

Francis Schaeffer on Apologetics in Dystopia

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Abstract

Whether our culture reflects, 1984 or the Brave New World, Schaeffer saw tremendous alignment in such dystopian tales and current social movements of his day and our own. This lecture will explore both his insight and predictions, but also the reality forecasted in dystopian tensions with reality. Moreover, we will find direction for our current cultural struggles in Schaeffer's surprising insights.

Introduction: Tension in Our Time

Our time is a world of tension. We do not have to look very far to find the turmoil within our culture or question where the problems exist. We see them every day, directly before us, on the news, on social media and perhaps even in the dynamics of our work and family lives. We are not yet fully in the throws of the Orwellian realms of *1984* or the Huxleyan notions of *Brave New World*, but their startling notions of the future dystopia are marching forward on human reality every day. Moreover, they are carried on by the cultural adoption of the changes in media that Marshall McLuhan exclaimed in *The Medium is the Massage*,¹ a dynamic Schaeffer pointed to in his works. Our ways of thinking have been so transformed through the visual enterprise of multimedia sensation that it nearly saturates most of our leisure.

Dr. Schaeffer was regularly listening to such discussions on the secular “prophets” of his generation, those preceding our own, that the church largely ignored. Here the amalgamation of Dr. Schaeffer’s own prophetic insight can also be found, as we see how he was piecing the numerous trends together. Yet for Dr. Schaeffer, it was not only that he saw the history and development, but he also saw the foundational erosion of True-Truth and the Christian consensus that once held influence in our society. His insights focused not only on what was coming, but also the Biblical prescription. Now is the time these insights truly need to be reexamined and contemplated, as now more than ever, the natural results of the fallen worldview perspectives they analyzed are revealing their outcomes.

¹ For the uninitiated, the word “Massage” instead of “Message” is intentional. Reportedly after a printing error, McLuhan advised the publisher to leave it, as it summed up the thought quite well. The medium does in fact shape and massage us.

Section 1: Tensions with Truth and Humanity

Before we decline into a pessimism of thought, lamenting our culture's absolute decline and begin any further withdrawal from society, we must be reminded about what Dr. Schaeffer teaches about tension. Tension is not merely a place of conflict. It is not a sign for us to retreat. Rather, where tension exists, Dr. Schaeffer says we can speak. Tension is the soil in which truth thrives. Tension is the compost that contrasts the beauty of the growth that results from truth. Yet to understand how, we need to learn to understand what exact tension Dr. Schaeffer is talking about.

Dr. Schaeffer taught that tension is where a person's thoughts and preconceived notions about the world do not align with the world that God has made. This is not a mere creation concept, but one that pertains to the whole of life. Dr. Schaeffer wants us to understand that underneath the broader tensions of the world, there are often foundational tensions that conflict with the reality and truth that God has made. Nancy Pearcey, a student of Dr. Schaeffer, has described Dr. Schaeffer's term of *tension* as a form of collective or personal *cognitive dissonance*² which the world or an individual exhibits. They need God and His truth about reality and oneself, but reject it, often by taking a "leap into non-reason" as Dr. Schaeffer described it. This leap, forces them to put something else in the place of truth. As one will recall from Dr. Schaeffer's teachings, they erect a false roof over their head to protect themselves.³ Sometimes, they even realize their notion and it's false nature, but for the sake of not wanting to violate their system of belief, they continue in this mode of thinking romantically. This sort of leap forms a dualism of truth. There is the idea that one *wants* to believe and then there is the real world. The idea, or false presupposition holds its own idea of truth and the real world, God's truth, speaks through constant revelation against it. This is what Dr. Schaeffer means by tension.

