

ISCA 2017 - Francis Schaeffer and the Apologetic of Beauty

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Abstract: Often mischaracterized and even arbitrarily dismissed as only an art philosophy, Schaeffer teaches us an apologetic of beauty that is missed by many scholars. Once understood, the strength of thought and the power of the clarification of the historic Christian position utterly confounds the very foundations of Atheism. Moreover, for the believer, when realized, it adds tremendous edification to one's soul.

Introduction

Before we consider the thought of Francis Schaeffer and it's grasp on the apologetic value of beauty, I first would like to address an example of how I think Dr. Schaeffer has been largely misunderstood in this area. The example came about, upon attending an apologetics conference. As part of one of the plenary speaker's general introduction to himself and the apologetics at his university, he somewhat jokingly, but seriously, mentioned from the stage that at the university, they have two types of apologetics, manly and girly apologetics. Amongst the manly apologetics he mentioned his own work and preferred colleagues. Then among the girly apologetics he mentioned Francis Schaeffer, and others. One might think that I was offended at this, but rather I was intrigued to understand what he really meant. Was this just an off-handed joking remark, or was this a real opinion? Later, at a dinner I was invited to, I had the opportunity to give him a hard time about the comment. However, rather than downplay the

notion as a joke, he seemed to double down. He essentially explained in his opinion, the fascination with the arts and more sweeping cultural apologetics were more “girly” and that the real “manly” work, was in the more fine detailed, heavy lifting, work of historical and detailed apologetic studies, (at least this is the best summary I can provide, given the brief and somewhat loud restaurant discussion). Those present, did not take his remarks in any way to mean that Schaeffer’s apologetic was a lesser apologetic, but rather that it simply wasn’t the most “manly” of apologetics. They did not perceive this at all as any kind of a slight against Schaeffer. Albeit, it is easy to see that it might be construed as a degradation. This example is often how controversy starts, and thus is the reason why I chose not to mention this well known scholar’s name. This scholar expressed no dislike for Francis Schaeffer or anyone else. Nor did it seem like he had any intent whatsoever to disparage anyone. He was just making an observation which he thought was objective from a “manly” point of view.

However, my personal concern is that he and others are making a critical error in understanding Francis Schaeffer. So my response hereafter is not an attempt to disparage them, about idle words, but rather to challenge that notion in a healthy way and then move on to clarify Dr. Schaeffer’s position. It is my opinion that an honest evaluation of the notion is worth our consideration and very relevant to properly clarifying Schaeffer’s apologetic. It will also shed some light on our culture.

Firstly, I would challenge you, when you come into contact with a view that differs from your own, that you not just rush to a rebuttal, but that you also try to see in what way you might empathize with the argument and attempt to find truth in it’s assessment. Even if that argument seems intrinsically wrong. This is what I have attempted to do since I heard the remarks. So in what ways, are these remarks true? It is perhaps true that women are more inclined toward artistic sensibilities. It might be perhaps true that women may be more apt to summarize in

generalizations rather than fine details. It is plausibly true that Dr. Schaeffer and some of his followers perhaps show more empathy than many male scholars, which might be considered more of a female trait. It might be possible to construe that scholars, like Schaeffer, are less academic than more formal academic apologist. These are all good possible subjective points, but they are unfortunately plagued by generalizations and not necessarily fact. Thus, one is not able to discern any absolutely truthful grounding to give them substantial weight. They are worth consideration, yes, but again, probably not of significant weight.

Now then, what are the flaws? Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, the notion that Schaeffer's apologetic is "girly" conveys a chauvinistic sentiment. I am not implying that the scholar is a chauvinist, I am just saying that the remark is in the very least chauvinistically insensitive. Saying that some apologetics is more "manly" than others, plays into stereotypes that are not necessarily conducive to objectivity. Secondly, by nature of having chauvinistic sentiment, the remarks by default seemingly marginalize Schaeffer's apologetic. As I have said, this did not seem to be the intent. However, if one assumes that by "manly" apologetic work, one is working harder than "girly" apologetic work, the work itself is considered to be lesser. Yet of course again, this is chauvinistic in content as we know that some women out work men. Thirdly, the notion is a hasty generalization fallacy. While one can assume certain notions about apologetics that might have more affinity toward "girly" traits, it is a false assumption to assume that all of such apologetics holds to "girly" traits or that all such traits are intrinsically "girly." Fourthly, by making such a generalization, the scholar is in fact contradicting himself, for he is making a somewhat shallow and sweeping analysis, which is largely what he seems to imply that "girly" apologist do. Moreover, by not getting down into the nitty gritty of the "manly" scholarly work of analyzing Francis Schaeffer and others, he puts in this category, he can be accused of lesser study himself. Finally, the notion seems to have a general misunderstanding

