

CHRISTIAN CIVICS

Literary Analysis:
How Then Should We Live?
The Rise and Decline of Western
Thought and Culture
A book by Francis Schaeffer

Dave Johnson



Literary Analysis: How Then Should We Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture

A book by Francis Schaeffer

“This book is written in the hope that this generation may turn from the greatest of wickedness...that this generation may get its feet out of the paths of death and may live.”

Final Paragraph,
How Then Should We Live

Introduction

It is necessary to begin this analysis by explaining the book in question was assigned to this author's Classical Christian Civics class as a conclusion to numerous subjects taught and learned through the year. The class and the school approaches subjects not only academically, but spiritually with a Christian mind-set. This analysis is written from that perspective.

In the beginning of Francis Schaeffer's twentieth book, *How Then Should We Live*, the author makes a special note indicating that the book does not “make a pretense of being a complete chronological history,” (How, p. 15). Never the less, what attracted this History/Civics Teacher to the volume is its attempt to investigate the moral decline of our civilization through a broad overview of historical and cultural examination. Schaeffer, who often preached the ills of modern culture, leads the reader through the chronological path of the West's rise, peak and demise; from Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Reformation into the Modern Age of the Enlightenment, arrogance and fragmentation. His attempt is phenomenal and extensive for a sole analytical treatise.

Therefore, the purpose of this analysis purports to not analyze the extent of world civilization history, as Schaeffer writes. Rather, the purpose of this report is to focus on Schaeffer's conclusions to the Christian and discern those conclusions' rationality and possibility.

I. Recognition of the World's Existential Methods and Avoiding the Same

Schaeffer's entire book is a one way street. The sign directs the reader one way; down the “line of despair” (Worthen, p. 62), toward the West's dark, dismal journey to accepting a humanistic perspective of “the separation of optimism about meaning and values from the area of reason,” (How, p. 250). In other words, a welcoming of “existential methodologies”.

Schaeffer begins his work with the early church during the Roman Empire. But he quickly moves onto the Middle Ages when “the pristine Christianity set forth in the New Testament gradually became distorted” with a “humanistic element” that was added which gave more credence to the “church” than to “the

teaching of the Bible,” (How, p. 26). Early on in the West’s history, Schaeffer insists that before the term “humanism” is used by the French Enlightenment, before the concept was pursued during the Renaissance, “the concept was essentially the same in that it was **man taking to himself that which belonged to God**,” (How, p. 26; emphasis mine). By the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas opened the door to “placing revelation and human reason on an equal footing,” (How, p. 38). Furthermore, the belief that the Fall of mankind in Eden only affected man’s spiritual condition, not his intellect, enhanced the humanistic perspective of the Medieval Age; “people could rely on their own human wisdom...people were free to mix the teachings of the Bible with the teachings of the non-Christian philosophers,” (How, p. 46). With the advent of the Renaissance, Petrarch, the “father of the new humanism,” maintained a love for the non-Christian Greco-Roman world. This Renaissance humanism became a “value system rooted in the belief that man is his own measure, that man is autonomous, totally independent,” (How, p. 56). Man also began viewing things as autonomous in which “there was nothing to which to relate them or to give them meaning,” (How, p. 66). Schaeffer also contends that the northern Reformation is essentially synonymous with the High Renaissance in which both “dealt with the same basic problems” but approached those problems with different solutions and results. The Reformation taught that “people could not begin only from themselves, and on the basis of human reason alone think out the answers to the great questions” all man faces (How, p. 75-76). The Reformation sought to remove “the humanistic distortions which had entered the church,” (How, p. 78). And while the Renaissance “centered in autonomous man”, the Reformation focused on “the infinite personal God who had spoken in the Bible,” (How p. 80). Ironically the philosophy that contends that man is central actually removes all meaning. However, begin with the Bible’s position that a person is a created being in God’s image then man is lifted up with dignity and purpose. Schaeffer indicates that the Reformation not only was influential in spiritual matters, but cultural. He insists on such thoughts as “There would have been no Bach had there been no Luther” (How, p. 87). But Schaeffer continues with the reality that “wherever the biblical teaching has gone, even though it has always been marred by men....(it) also has brought peripheral results in society...in both the arts and political affairs,” (How, p. 100). Vinet, Bucer, Locke and Jefferson all were influenced by Christian values, even if they, themselves, were not saints. Schaeffer contends the Reformation and the preaching of the gospel brought about “an interest in culture and a true basis for form and freedom in society and government,” (How, p. 106). Sadly, however, mankind tripped down the path of humanism into the so-called Age of Enlightenment. Lead by the father of the age, Voltaire, into an antithesis to the Reformation, a sharp contrast to a respect in God and his scripture. The results were apparent in the French Revolution. With the Declaration of the Rights of Man where “what was called ‘The Supreme Being’ equalled ‘the sovereignty of the nation’...the general will of the people....destruction came not from outside the system; it was produced by the system” (How, p. 118). But regardless of the political systems of humanism, a new approach to scientific method was also emerging from man’s autonomous belief. While men like Newton “wrote more about the bible than about science” (How, p. 131), and Einstein could not believe the “God plays dice with the cosmos” (How, p. 134), humanism seeped into science as well. Science no longer saw the universe in an open system rather closed where “nothing is outside...everything which exists is a part of it” (How, p. 141). Schaeffer introduces the reader to the French Existential Philosopher, Jean-Paul Satre. It was Satre opened humanism into its final conclusions that there are no absolutes, no moral standard and hence no final sense of what is right or wrong (How p. 140). With this personage and the unique philosophies of modern science, Kant, Lyell, Haeckel, Darwin, Spencer, Rousseau, Kierkegaard and many, many other humanists emerged. Existentialism now removed reason from faith and optimism. And this “dichotomy, the separation of optimism about meaning and values from the area of reason” was accepted and faith and optimism became “incidental” (How, p. 250).