A simple example of this sort of thinking is an Atheist who believes in the Darwinistic notion of "survival of the fittest" but also believes in practicing love toward his wife and children. He might believe in such things as love and beauty, but since there really is no basis for them in his system of belief, he merely romantically practices the notions without the foundation for doing so. In fact, in accordance with his own system, there is no basis for ethics at all. When examined honestly, his "survival of the fittest" notion is equivalent to "dog eat dog" and yet he insists there is something sacred in his notions of family and love. Albeit these notions are borrowed and without base. If he were honest with his own worldview, he could not live with this inconsistency. Moreover, there are no constraints that prevent him from the most vile forms of evil and

² This was in a portion of her answer to me when I asked her this question from the audience and talked with her thereafter at "ReThink Worldviews: Finding Truth" a conference by ReThink315, 04/29/2022,

³ Some will recall the usage of this phrase, "Taking the Roof Off" in the work of Greg Koukl, *Tactics*, which borrows the term from Dr. Schaeffer.

self-serving family abuse. Thus, what is always left, is something inhumane and less than the God-given dignity and humanity the Christian knows.

What is significant therefore, when one considers the aforementioned dystopian writings from authors like Huxley and Orwell, is that this very same struggle is equally present and highlighted by these men. In Huxley's *Brave New World*, there is a noticeable shift that is clarified by the character of the Controller:

Our Ford himself did a great deal to shift the emphasis from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness. Mass production demanded the shift. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can't.⁴

As we can see, this is in direct contrast with Schaeffer's Apologetic and the Christian worldview. In a world of genetically engineered individuals with the happiness sustaining soma drug for when one encounters any number of troubles or tensions, truth is a bygone notion. All that now mattered in the moment for Huxley's populace was comfort and happiness. Yet, what was lost was truth and beauty in the real sense of the words. People would rather be happy and undisturbed than to be troubled with the truth. Moreover, truth is a requirement of beauty. One cannot have beauty if it is a falsehood.

Likewise, in Orwell's *1984*, when Winston is faced with the most horrible tension of the real world versus the doctrine of the Party. During his interrogation, the character O'Brien would make the most boisterous statement:

We control matter because we control the mind. Reality is inside the skull.⁵

Later Winston would wrestle with the self-refuting notion as he struggled with the nature of reality and truth:

The belief that nothing exist outside your own mind—surely there must be some way of demonstrating that it was false. Had it not been exposed long ago as a fallacy? There was even a name for it, which he had forgotten.⁶

The term Winston was looking for was Solipsism, the view or theory that self is all that can be known to exist. In other words, self is the only truth. This modified notion of this idea of reality would allow the Orwellian treatment of dystopia to move in the exact opposite direction of that of *Brave New World*, but with the same agenda of control and loss of humanity. Truth was replaced with self deception, beating down one's humanity

⁴ Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World*, 1st Perennial Classics ed., p228.

⁵ Orwell, George, *1984*, New American Library, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 375 Hudson Street, 1961. p264-265. (Original Copyright Harcourt Inc., 1949)

⁶ Ibid., p266.

being the only option. O'Brien would make another most astonishing remark in this respect:

Progress in our world will be progress toward pain. The old civilizations claimed they were founded on love and justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self abasement. Everything else we shall destroy—everything.⁷

He would later simplify the concept:

If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever!⁸

Contemplating this becomes all the more significant in our time. The current dystopia in reality is neither completely in the realm of blind euphoric happiness or absolute authoritarian mind control, but rather, a hybrid of both, which is most adequately summed up in Dr. Schaeffer's phrase of "arbitrary absolutes." Dr. Schaeffer could see that in our world, the dystopia was never quite as straightforward as a singular model of control or a singular means of manipulation. Rather, the complex workings of the spirit of the age would harness most any beast of burden to get the world there. It would replace the truth of the real world that God has made and the truth about man (something which, combined, Dr. Schaeffer would call True-Truth). It would replace True-Truth with arbitrary absolutes through any path that was expedient with all subtlety. With each step mankind would further lose the truth about itself and its humanness.

With no base for the dignity of the individual, only arbitrary expediency gives whatever dignity is given. And being only arbitrary, expediency can twist and turn at will. Men tend to act ultimately with remarkable consistency to their presuppositions, their worldview. To forget this in regard to a system which consciously rests on the philosophic base of materialism will be to lose not only two eyes, but also one's head.⁹

Dr. Schaeffer aptly analyzed that no matter the non-Christian dystopian system, when one loses the base for the human dignity of the individual, one has to step out into some form of mysticism and only arbitrary solutions are all that are left. The arbitrary solutions will inevitably be in tension with the real world; in tensions with persons made in the image of God. They will be inhumane!