of the role of a scholar like Francis Schaeffer. Thus, the remark shows signs of being a categorical error. Dr. Schaeffer, being more of a “popularizer apologist,” was able to take his apologetic thought into audiences that the academy was seldom able to reach in his time. While Dr. Schaeffer was not a formal institutional apologist, he was on the other hand the inspiration for many of our predominant scholar and institutional apologist today. Men who are of that class who have been deeply influenced by Francis Schaeffer in various degrees include, but are not limited to, John Piper, Al Mohler, Chuck Colson, R.C. Sproul, and even William Lane Craig (with respect to cultural apologetics). Numerous others likewise claim his influence. Not to mention the numerous scholars that are directly connected with L’Abri itself. Yet surely, all of these previous men listed would qualify for the scholar’s “manly” apologetics classification. However, female scholars like Nancy Pearcey have likewise continued a strong apologetic movement as well. It should be noted to more firmly state the point, that we at Francis Schaeffer Studies have regularly spoken with academic scholar after scholar who have said that it was Schaeffer who first opened their mind to think Christianly without feeling like they were committing intellectual suicide.¹ This cannot be discounted.

Again, now lest someone think that I would wish to disparage anyone, let it be clearly understood that my goal in recounting this story is to highlight what I see is in many ways, as a symptom of a cultural misunderstanding in apologetics in respect to Dr. Schaeffer. I bring up the scholar’s remarks by way of contrast for the purpose and hope of speaking to a correction and a clarification of Schaeffer’s thought. This scholar is not the first to make an invalid analysis of Dr. Schaeffer in this or in other areas. Nor, will he be the last. What is rather more important is to note that the remark is symptomatic of some forgone conclusions that are often made. These

¹ See the Francis Schaeffer Legacy Project on francisschaefferstudies.org.

notions are not just made by the given unnamed scholar, but by numerous people I have talked to. Thus, to me it is worth the clarification.

So what is Schaeffer's view? Well, despite what some might be apt to think, Schaeffer's grasp of the apologetic value of beauty is not just about aesthetics. His works in general are not just relegated to one sphere either. In fact, a survey of his entire works would show one that he only wrote one small book specifically on art and his works cover everything from pollution to government.

As to more specifically his apologetic with respect to beauty, it is not just about "art with a capital A," as Schaeffer used to say. Seeing Schaeffer's apologetic as merely all about art, culture, and sweeping analysis is a tremendous misunderstanding that is all too common. Schaeffer was not trying to just make a mere art apologetic. Rather, Schaeffer's apologetic of beauty is an all inclusive notion of "beauty realized" in contrast to a fallen world. This beauty is not just the physical things that we can see, although it includes those as well, but more significantly includes the beauty of the light of Revelation and also the light of the results of the Gospel. Schaeffer was concerned that in all our apologetic fervor, we were prone to miss the human beings before us. What he called, "the beauty of human relationships," can have lasting implications. As we shall see, this is at the heart of evangelism, and also at the heart of all worthwhile apologetics.

The Foundational Aspects of Beauty in Apologetic

True Christianity produces beauty as well as truth²

² Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Three, A Christian View of Spirituality*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 417. (Book: *Two Contents, Two Realities*)

Dr. Schaeffer's first analysis of reality is that God is objectively there. For all human beings, the question before us is either God is there, or He is not. There is no other basis or question. Thus, when the non-believer holds that God is not there, he has no explanation for what is before him or for himself. He cannot explain the beauty before him. He cannot explain the beauty in himself. He cannot explain the beauty of creation, the beauty of others, or the nature and beauty in the good that he sees. He admires it. He desires it. He borrows what it gives him, but he is hopeless to explain it. He can see God's creative declaration, in which Scripture states, "God saw all that He had made and it was very good" (Gen. 1:3), but he has no viable explanation to make practical sense of it. He holds to a belief in love, but cannot truthfully explain what love is or the beauty thereof. He holds to views of good, but he cannot tell you truthfully what good is. Neither can he explain the beauty of what is good. He doesn't even have a basis for truth to tell you truthfully how to discern beauty rightly. He is hopeless in all of these efforts.