So a recognition of the results of centuries of humanistic thinking is paramount to the Christian's reaction to our culture's godless heritage. But he warns us to avoid falling into our own form of "existential methodology," specifically deleting or diminishing the Bible's affirmations of the cosmos, history or moral commands yet holding the philosophy and "religious matters" provided in the Bible as valid. It's a box deal to Schaeffer. "This is not just an emotional holiness but holiness in relationship to [objective] content... holiness in relationship to thought and a set of things that can be states as true, in contrast to that which is false" (True, p. 108). Furthermore, Schaeffer believed there are "good, adequate and sufficient reasons" to affirm Christian faith, "to know with our reason that Christianity is true" (The God Who, p. 202).

One aspect of Schaeffer's work should be pointed out at this moment; it is rational, reasonable and real for Christians to think and be scholarly. As Arlin Migliazzo put it, "Schaeffer showed me that Christians didn't have to be dumb." (Hamilton, p. 27). As the humanist methods are identified, Schaeffer became an example we should be intelligent in our relationships and discussions with the world. "The denial of 'true truth' was not some passing academic fad" (Colson, p. 45).

II. Knowledge is Not Enough; Action is Critical to Influence Culture

Schaeffer was a preacher as well as an author. His 276 page "sermon" is not only an informative treatise of the West's decline, but a motivational record that demands that the Christian reader not only "know the right world view...but consciously to act upon that world view so as to influence society in all its parts and facets across the whole spectrum of life, as much as we can to the extent of our individual and collective ability" (How, p. 250-251).

Schaeffer ends his book with five chapters dealing with the breakdown of man's philosophy, science, theology and culture that lead to "modern fragmentation", both cultural and social (How, p. 177). He concludes his book at the time of the writing, during the latter 1970s. During this period of "fragmentation" Schaeffer suggests the riotous hippie movement, drug scene and rebellious youth were only seeking what society had disrupted; truth in reasonable, authentic "morals, values and meaning" only found in "the Creator of the universe" (How, p. 247). In 1970 he wrote, "Modern humans, who have rejected [they are God's creation in God's image], have no clue as to who they are, and because of this they can find no real value for themselves or for others. Hence they downgrade the value of other people and produce the horrible thing we face today - a sick culture in which people treat people as inhuman, as machines. As Christians, however, we know the value of men and women" (The Mark, p. 28).

Yet, Schaeffer and his family tried to become more than mere preachers, they tried to offer solutions. In 1955 Schaeffer put his beliefs into shoe leather when he established a Swiss "shelter" for those seeking truth. L'Abri (Swiss for "shelter") was the Schaeffer's home that they opened to strangers to come and learn together. It "became a haven for disillusioned Christians, curious backpackers, and seeking non-Christians" where "students" could visit for a few days or a few months to study, ponder and pursue truth (Cutrer, p. 22, 24).

