, and J. P. Moreland.

Gordon Lewis thought Schaeffer was a verificationist, or someone who holds to what is called cumulative case apologetics.<sup>10</sup> This approach suggests that the truth of the Christian message is not strictly a formal argument to “prove” Christianity, or an argument from probability. According to Steven Cowan,

it is more like the brief that a lawyer makes in a court of law or that a literary critic makes for a particular interpretation of a book. It is an informal argument that pieces together several lines of data into a sort of hypothesis or theory that comprehensively explains that data and does so better than any alternative hypothesis.<sup>11</sup>

Those who use this approach are usually said to include Basil Mitchell, C. S. Lewis, C. Stephen Evans, and Paul Feinberg. Feinberg puts it this way:

Christian theorists are arguing that [Christianity] makes better sense of all the evidence available than does any other alternative worldview on offer, whether that alternative is some other theistic view or atheism.<sup>12</sup>

On this approach, the Christian account of reality given to us in Scripture explains such foundational matters as the existence and form of the cosmos, the nature of morality, religious experience, historical facts such as the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of ultimate redemption.

I think Schaeffer would have been fascinated to have seen these attempts to pigeonhole him into a particular approach. But where did *he* think he fit into the usual classification of classical apologetics, evidential apologetics,

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<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1984), see his section on Schaeffer, pages 145–46.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon R. Lewis, “Schaeffer’s Apologetic Method,” in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, ed. Ronald W. Ruesegger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 71.

<sup>11</sup> Steven B. Cowan, introduction to *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “Cumulative Case Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 152.

verificationism, presuppositionalism, Reformed epistemology apologetics, and fideism?

Schaeffer regarded himself as a presuppositionalist, though he sometimes resisted the attempts of others to put him into any particular category. Presuppositionalists stress the deep impact of sin on every aspect of our humanity, including our ability to know. Because of this, they argue that the unbeliever has to be challenged at a more foundational level than a presentation of powerful evidence for the truth of the Christian message. This position recognizes that every human person has assumptions, or presuppositions, that shape everything they believe and the way they live. Because we have fallen away from our original state of innocence and live in rebellion against our Creator, not one of us starts our investigation of the world, of human life, and most especially of God, from a place of neutrality. The unbeliever has a heart turned away from God toward idols, especially the idol of the self, and this pre-commitment of the heart stands in the way of hearing and receiving the truth. The Christian apologist should gladly acknowledge their presupposition of the truth of Christianity. God exists and he has spoken—this is the starting point of apologetics. Evidences and arguments may be marshaled to support the truth claims of Christianity, but at base the apologist argues that all morality, all meaning, all rationality presupposes the existence of the God who has made himself known in Scripture. John Frame argues, “We should present the Biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes argument possible.”<sup>13</sup> Schaeffer would have been in thorough agreement with Frame’s statement.

While Schaeffer saw himself as a presuppositionalist, and he would have affirmed the outline of this approach to apologetics that I have set out above, he is not easy to fit into a box, and this is why he has been classified in other ways by Reymond and Lewis. This is also the reason why he was criticized repeatedly by Cornelius Van Til as being inconsistent to a properly presuppositional approach to apologetics. Part of the challenge here is that rather than developing a particular methodological approach, Schaeffer had a passion for the communication of Christian truth both to believers and unbelievers, and he was very gifted at this task, whether he was speaking to people who considered themselves intellectuals, to ordinary working people without much book learning, or to little children.

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<sup>13</sup> John M. Frame, “Presuppositional Apologetics,” *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 220.

He very carefully said that he was not an academic apologist, but rather an evangelist. He would always add that he was not implying that academic apologetics was an inappropriate calling, but it was not his calling.