Thus, Dr. Schaeffer held that, man is "shut in." He said, "There is nowhere that man can go that he can escape the things of grace that God has given him to shut him in."³ This is God's testimony to man. He has shut man in with beauty! Moreover, when we look at man himself, Schaeffer says we see a uniqueness to him. Schaeffer often referred to this as man's "mannishness." He here starts with his creativity. Here is what Dr. Schaeffer said in a recorded interview:

When we speak of personality we can think of many, many things where people are said different from non-life or different kinds of life... I would put the first as creativity. By creativity, of course I mean the arts, and I would say one of the distinctives of people as against everything else is that all people are creative. Nothing else is creative. You never find the animals as creative. It's repetitive. It's only man. Everywhere you go, every

³ Schaeffer, Francis, Why I am a Christian Pt 2, Reclaiming the World (video).

culture, every man, every woman, every child. They're creative. In the artistic sense, but not just art with a capital A. The flower arrangement, the little child making his drawings. View little children! What are they doing? Making drawings. They're creative. As far as creativity, not as the level, but that's as much creative as Michelangelo. Then I move over and I look to other cultures... it is very different from what we would create, but it's creativity. I find a similarity between that and myself. The people who made that are me, if you understand what I'm saying. Now then, everywhere you find creativity. I think it's the greatest mark, because God is the Creator. He has made those who reflect Him on this high level of creativeness. So everything, even that which is created by a non-Christian may be blaspheming, yet the very fact that he creates is reflecting who he is as made in the image of God, whether he knows it or rejects it.⁴

What Dr. Schaeffer is describing is an intrinsic beauty in man, where he, as Schaeffer says, "creates after his Creator."⁵ This has not only a tremendous value in communicating that we cannot be a mere biological machine, as a naturalistic worldview propagates, but that we are extremely significant. Listen as he explains further:

... to me the most marvelous thing of all creativeness is not artistic and cultural creativeness. As you know I have spent much of my life enjoying this. [Yet] the greatest point of creativity is that we are significant and can influence history. This is startling when you think about it. Nothing else does, in the same way, by choice. So consequently, in my mind... creativity is the center thing of humanness.⁶

⁴ Schaeffer, Francis, Why I am a Christian Pt 2, Reclaiming the World (video).

⁵ This notion can be found in Schaeffer's book *True Spirituality*.

⁶ Ibid.

This all has tremendous apologetic value. The Christian worldview has the answer for why beauty exist and the dignity of man. Yet it also has an answer to why those who live under the dark notion of man as mere animal-machines cannot find ultimate answers. They are in tension with the world that God has made.

Beauty in Contrast to Despair in Apologetics

When mankind looks around himself and finds no basis for beauty, we can see that he also finds despair as he tries to live by philosophies that are not true to the real world that God has made. For example, man wants beauty in justice, but he has no basis for ethics or law. He wants beauty in love, but often love is characterized by personal and lustful pursuits rather than deep devotion and sacrifice as the Christian position teaches. Their solutions often drive them toward authoritarian and inhuman agendas. They are trying to solve the riddle of the biological-machine, yet fail at every turn. It always ends with impersonal results.

...the more they become aware of humanity the more they realize its facelessness. Out of this springs a real fear of the impersonal, and they are right to be afraid.⁷

If the universe we are living in is what the materialistic humanists say it is, then with our reason (when we stop to think about it) we could find absolutely no way to have meaning or morality or hope or beauty. This would plunge us into despair. We would have to take seriously the challenge of Albert Camus (1913–1960) in the first sentence of *The Myth of*

⁷ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Three, A Christian View of Spirituality*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 332. (Book *True Spirituality*)

Sisyphus: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Why stay alive in an absurd universe?⁸

When man realizes honestly the reality of this deep place of despair, the walls close in. He finds no beauty in his fallen system. His tension is that the image of God in him desires fulfillment of beauty, justice, love and culture, but his methods, which treat man as less than man, as an animal-machine, often produce only deeper tension.