Schaeffer motivated many Evangelicals to become involved in areas not always considered spiritual, such as art, literature and politics. As Chuck Colson said, "Schaeffer's message impacted...us at formative states of our Christian growth. We were stirred by his challenge for the church to be more than a safe haven for the saved, just a comforter of souls. We were moved by his call to bring Christian truth to bear in every aspect of human life..." (Colson, p. 45).

Here is a great irony in Schaeffer's life and influence. In recent days the Evangelical churches of our society have become more and more entertainment oriented and ineffective in reflecting New Testament Christianity. And this reality has not gone unnoticed by many truth seekers. In Molly Worthen's article "Not Your Father's L'Abri," she tragically subtitles her article "The Swiss retreat now tends less to philosophical skeptics than to **disaffected evangelicals**" (Worthen, p. 60, emphasis mine). She continues "The modernist philosophy that he targeted in most of his writings, the bogeyman of existentialism, is passé. Now the question is, Is there truth at all?" (Worthen, p. 64). Furthermore, Fischer, writing of his experience of Schaeffer, noted that the "Religious Right is caricatured in society as a theocratic movement with no concern for the poor and downtrodden." He continued that Schaeffer's work was "not a call to arms but a call to care." (Fischer, p. 40).

And most ironic, Frank Schaeffer, the son who helped his father Francis write the book, the subject of this analysis, as well as put it on an award winning film series left the Evangelical churches for the Greek Orthodox Catholic Church, tired of the "hero-culture" in evangelical churches and the "entertainment-oriented... 'happy, clappy nonsense'" of the unorthodox (Russell, p. 1, 2). He offered a stinging rebuke toward many Christian churches, calling his exodus his "escape from Disneyfired Protestantism" (Woodard, p. 35). He insisted that his departure was due to a hunger for "something more reverent, liturgical and historical." Furthermore, he declared "A Sicilian Catholic mama, a Russian Orthodox babushka, a jailed American pro-lifer, and a 1st century Christian slave would understand each other. But if you stuck them in one of the 23,000 American Protestant churches, with a cartwheeling pastor and jazz band, they'd all ask, what's Christian here?" (Woodard).

Schaeffer's son and the change of L'Abri's focus surely indicates that the Christian churches have not heeded the admonishment of the book. Could they too have slipped back into a view of their own autonomous nature?

"Man beginning with his proud, proud humanism, tried to make himself autonomous, but rather than becoming great, he had found himself ending up as only a collection of molecules - and nothing more" (How, p. 159).

III. Specifically, Resist Authoritarian Government

Shaeffer succinctly states, "...humanism ever since - has found no way to arrive at universals or absolutes which give meaning to existence and morals," (How p. 50).

A humanistic government that defies everything holy, according to Schaeffer, must be resisted "in all its forms regardless of the label it carries and regardless of its origin" (How, p. 251). His warning to Christians was that they "will be still as long as their own religious activities, evangelism, and life-styles are not disturbed." But "we are not excused from speaking" (How, p 251).

He offers as examples the like of Shaftesbury, Wilberforce, Wesley and even John the Baptist those who spoke out. But he also cautions "If we as Christians do not speak out as authoritarian government grow from within or from outside, eventually we or our children will be the enemy of society and the state" (How, p. 251).



In a 1982 sermon on the “Old Time Gospel Hour,” Schaeffer gave a portion of his conclusions from his work, *A Christian Manifesto*. He ended the sermon with this statement:

“The final bottom line, the early Christians, the people of the Reformation, the Founding Fathers of this country faced and acted on is the realization that if there is no place for disobeying the government, that government has been put in the place of the Living God. At such a point, that government has been made nothing less than a *false god! NO! We must say NO! Caesar is not to be put in the place of God. And we as Christians in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in all of life must so think and act on the appropriate level at the given moment where we are. And if unhappily it becomes necessary that that level includes some open disobedience to government we must walk that road....Christ must be the final Lord, and not society, and not Caesar. CHRIST MUST BE THE FINAL LORD, AND NOT SOCIETY AND NOT CAESAR!*”
(The Christian Manifesto)

Unfortunately, such words have been misinterpreted as pro-violent or inciting lethal revolt. (Lizza) Actually in his book by the same title, *The Christian Manifesto*, Schaeffer did suggest the hypothetical possibility of Christians being forced to choose in some future society between martyrdom or revolt. Otherwise, to defend themselves. “...when all avenues to flight and protest have closed, force in the **defensive** posture is appropriate. This was the situation of the American Revolution. The colonists used force in **defending** themselves.” (Douthat) It is understandable, however, how his excitable words could have been misconstrued.