⁷ Ibid., p267.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Five, A Christian View of the West*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p218. (*How Should We Then Live?*)

Section 2: Speaking to Tensions or Truth and Humanity

The power of what Dr. Schaeffer is proposing as a response, begins with something almost counter-intuitive to many Christian perceptions of evangelism. When many people think of evangelism they think of preaching alone. Yet, while, preaching will always be the primary mode of testimony to the revelation of Scripture. We must not forget that in our day and age, there are barriers to hearing the Gospel. This cannot be helped in a fallen world, but it can be acknowledged and addressed in our current dystopia. We should never be making adjustments to be more liked by the world, but rather, to be more effectively heard. There is a fine line between modifying our message and methods to be more effective and merely modifying them to be more popularly relational. Schaeffer is proposing that we speak to tension, in our preaching, but not just in our preaching, but in all our conversation with non-believers with diligence and patience.

These barriers we speak of may even need to be taken down brick by brick. Thus our best and most effective mode of evangelism at times may in fact be the opposite of preaching one-on-one, but instead asking questions. However, knowing what questions to ask involves us first being able to listen and take blows.¹⁰ Yet, what should we be listening for? We have already explained two key factors. The loss of truth and the loss of humanity. As we train ourselves to listen, we must begin to listen for the tensions in truth and the degradation of humanity. Very often they will be linked together. Usually when there is a conflict with truth an inhuman injustice or result will follow.

One can think of the abortion debate. The falsehood is claiming that there is no life in the womb. The inhumanity is the loss of that life and the murder on the hands of all those involved with the abortion. We can argue all day with someone about women's rights, but unless we speak by asking the real question targeting the issue of truth and loss of life, we are not really addressing the tension.

Likewise, what Dr. Schaeffer is proposing is also in conflict with some people's perception of Apologetics. Aren't we to store up answers for rebuttal to defend the faith? Yes, however, we should understand that Apologetics is not all about merely building a wall of defense.¹¹ Rather, the best offense in many situations, is in fact to target the tension with a question. We must begin to transfer the burden of proof to those making the outlandish claims in contrast to True-Truth. After all, we must remember that while we have answers, perhaps the most affirming answer is for someone to realize that their own position is deficient and insufficient to provide truth, meaning, hope and beauty. This will often more effectively testify to them personally.

As was noted earlier, "Tension is the soil in which truth thrives." Yet, how we introduce truth becomes just as important. If we take the plant/soil agrarian anecdote a bit further, it has long been stated that weeds must be pulled up by the root. Many in

¹⁰ See *Truth Amidst Tension*, p92.

¹¹ See *Truth Amidst Tension*, p65.

Apologetics encounter weeds and beat them down with arguments, yet don't get at the root and then damage or prevent the truth seed we are trying to grow in the process. Moreover, with the weed root still there, this means that the weed will grow back again, perhaps even stronger. So what do I mean by a "weed root" in my analogy? Simply this. If we do not challenge the false worldview presuppositions that allowed the root to grow in the first place, we may not get at the true nature of the problem. Now, please know that the analogy is not intended to be universal in its scope. We will even find that targeting smaller tensions, when there is a deeper tension, may have the same effect. Yet, we should never take a quick mechanical approach to the situation. We are talking with and dealing with real people, created in the image of God, though fallen. We are obligated to their Creator to honor his workmanship by dealing with them justly.

In retrospect now, how would you help Winston in *1984*? In his, like many in the world today, he becomes blinded and is eventually subdued to not only avoid his tension, but he learns to love the things he hated most. In his case, with such a high degree of torture conditioning, one must question what is possible. After all, we now label this "sympathy to captors" Stockholm Syndrome, which falls in lines of post-traumatic stress. Yet, the first place we should start is by addressing his humanity and helping him to untangle the inner tensions. Thankfully, we are not yet dealing with this level of troubles with people in our society, yet there is something to this approach. By identifying and communicating the revelation of "the universe and its forms" and "the manishness of man" (two of Dr. Schaeffer's terms), with the individual before us, we are conveying the aspects of True-Truth and echoing Natural Revelation from our Creator.