There is a real tension in being a modern man because no one can live at ease in the area of despair. A Christian knows that this is because man has been made in the image of God and though man is fallen, separated from God by his true guilt, yet nevertheless he has not become a machine. The fallenness of man does not lead to machineness, but to fallen-manness. Therefore, when people feel this utter despair, there is a titanic pressure,⁹

This point of tension is something real in all of mankind. Our fallenness is at war with the image of God, in which we were created. I have heard many an evangelist and apologist state that men have an empty space, that can only be filled by God. Yet, be sure of this, they often don't see it! People deflect this tension.

Man today seeks to deflect this tension by saying that he is no more than a machine. But if he were no more than a machine, he would find no difficulty in proceeding step by step

⁸ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Five, A Christian View of the West*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 376. (Book: *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*)

⁹ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 68. (Book: *The God Who is There*)

down the line to the logical conclusion of his non-Christian presuppositions. Man is not a machine, however, even if he says he is.¹⁰

As Schaeffer says elsewhere, “They build a roof over their head.”¹¹ We must learn to not only ask questions that help them see the consequences of their worldview, but we must also acknowledge the way that they borrow beauty. They cannot live consistently with their worldview. They cannot live like an animal. They can’t live a machine. So they live in contradiction. We must both praise them for where they have realized that they “ought to live civilized” and “ought to love and respect others” and yet however, we must also ask them where the basis of that belief comes from.

Beauty in Human Relationships

In contrast to this tension, we as believers must hold up the Biblical standard. We must show beauty and shine light into their darkness, by following what we believe to be doctrinally true, that they are created in the image of God.

This attitude is to operate on all levels. I meet a man in a revolving door. How much time do I have with him? Maybe ten seconds. I am to treat him well. We look at him. We do not think consciously in every case that this man is made in the image of God, but, having ground into our bones and into our consciousness (as well as our doctrinal

¹⁰ Ibid. 135.

¹¹ This teaching can be found in Schaeffer’s book, *The God Who is There*.

statement) that he is made in the image of God, we will treat him well in those ten seconds which we have.¹²

Moreover, we must make this proclamation as “image recognizers” not only to the non-believer, but also to each other.

If we are called upon to love our neighbor as ourselves when he is not a Christian, how much more—ten thousand times ten thousand times more—should there be beauty in the relationships between true Bible-believing Christians, something so beautiful that the world would be brought up short! We must hold our distinctives. Some of us are Baptists; some of us hold to infant baptism; some of us are Lutheran, and so on. But to true Bible-believing Christians across all the lines, in all the camps, I emphasize: if we do not show beauty in the way we treat each other, then in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of our own children, we are destroying the truth we proclaim.¹³

Beauty in the Covenants

Schaeffer was not just basing this belief on idle notions. Rather, his thought in this area is deeply Covenantal.

[A] thing to notice from the biblical viewpoint is God’s covenant of creation. God has given us certain written covenants in the Scripture. He has made tremendous

¹² Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Three, A Christian View of Spirituality*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 418. (Book: *Two Contents, Two Realities*)

¹³ *Ibid.* 418.

promises...But with God's written covenants there is also the covenant of creation. The covenant in the Scriptures is a propositional, verbalized covenant; the covenant of creation rests upon the way God made things. God is going to deal with them as He made them. God will not violate either covenant. He will always deal with a plant as a plant, with an animal as an animal, with a machine as a machine, and with a man as a man, not violating the orders of creation. He will not ask the machine to behave like a man, neither will He deal with man as though he were a machine.¹⁴

By highlighting God's covenant arrangement, Schaeffer helps us realize the true order of its beauty. God has set in motion an order that He, Himself, will not break. This is the integrity of God and the testimony we may recall from Romans 1: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." (Rom 1: 20) It is a testimony of Himself, and also His beautiful work. He calls all men to acknowledge it. Most of all, us who believe.

Thus God treats His creation with integrity: each thing in its own order, each thing the way He made it. If God treats His creation in that way, should we not treat our fellow-creatures with a similar integrity? If God treats the tree like a tree, the machine like a machine, the man like a man, shouldn't I, as a fellow-creature, do the same—treating each thing in integrity in its own order? And for the highest reason: because I love God—I love the One who has made it! Loving the Lover who has made it, I have respect for the thing He has made.¹⁵

¹⁴ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Five, A Christian View of the West*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 34. (Book: *Pollution and the Death of Man*)

¹⁵ Ibid.

