

Dr. Francis Schaeffer on Doubt in the Scope of the Work of Apologetics

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When one thinks of the word doubt, it is often with a certain level of concern. Doubt, especially in the scope of Apologetics, is not only questionable, but taboo. We question it, in the persons we debate, and in persons we may even encounter who are believers, and especially in other apologetists. The lack of doubt, conversely, is often seen as a level of spiritual strength. Moreover, doubt is often generally seen as sinful. Thus, it might beg the question, how should it be understood in the scope of Apologetics and even in the life of the apologetist. Dr. Schaeffer, thankfully, brings much of the matter to light, not just in his teaching, but moreover in his apologetic methods. To this end, I want us to examine his teaching on the subject together and thereby, I believe we will find strength in ministry.

Doubt & Sin

As we begin, lest one might think Schaeffer to be unorthodox, we need to clarify that Schaeffer did in fact hold that doubt was sin. This is evidenced by several remarks on Scripture he made. Firstly, with respect to Eve:

Eve doubted God; that was her sin. The outward disobedience was the result. Her initial sin was the inward doubting. By her doubting she called God a liar. Eve doubted God, and I as a child of God am now to do exactly the opposite: I am to believe Him. *Eve doubted, and mankind in revolt doubts God.* To believe Him, not just when I accept Christ as Savior, but every moment, one moment at a time—this is the Christian life, and this is true spirituality.¹

Here we can see that not only did Dr. Schaeffer see doubt as sin, but also that believing in God and trusting in Him is part of the Christian life. Yet, note however, that Dr. Schaeffer is clear to cast the implications of Eve's doubt onto the fallen world. This is mankind's condition in the fallen state. This same doubt now results in general unbelief in humanity. Schaeffer likewise, commented on how the Lord dealt with Thomas and the implications of that exchange:

¹ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Three, A Christian View of Spirituality*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books., p285. (Book: *True Spirituality*).

Because Thomas insisted on seeing and touching Jesus in His resurrected body, we have been given in the Gospels an even clearer evidence of the Resurrection than we would otherwise have had. But Jesus is saying that Thomas should have believed without this additional evidence, because the evidence available to Thomas before was in itself sufficient. In other words, before Thomas saw and heard Jesus in this way, he was in the same position as we are today. Both he at that time and we today have the same sufficient witness of those who have seen and heard and who have had the opportunity to touch the resurrected Christ. In fact, in the light of this sufficient and sure witness we, like Thomas, are disobedient if we do not bow. We are without excuse.²

I want to call your attention to the subtlety of Dr. Schaeffer's teaching here. On one hand, he shows how God, in His Sovereignty, used the doubt of Thomas to provide further evidence of the resurrection in Scripture, something which we can be thankful for. The physical evidence of the visible recognition of the wounds of the risen Lord in the Scriptural accounts are tremendous, in spite of the doubt of Thomas. Yet, Schaeffer takes it a step further, to begin to open our understanding, when he indicates that we are at a vantage point with sufficient evidence, even without witnessing the actual wounds of Christ first hand. What is Schaeffer getting at? Moreover, what does Christ mean, when we remember His words, of "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"³ in the account where Thomas finally professes, "My Lord and My God!"

The Testimonies

Dr. Schaeffer regularly held to three witnesses⁴ in his apologetic. The first witness he labelled, "The universe and it's forms" and the second, "the mannishness of man." What Dr. Schaeffer regularly put forward by these terms was that before mankind there is testimony taking place both inside and out of his existence. The universe itself is declaring God, and man's own existence is testifying as well. Listen as he explains this profound witness, that speaks to both believers, doubters and skeptics alike. Here, in context, Dr. Schaeffer is describing seekers in Eastern mysticism, but the same holds true elsewhere in his works in relation to mankind in general:

God has also created man as a real, personal being, and he possesses a "mannishness" from which he can never escape. On the basis of their own worldview often these experience-seekers are neither sure the external world is there, nor that man as man is there. But I have come to the conclusion that despite their intellectual doubts, many of them have had a true experience of the reality of the external world that exists, and/or the "mannishness" that exists. They can do this precisely because this is how God has

² Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Five, A Christian View of the West*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p402. (Book: *Whatever Happened to the Human Race*)

³ John 20:29

⁴ The word "witness" is my word to group them, Dr. Schaeffer did not classify them this way.

made man, in His own image, able to experience the real world and man's "mannishness." Thus they have hit upon something which exists, and it is neither nothing, nor is it God...when they experience the "redness" of the rose, they are having the experience of the external world.⁵

This "redness" or even the mere emotion of the experience itself, is unique to the human experience. Schaeffer further elaborates with another illustration:

In the same way, lovers on the left bank of the Seine in Paris experience the "mannishness" of man when they fall in love and yet cry because they do not believe love exists. If I met any of these, I would put my hand gently on their shoulders and say, "You are separated from God if you do not accept Christ as your Savior, but at this moment you understand something real about the universe. *Though your system may say love does not exist, your own experience shows that it does.*"

To Schaeffer's point, the very basis of humanness is speaking to both reality and questions of origin. Where does love come from? Why do I feel emotion when I see beauty, as in the "redness" of the rose? Our manishness (humanness) speaks of the origins of personality, which defy the concept of origins in mere natural causes. The Naturalist has no answer for this. The order of our minds, in which we exist to even think about, comprehend, and have discourse about love and beauty are testifying of concepts beyond ourselves. These do not come about in the material universe anywhere else in all existence that we know of and are aware. Moreover, Christianity synthesizes who we are without degrading our humanity. Dr. Schaeffer regularly asked us to consider that man is not merely an animal as Darwinistic positions propose and not merely a machine, that can be manipulated, as some Behaviorist prepose. Christianity alone holds man in his proper place, in the place of dignity and honor.

Finally, Schaeffer likewise, of course, held to the position of the truth and testimony of Scripture and his position is further established on that basis in his teaching of what he called "The Historic Christian Position." Which applies the principles to the questions that man has. Questions like, "Where did I come from? How do I explain man's dilemma? Where am I going?" Eventually, one realizes that Dr. Schaeffer has translated the historic positions of "Creation, Fall, Redemption and Glorification" into the common language of his day to meet men and women where they are.

Nevertheless, as firm as Dr. Schaeffer is on the testimonies of God, both in nature and revelation, and Schaeffer's concise teaching on doubt as sin, one might think that Schaeffer might hold to a position that would not be tolerant of doubt. However, surprisingly, this is not the case. So then one might ask, how can Schaeffer entertain doubt in the slightest? Sin is sin, is it not? Moreover, how did he work through doubt in himself and in the life of others?

Before we answer that question, let us briefly review Schaeffer's history in this area. Firstly, we must say that it is quite clear that Schaeffer experienced periods of doubt and

⁵ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p24. (Book: *The God Who is There*)

despair. His story of having done a significant ten years of ministry as a pastor in the states before coming to question his faith during his time as a missionary is known among scholars and readers of Dr. Schaeffer, as the basis of his spiritual transformation. The hours in his hayloft, pacing at L'Abri in the 1950s, where he took things back to a bare agnosticism and rebuilt and reexamined his entire thinking are documented in his book *True Spirituality*. Moreover, Schaeffer regularly welcomed various persons dealing with doubt, despair, questions and hardships into his home. They were not always non-believers, but often there were those who were told "Don't ask questions, just believe." Some of these would come having accepted Christ, but not really knowing whether God exist or not. Yet, rather than shrug off people's questions and doubts, I believe his general operating conceptual position is summed up in the following thought, where he states,...

Men must know that with integrity we have faced the dark path they are treading.⁶

One story that was recounted to me was when one traveller came to L'Arbi seeking to get his questions answered and flatly told Dr. Schaeffer that he did not want to discuss Schaeffer's God or his religion or his Bible. To which Dr. Schaeffer merely invited him to stay on an ask his questions. To many apologist, this would have been the end of the exchange. Yet for Schaeffer, it was the beginning. Why?