Section 3: The Silent Tensions of Personal Peace & Affluence

It is startling now to think of Dr. Schaeffer's warnings with respect to "personal peace and affluence" when we think of how they play out in the dystopian tales we have mentioned. The reality should hit home that we also are much the same as those in Huxley's *Brave New World*, we are highly captivated by the desire for comfort and happiness in our culture. A culture that very often is more comfortable sitting relaxed while the world crumbles.

Gradually that which had become the basic thought-form of modern people became the almost totally accepted viewpoint, an almost monolithic consensus. And as it came to the majority of people through art, music, drama, theology, and the mass media, values died. As the more Christian-dominated consensus weakened, the majority of people adopted two impoverished values: personal peace and affluence.¹²

How far is that from Huxley's "comfort and happiness?" As Dr. Schaeffer explains, our desires are so wrapped up in a longing for a life without troubles and the comfort of material things:

Personal peace means just to be let alone, not to be troubled by the troubles of other people, whether across the world or across the city—to live one's life with minimal possibilities of being personally disturbed. Personal peace means wanting to have my personal life pattern undisturbed in my lifetime, regardless of what the result will be in the lifetimes of my children and grandchildren. Affluence means an overwhelming and ever-increasing prosperity—a life made up of things, things, and more things—a success judged by an ever-higher level of material abundance.¹³

In as much as Dr. Schaeffer highlights the growth in this paradigm, we must also realize this is something of the human condition magnified. We may recall the words of Martin Luther in his prayer before his trial where he states, "I too, desire to enjoy days of peace and quiet and to be undisturbed."¹⁴ We all desire comfort and provision and often just to be left alone. Yet, this also is a tension with reality. For while God made a world in peace, that ended with Lucifer and the fall of humanity into sin through Adam. Our fallen world will not leave us alone. It is like desiring shelter and peaceful ice cream delivery

¹² Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Five, A Christian View of the West*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p211 (Book: *How Should We Then Live?*)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Luther, Martin. "Martin Luther's — Here I Stand, The Speech that launched the Protestant Reformation" A Production of Fellowship for the Performing Arts, Narration by Max McLean © 2006. Now available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5RqfjYtw>

service in a fox hole on the front lines of a war, where all the while we are being shelled by the enemy. In this life, there will be blessings in contrast to great despair, and we must magnify and praise God in these moments. Yet, we should never forget that we are always spiritually at war. We should also then recall the rest of Martin Luther's prayer:

But Thine, O Lord, is this cause. And it is righteous and of eternal importance. Stand by me, Thou faithful, eternal God! I rely on no man...¹⁵

Here we must know that not only is the cause of truth the Lord's and that He is with us, yet we too, like Martin Luther shall state, "Here I stand, I can do no other!"

Section 4: Facing the Dystopian Implications Now

Our stand however is in the midst of the implications of the current dystopia. We must understand what Schaeffer was saying then and what it means for us now.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was not a joke. As he described it, babies were grown in test tubes. They were bred in intellect and physical ability for the level of labor the state wished them to perform. So if a man was needed for a certain manual job, he would be bred for that level, another man to another level, and on up through the whole line. That was Huxley's vision forty years ago. It is much closer today.