This must be a conscious exercise of recognizing the beauty of God's order and not imposing this position mechanically.

Let us emphasize—this is not pantheistic; nevertheless, this respect for all created things must be consciously exercised. Consciously we are to treat each thing in its own order and on its own level. Like so many things in the Christian life, this attitude does not come mechanically, because God is treating us like man and expects us to choose and act like man. Thus we must consciously deal with the integrity of each thing that we touch.¹⁶

Have we grappled with our integrity? Have we really thought about how true we are to creation? If we are first of all not acknowledging beauty ourselves, are we not inconsistent? Yet moreover, as apologist, are we not cold in our hearts? We must guard against mechanical arguments that would falsely demonstrate the character of God. Is it wrong to speak of method and good tactics in this war? Absolutely not. Yet, we must always be careful to maintain beauty and graciousness. It is not only good apologetics, it is also distinctly Christian.

Conclusion: Beauty in Life & Apologetics

When we encounter those who are struggling with their worldview and may not even realize the tension, we must learn the compassion involved in addressing their situation. Learning a compassion is essential. It starts with us as apologist learning to live and show beauty in

¹⁶ Ibid.

contrast to what is all about us and those we are speaking with. This is the context into which Dr. Schaeffer invokes this next quote:

the Christian's life is to be an art work. The Christian's life is to be a thing of truth and also a thing of beauty in the midst of a lost and despairing world.¹⁷

This reality we are bringing forth, should thus likewise play out in our apologetic:

Our walk should be such that even the blasphemer must know inwardly that we have dealt fairly with him. Rightness and love must go hand in hand or there is no real power. Showing a man to be wrong is only the first step; the final aim must be to lead him to full obedience to Christ. In dealing with the unbeliever our final desire for him must be his salvation, no matter how hopeless that seems. No man is beyond the infinite grace of God.¹⁸

Likewise, our lives and witness should shine into total culture as an example to a watching world:

...we are surrounded by a world in which personality is increasingly eroded. If we who have become God's children do not show Him to be personal in our lives, then in practice we are denying His existence. People should see a beauty among Christians in

¹⁷ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Two, A Christian View of the Bible as Truth*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 417. (Book: *Art and the Bible*)

¹⁸ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Secret of the Power of the Enjoyment of the Lord*, The Sunday School Times. 1951.

their practice of the centrality of personal relationships—in the whole spectrum of life and in the whole culture.¹⁹

As we think about all of this, how do we practically apply this to our apologetic? Well, let me give you an example. I was talking to an Atheist friend recently and one thing that I have realized is that he is passionately full of opinions and positions about how things should and should not be in society. In fact, this is true of most atheist. So I first acknowledged this and praised him for it. Then secondly, I asked him a very pointed question. I said, “I can see that you believe this is how we ought to treat others. I wholeheartedly agree. However, while I know why I, as a Christian, believe we ought to treat each other this way, I however, do not know on what basis you believe that people ought to treat each other this way.” The conversation also eventually led to the inverse discussion as well. I said, “I agree with you that the abuses that you mentioned are wrong, yet I do not know on what basis you believe that these abuses are wrong.” This is a matter of not necessarily rebuttal, but of directing their attention to acknowledge the real world. They see the good, but they don’t know the basis for it. They see the bad, but they don’t have the basis for judgement of it. It is our job to call them to acknowledge the reality before them. That reality is part of God’s revelation to them, and it is speaking!

In summary, It is hoped that by taking this exploration through Dr. Schaeffer’s thought with respect to his apologetic of beauty, one can see the tremendous misunderstanding in seeing Dr. Schaeffer’s apologetic as merely about aesthetics. Seeing his apologetic as merely all about art, culture, and sweeping analysis is to minimize his thought to just a few small spheres. What Dr. Schaeffer is addressing regarding beauty is on a massive scope that touches

¹⁹ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. 174. (Book: *The God Who is There*)

the entirety of life. May we follow his lead in this exploration and become deeply practiced in living, teaching and demonstrating beauty before the watching world. May the world acknowledge and see this beauty ever before them! May Christ be acknowledge and glorified and may we see the true beauty as the light of the Gospel expands throughout the earth!