He also was, from his earliest years, passionately committed to seeing the “common ground” between different perspectives among believers, including the common ground between differing apologetic approaches.<sup>14</sup> One of the earliest articles Schaeffer wrote was an attempt to get J. Oliver Buswell, a leading classical apologist, and Van Til, a presuppositionalist, to see that they had much in common. Schaeffer’s article was written in response to a series of exchanges between Buswell and Van Til, exchanges that had become fairly heated and had troubled some of the readers of the magazine in which they had been printed because of the lack of charity that seemed to be creeping into this to-and-fro. Schaeffer, then a young man of 36, urged the two to recognize that they both believed that reasoning alone could not save anyone, that both insisted that people are rebels trapped in sin, and that both admitted gladly that without the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and mind no one would come to faith; and he urged them to acknowledge that they both agreed that only God’s Word makes sense of human life. In this article Schaeffer set out an outline of his approach to apologetics that helps us understand his life’s work. I will summarize in my own words as a series of brief points what he wrote.<sup>15</sup>

1. All people, no matter what their beliefs or way of life, live in God’s universe, for it is the only one there is.
2. The unbeliever may indeed invent another world to inhabit, a world of false gods, idols, a world where there is an obstinate refusal to worship and serve the true God and maker of all things. Such an invention is what all religions and alternative worldviews and ways of living are in fact—not truth but a kind of make-believe.
3. This invention does not fit what is truly “there,” so the unbeliever lives between two worlds, worshipping and serving the gods he or she has chosen; but living in actuality in the world that God has made.

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<sup>14</sup> For an excellent article on Schaeffer as an apologist “who favors integration” between different apologetic methods, see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Apologists Who Favor Integration,” in *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Devon: Paternoster, 2006), 425–82; available online as “Faith Has Its Reasons” at [www.Bible.org](http://www.Bible.org).

<sup>15</sup> See Francis A. Schaeffer, “A Review of a Review,” *The Bible Today* 42.1 (October 1948): 7–9.

4. If the unbeliever were consistent to their make-believe world, they would be driven to meaninglessness, amorality, and irrationality. But, thankfully, no one is fully consistent.
5. The unbeliever has to live in deceit, benefiting from God's world and the beneficence of his general grace but suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.
6. God constantly confronts the unbeliever with the truth, for the Spirit is the world's prosecutor. He gives people up to the consequences of the false ways of seeing the world that they have chosen to serve, and he also continues to pour out his good gifts on the unbeliever. These gifts are a testimony challenging the unbeliever to repentance and to seeking the one true God, and they render the unbeliever inexcusable.
7. We are to focus on the tension, helping unbelievers to see that all that is good and true and beautiful comes from God, that God's world and gifts are their true home, and that the worldview or idol to which the unbeliever has given mind and heart is a totally inadequate means of dealing with the world that truly exists.
8. We are to remember that in our thinking and our lives we believers are never consistent either. We are all still living in two worlds, and therefore, understanding our own fallibility and inconsistencies, we are to communicate the truth with humility, understanding, grace, and respect.

Another way to summarize how Schaeffer approached the task of making truth known to people would be to say that he used presuppositions as a kind of evidence. We may imagine him praying for the Holy Spirit to open a person's heart and mind all the time he is speaking like this: "If you turn away from God and make a world of your own imagining, there will be terrible consequences, both for the way you think and for the way you live. Yet at the same time, because you live in God's world and you are made in his image, you will be restrained from being consistent to your way of seeing the world." Schaeffer would speak very often of two realities, "the universe and its form" and "the mannishness of man," both of which act as a constraint on people's thinking and their lives. "If, on the other hand," he would continue, "you would turn to the Lord, you will find the world 'falling into place' in your thinking, and your life will be set free by the truth."

Schaeffer saw his work as simply applying Paul's words in Romans 1:18–32, where Paul sets out the consequences of suppressing the knowledge of God and of worshiping and serving part of the creation in God's place. Another way to put this would be to say that Schaeffer's approach was similar to Isaiah's in Isaiah 40–48, where the prophet contrasts the folly of the worship

of idols with the wonder of the worship of God and sets out the consequences of these two ways of thinking and living. In Psalm 115, we see the psalmist doing precisely the same thing when he sings of the glory of the Lord and contrasts that with the emptiness of idols and the way they make those who worship them become like them. False belief systems, just like practical idolatries, destroy our humanity. Only the truth made known by the Triune God can make sense of our lives and set us free to be truly human. This was Schaeffer's passionate conviction. He spent his life defending this conviction and seeking to bring others to acknowledge the Lord who graciously gave us the truth and who sets us free as we bow to him.