The man eventually came to Christ and reportedly served at L'Abri. There is something to say for working with people as they are. It will be messy, it will not be clean. Dr. Schaeffer compared the life of the Christian and helping others engulfed by the world spirit to be like walking through mud, denoting that one cannot walk through the mud and not get dirty.⁷

Other such illustrations come to us from the posthumous work, *The Letters of Francis Schaeffer*, which document his responses to people in doubt of hope in God and concerns seeking answers to numerous questions. As we study some of his responses, a significant understanding comes to light. Firstly, consider the following insight he shares with a person:

If our Christianity is only a bare intellectual system, then again when the winds of adversity come, the certainty of our faith will be blown away. In other words, there must be a sufficient intellectual basis of truth (since Christianity deals with truth), and yet it must not stop only with bare intellectualism.⁸

Dr. Schaeffer here, indicates that our toil with truth, although absolutely necessary, if left to its own end, will deteriorate our faith in a Fallen world. If we are wondering why Schaeffer holds to this notion, the next quote will provide an answer for us:

⁶ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. P145. (Book: *The God Who is There*)

⁷ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Three, A Christian View of Spirituality*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p53 (Book: *No Little People*, Sermon: *Walking Through the Mud*)

⁸ Schaeffer, Francis A. *Letters of Francis Schaeffer*, Crossway Books, Westchester, IL. 1985. p168.

We do live in a fallen world--one that is abnormal from that which God has made. Each of us has certain results of this abnormality; each of us has a different mix concerning the way the results of living in this abnormal world affect us. With some it is more physical, with some it is more psychological, with some it is more intellectual, with some it is more moral. Each of us has some of these, but with each of us certain aspects of the abnormality have a stronger effect upon us than others.⁹

As we remember Dr. Schaeffer's remarks on the consequences of Eve's doubt and correlated it with what we just read, we start to see something of significance. Dr. Schaeffer explains an important dilemma in the human condition when we take the two aforementioned quotes together. On one hand we are battling for truth, and on the other hand, we are battling against the effects of the abnormal world. We are not on an even playing field, in fact, the deck is stacked against us. It is important to note that Dr. Schaeffer spells out in his work *True Spirituality*, that we are free from the bonds of sin, but we are not always free from the *results* of the bonds of sin. We still have to live in a fallen world. Our various struggles to affirm truth in our lives are the nature of an uncomfortable state of grace, whereby the entire world is in transition. We are certainly called to believe God, yet we are also in the midst of the battle. Much like our Lord, standing before the grave of Lazarus weeping, we too must acknowledge the temporary despair. Here is more from Dr. Schaeffer on the subject:

We all go through times of ups and downs physically and psychologically,... each of us goes through these times in some degree since we all are abnormal from the affects of the Fall. For myself, when I am in a depression, what I do is to turn back to the promises that, because Christ's death on the cross has infinite value, once we accept Christ as Savior He will never let us go.

We also have the promise that as we bring our moment by moment sins under the finished work of Christ, these sins are gone, and we can have a quiet conscience concerning them. Thus as Christians, we have endless new starts.¹⁰

Consider what is being said here. Dr. Schaeffer is saying that we, on this level, must be about the constant diligence of acknowledging moment-by-moment sins which may be more numerous than we realize, but that we can have a quiet conscience, as we constantly bring them before our Lord, our mediator, who has covered them all with His work. This is applying the truth of Redemption!

Then we also have God's promise that there will be a time in the future when the marks of the abnormality, in ourselves and in nature, will be completely healed upon the basis of the work of Christ... There will be a time in the future when the redemption of Christ will cure these things perfectly--just as now, already having accepted Christ as

⁹ Schaeffer, Francis A. *Letters of Francis Schaeffer*, Crossway Books, Westchester, IL. 1985. p142.

¹⁰ Schaeffer, Francis A. *Letters of Francis Schaeffer*, Crossway Books, Westchester, IL. 1985. p14.