Schaeffer closes his exhortation with Ezekiel 33 and the warning given to the watchtower attendant; those who will be held responsible if they do not warn their own when they see danger approaching.

His final words in the book simply compel the Christian reader to act, to speak out. And in this, the title of the book is explained: “Therefore, O thou son of man, speak unto the house of Israel; Thus ye speak, saying, if our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, **how then should we then live?**” (How, p. 252, emphasis mine).

Conclusion

Schaeffer’s seminal work, *How Then Should We Live*, walks with the reader as it wanders through Western history. But its real intent is to motivate the reader, especially the Christian reader, to become aware of humanistic, existential decline in culture, to become influential in the society, and even to actively engage in the debate; to resist when governing authorities excel the demise even further.

I do not believe from my studies of the man, Francis Schaeffer, that he would have ever encouraged physical combat or violence for his beliefs. His approach was on the intellectual level. His attack was in the cultural arena. His strategy was in treating every human as one with value, one created in the image of God, including the insincere or misguided politician or authoritarian. He taught resistance but only as Christ resisted.

And yet, the author of this analysis still wrestles with how resistance is to be conducted and still maintain the respect and honor expected of a Christian (Romans 13:1ff; I Peter 2:17). There is a balance between how much one battles for a world destined for eventual destruction and the realm that is permanent and eternal. The world is fallen and going down, but is it not the responsibility of the “watchman” to call into



the fray? Could I not too attempt to bail out the sinking ship even though that ship is not the ultimate , final destination?

Schaeffer believed so. He struck out as hard as he could with the weapons he had; his own Swiss home, his pulpit, and his writing. None of his tools were violent. But they were effective.

As a Civics Teacher in a Christian school, the book is compelling. I used it as a conclusion for my class to lay a capstone of motivation for my students to take what they have learned and become active and if necessary, resist as Christ would against a humanistic society.

This writer has not seen such a comprehensive study on Western Civilization with a consistent Christian theme and full-circle wrap up with a simple nudging question - how will I live now, and what am I prepared to do to engage the culture and influence society?



References

Chuck Colson, Timothy George (2012), *Flaming Truth*, *Christianity Today*, February, 2012, p 45.

Corrie Cutrer (2005), *L'Abri Turns 50*, *Christianity Today*, May, 2005, pp. 21-24.

Ross Douthat (2011), *Misreading Francis Schaeffer*, *The New York Times*, August, 31, 2011, online:
<http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/31/misreading-francis-schaeffer/>

John Fischer (2007), *Learning to Cry for the Culture*, *Christianity Today*, April, 2007, pp. 40-41.

Michael S. Hamilton (1997), *The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer*, *Christianity Today*, March 3, 1997,
pp. 22-30.

Robin Galiano Russell (2005), *Evangelical Heavyweight Schaeffer Turned to Orthodox Christianity*, *Dallas Morning News*, 4/22/2005.

Schaeffer, Francis (1979), *How Should We Then Live - The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books.

Schaeffer, Francis (1982), *The Christian Manifesto*, *Old Time Gospel Hour*, broadcast, March 21, 1982.

Schaeffer, Francis (1968), *The God Who is There*, Downer's Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press.

Schaeffer, Francis (1970), *The Mark of the Christian*, *Christianity Today*, March 6, 1995, pp. 27-33.

Schaeffer, Francis (1971), *True Spirituality*, Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers.

Ryan Lizza (2011), *A Christian Manifesto's Call to Arms*, *The New Yorker*, August, 30, 2011, online:
<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/08/a-christian-manifestos-call-to-arms.html>

Molly Worthen (2008), *Not Your Father's L'Abri*, *Christianity Today*, March, 2008, pp. 60-65.

Joe Woodard (1996), *One Man's Journey to the East*, *Alberta Report Newsmagazine*, 23:37, p. 35, 8/26/1996.