Modern man has no moral imperative for what he *should do*, and consequently he is left only with what he *can do*. And he is doing what he can do even though he stands in terror. And the biggest terror of all is: who is going to shape the human race?¹⁶

The time to be shocked over what evils mankind can do is past. Modern man can and will do whatever he can do to realize the dystopian goals he has set for himself. No degree of dehumanization is off the table, given time and further degradation of society. Following the passage just quoted, Schaeffer takes us in a prophetic direction:

It will not be just a matter of male and female, not merely a matter of preventing deformed babies. That is not where it ends. It is rather like Aldous Huxley and drugs. It is not that you give the drugs to the sick, but to the healthy. Here it is the same. Not just that you deal with a baby who may be born deformed. Now we are going to fool with the babies who are not deformed.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Four, A Christian View of the Church*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p77 (Book: *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*)

And with the development of the biological bomb, even today men are on the verge of being able to make new deadly viruses as super-weapons, viruses for which there are no cures. Unlike the H-bomb, these will be easily made by any small nation.¹⁷

What may have been taken as fear mongering in the time of Schaeffer's writing now seems to be our reality. Consciously or unconsciously, mankind believes itself as a whole to be in sickness and is doing what it can to remedy the human condition. Further, the natural implication of the desire to change and alter the human race or government powers through extreme measures seems to be currently at hand. One can only imagine the growth in dehumanization that will come in future years.

We may never know the whole truth about Covid 19 or the base of the spread of the pandemic, but we do know the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) sent a letter to Congress¹⁸ stating that they conducted gain-of-function research on bat coronaviruses in Wuhan, a report that had been previously denied before Congress. Yet, they allege it could not have become SARS-CoV-2 although SARS-CoV-2 is known to have originated in Wuhan.

Now for our purposes here, it is not whether the Covid pandemic constitutes an instance of corruption or not, rather the evidence of the actual occurrence of such studies in itself speaks volumes. The tame medical words of "gain of function" actually prove to be much more sinister when we realize that the "functions" gained might include such things as highly increased transmissibility. Just what sort of worldview would justify increasing the transmissibility of a deadly world virus? The answer is likely the one that Schaeffer pointed to, "the one that can." Yet, Schaeffer goes on:

These, then, are some of the pressures on twentieth-century society and the church. The collapse of the Reformation concept of government, the loss of truth, the demise of any generally accepted leadership group, the breakdown in personal responsibility, the growth of population and the ecological problem, the hydrogen bomb, and the biological bomb—tremendous pressures these are! And these pressures open the way for the manipulators.¹⁹

We must take the next steps beyond the secretive or even overt actions that prevail and begin to then consider that those who would do such things, know that many people will not go along with their way of thinking or their approach to reality. It is not just Christianity, but further, any view that opposes their reality will need to be silenced. Not everyone has the stomach to watch the continual stamping on the face of humanity. Thus, subtlety and devices are needed. This is where McLuhan medium has taken hold

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The letter can be viewed online here: <https://twitter.com/GOPoversight/status/1450934193177903105>

¹⁹ Ibid.

and grown. We are not only being messaged, we are being massaged, as was the joke in the title of McLuhan's book title: *The Medium is the Massage*.

In chapter 7 of Schaeffer's book, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, which we have been quoting from, Dr. Schaeffer outlines the following forms of manipulation at work in his day, which are neither exclusive or exhaustive:

- Scientific Manipulation
- Manipulation of Law
- Manipulation of History
- Manipulation of Theater & Art
- Manipulation of Television
- Chemical and Electrical Manipulation

The last thereof, Dr. Schaeffer warns of the manipulations of drugs and also the future of computing. We are indeed much further down this line of manipulation.

While we can see that his list is broad, the implications have grown even more from their state in his time. At this point, while we know that we should stand, how ought we to deal with such manipulations at every turn and sphere of life? What does Dr. Schaeffer advise? Firstly we need to get our house on order:

I hate being an alarmist, and I do not think I am. Anything I have said that is alarmism, I hope you will simply forget. But these things are something that the church must be aware of. Many young scientists come to L'Abri, and I half facetiously say to some of them, "Maybe the biggest contribution you can ever make to Christianity is to make something you can put on the spigot or the faucet that will strain out everything except water!"

The church is confronted with people who really believe that democracy is dead, who really believe that such an age is gone. I agree, unless we can return to a Reformation base with real reformation and real revival. These are the things the evangelical church should be getting prepared for.

While we heed this advice, the pathway forward is not as simple as merely saying the words "reformation" or "revival" but rather, this truly requires change. For us, as Apologist, this is all the more pressing.