Savior, our true moral guilt has been removed and we are in a relationship with God in this present moment. Thus, on the basis of the work of Christ, we have the present fact that God is now our Father, but we look to the future for the full redemption of our whole being.”¹¹

Dr. Schaeffer’s instruction to remember both the intellectual truths of the Christian position and also the promises of Scripture should bring us comfort, especially as we note that Dr. Schaeffer himself dealt with times of doubt and depression. Dr. Schaeffer is challenging us both to take the Fall seriously and moreover to stand on the promises of God in our lives for both strength and assurance. We should remember the words of Paul here, that remind us that we all deal with earthly afflictions and yet are sustained by God’s grace:

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.¹²

Please understand, for Dr. Schaeffer, this was not a mere mindset, but something that became a lifestyle, recalling God’s strength in the midst of the fallen world, full of pitfalls, doubts and disturbances all the while, answering the door to those whom the Lord has sent. Thus, there must also be a supernatural aspect to our stance against the adversity. Thinking of this I was reminded that Dr. Schaeffer utilized an illustration of two chairs. One chair, being the chair of naturalism and the other of supernatural. Consider the following quote:

But let us notice that this emphasis must not be just a matter of doctrine. We must really sit in the supernaturalist’s chair and pray. If a Christian does not pray, if he does not live in an attitude of prayer, then no matter what he says about his doctrine, no matter how many naughty names he calls the unbelieving materialist, the Christian has moved over and is sitting in the materialist’s chair. He is living in unfaith if he is afraid to act upon the supernatural in the present life.¹³

“Are we ourselves beset with troubles that challenge our trust in God? How often do we ourselves neglect the spiritual disciplines?” These are realistic questions we must ask ourselves. “How often do we neglect prayer in the midst of troubles or difficulty?” If we are struggling in the area of doubt, are we not un nourished, either naturally, because of the effects of the fall, or because we have not strived in prayer? Moreover, to Schaeffer’s point, we have to ask, “Are we being un--*faith--ful*?” Are we really in doubt, and sitting in the chair of the naturalist, when we are not practicing belief and trusting the communion with the Spirit of God? Do we

¹¹ Schaeffer, Francis A. *Letters of Francis Schaeffer*, Crossway Books, Westchester, IL. 1985. p141-142.

¹² 2 Cor 12:9-10

¹³ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Four, A Christian View of the Church*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. P297 (Book: *Death in the City*).

truly believe in the God who is there? As Apologist, this should be a constant area of vigilance, as the evidence alone is not a sufficient base. We base our understanding in truth, yet the truth must have aid to overcome the obstacles of the fallen human condition. Please understand, we should not be casting guilt on ourselves in this area, but rather, be about taking the fall seriously with all earnestness and watchfulness, running to the Lord at every moment of concern.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must say, that it is not that Dr. Schaeffer holds to either a compromised or defeatist view of doubt, but rather a realistic one. His deep grasp of personal pain and suffering and the impact of the Fall provide us tremendous insight and also hope as we minister to others and find nourishment ourselves.

For us, as apologist, are we not face to face with the true reality of our war? The one not “battling with flesh and blood?” We should not parade around with what Dr. Schaeffer sometimes called a, “false triumphalism,” with our collection of evidences, but rather embrace a true diligence in the war within our minds that translates into our heart condition. We are not only to stand for truth, but to humbly apply the truth ourselves in all integrity. This will not only nourish our soul, but it will give us an intense compassion for the individuals in front of us. As you most likely know, Dr. Schaeffer was known for his compassion for the lost. I submit to you that the fact that he dealt with the truly devastating “dark path” with integrity, is why he was so often troubled to tears and also yet so effective. This same source should likewise move us as well, in our service for the kingdom, and draw us nearer to the heart of Christ. For when we consider the models in Scripture, such as the example of Paul, who endured, but with the promise from the Lord that, “My grace is sufficient for thee” and the Lord Himself, “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,” then suddenly we see Schaeffer’s point.

Above all else, thanks be to God that Christ bore this suffering with a perfect and sound mind, overcoming all temptation of doubt for us, accepting the Father’s cup of wrath, and bearing the burden, even unto death. Herein alone, we will find comfort for both our weary minds, in times of distress, and words of compassion for those that we seek to comfort with the Good News of our Lord. Let us all pray like the father seeking aid for his son from Jesus,

I believe Lord, help thou my unbelief!¹⁴

¹⁴ Mark 9:24