As we have now come to the famed year 1984, what we need in light of the accommodation about us is a generation of radicals for truth and for Christ. We need a young generation and others who will be willing to stand in loving confrontation, but real confrontation, in contrast to the mentality of constant accommodation with the current forms of the world spirit as they surround us today, and in contrast to the way in which so

much of *evangelicalism* has developed the automatic mentality of accommodation at each successive point.²⁰

One thing that has been a constant lament for me personally is that people know of Schaeffer, but very often miss some of the key elements of his thinking. If you want to understand Dr. Schaeffer's Apologetic, first start by reading his books *True Spirituality* and the smaller work, *The Mark of a Christian*. Everything else surrounds this material on spirituality. Then go on and read the deeper material of the *Trilogy*. We know Dr. Schaeffer raised awareness on "worldview thinking" and "presuppositions" in Apologetics, but have we actually taken those notions apart? Where does a Biblical Worldview come from? It comes from the Bible. It comes from foundational tenants of our faith and spirituality. We must have doctrinal truth and truth in spiritual practice in order to have a consistent Christian worldview. Non-Christians form false presuppositions because their worldview carries with it a shape of the world based on false spirituality or the lack thereof. Their worldview will always be inconsistent with the world God has made at some critical point.

Dr. Schaeffer's notion of worldview is holistic. I can not defend the faith if I myself do not live it. I cannot carry the banner of truth, if I sit in the seat of falsehood! It has always been interesting that Dr. Schaeffer both used an illustration of Apologetics called the "two chairs" in his book *Death in the City* (chapter 9), and also the same one in his book *True Spirituality*. Dr. Schaeffer would later document what he meant by doing so in his lecture *Ash Heap Lives*²¹:

...we must go on to a Bible-centered spirituality. In the last chapter of *Death in the City*, I point out that each person sits in one of two chairs—either the naturalist chair or the supernaturalist chair—and he perceives everything in the universe from the perspective of that chair. When an individual is born again, he moves from the former chair to the latter. The tragedy is that even after a Christian has affirmed the supernatural it is perfectly possible for him, in practice, to move back to the naturalist chair and spend most of the rest of his life there, seeing things from the same perspective as the world and living on the same basis. If a man does not believe the promises of God for salvation, we say he is in *unbelief*. The position of a Christian who sits in the naturalist chair is what I call *unfaith*. Many Christians live much of their lives there. I wish to speak to this problem, not by stressing the positive aspects of spiritual things (I have done this in *True Spirituality*, *The Mark of the Christian* and at the end of *Death in the City*), but by dealing with the negative—the danger of materialism in a Christian's life.²²

²⁰ Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Four, A Christian View of the Church*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p409. (Book: *The Great Evangelical Disaster*)

²¹ Note: *Ash Heap Lives* in the US, is a chapter in the book *No Little People*, which was published under the title of *Ash Heap Lives* in Britain.

²² Schaeffer, A. Francis, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Volume Three, A Christian View of Spirituality*, Westchester, IL, Crossway Books. p181 (Book: *No Little People*, ch. 7 *Ash Heap Lives*)

If we truly want the reformation and revival in our time, we must acknowledge both this materialism in our thinking and encourage others to do the same. We must together admit we have been unfaithful. It is not that Christianity is untrue in some pocket or shadow of our lives, some hidden place, some area of sin. Jesus Christ is Lord of not only all people, but all things and all areas of our life. There is nothing outside of His truth, authority, or gaze.

Conclusion

As we contemplate these things, let us engage them not only with all our heart, but with all our mind. We must learn to speak truth into the tensions of this world, not only in what is so blatantly in front of us each day, but also the tension in our own hearts. If we proclaim the truth and yet sit in the chair of unfaith, we are unfaithful and we are ourselves in tension. The challenge for us, for Apologetics in Dystopia, is to speak in such a way that commends the Gospel in contrast to the tensions the world is experiencing. We need to be encouraged that tension is not only an inconsistency in the worldview of the person before us, but that tension is a place where truth can thrive if we have the courage to question the tensions we find. May God grant us this courage. Amen.