

Interview: Francis A. Schaeffer

Is There Hope
For Evangelicalism?

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*Interview by David R. Leigh at the
1981 Rochester, MN, L'Abri Conference.*

“You are not a New Testament Church if there isn’t community.” — Francis Schaeffer

commonlife - Dr. Schaeffer, you made a comment at one time that you felt that the battle of the future for the evangelical would be the defense of the authority of the Bible. What do you see as the most pre-eminent danger to evangelicalism at this point in time?

Francis Schaeffer - I don't think there is any doubt about it in my mind that the real problem is what I would call "accommodation." If you go back all the way to the 30's you will find that the evangelicals or the fundamentalists, whatever you want to call them, were divided into two halves. In the 30's there were the liberals that took over the big denominations and the group that came out, the separatists, who were too hard, too harsh, lacking in love. This we must say was a terrible mistake we are still paying for. But, simultaneously, we must say, the leadership that grew up from those who stayed in and built, what in the United States could be called the evangelical establishment, they went in the opposite direction. Having sought accommodation ecclesiastically, they went on to do the same right down the line. This is their mentality and it is showing. It's an interesting thing that 50 years later it is showing more clearly all the time.

So when it came to the scripture issue for instance, there was a huge effort *not* to make a real break between those who were taking a weaker view of scripture, what I call the existential methodology, and those who held the historic view, an attempt to keep it sort of pasted over. Now of course with the inerrancy council and so on there has been a clear line drawn. But the unhappy thing is a large number of those who would be considered the evangelical leadership just didn't provide the leadership for this. Then you come to the human life issue, which then of course as you know from *Whatever Happened To The Human Race*, I think is crucial, because the issue isn't abortion, it is the value of human life. And we can say that none of this evangelical leadership provided leadership for that either. So what you have is accommodation, a next step.

Now I think we are seeing accommodation at another step along the line for the sake of increasing what they call now "the ecumenical." They are using this terminology themselves. For example, in the *Newsweek* article on the "Splendid Evangelicals," or whatever it was

called, the point of that whole long article, which was about three pages, is the fact that there is a desire to show that the best direction is back into the major denominations and ecumenical thinking. And we must say accommodation also even shows up politically in not drawing a clear line, a clear line as I would see it on the matter of the defense against Soviet aggression, nor a clear enough line about the persecution that's going on of Christians. But I would say it is a mentality, and this is the real danger.

So it shows itself up ecclesiastically first. It shows itself up on the matter of the scripture. It shows itself up on the matter of human life. It shows itself up in the matter of the freedoms of people behind the iron curtain, and in a lack of appreciation for having to take a clear stand for the appropriate defense of Western Europe and so on. And I think it comes down to what I gave in my San Diego talk. Toward the end of the San Diego talk, I said what you must realize is, instead of latitudinarianism, which this other direction has been, if you believe these things are true, then truth brings confrontation and it must be with love. And the separatists forgot the love part and it wiped us out. We've paid a price for 30 years for that. But while if you leave out the love you lose, and you are not what you should be in the world, on the other hand if you forget that truth brings confrontation it is equally destructive. So I think this is the real problem.

commonlife - How would you see evangelical leaders in the future changing to avoid this problem?

F.S. - I think it goes back to the whole problem of whether you view Christianity as just religious truth or as *truth*. And as I stress in the beginning of *Christian Manifesto* I do think I see things differently and I mean from many real Christians. Many real Christians, when they are talking about true Christianity, they are talking about a series of religious truths. As I see it, the emphasis ought to be exactly at the point that what we are talking about is truth and the truth a total reality. Now until people really begin to see this different distinction and feel it and act on it, I don't think we are going to have a solution. So I think it is going to go on. I think what you will find is a large section of evangelicalism is

sliding back toward the concept of ecumenism in a bad sense. Now of course there is a right kind of ecumenical mentality. But I don't know, I don't know where the leadership is going to come from. I certainly do not see any sign of this general stream of what I would call the evangelical establishment coming back. If anything, it goes on into new areas all the time.

commonlife - In the *Manifesto* you made a couple of statements that could be interpreted as supportive of the Moral Majority. You say something to the effect that, "you may be critical of what they are doing, but if that's so, do it better." Do you feel like the Moral Majority, particularly Jerry Falwell and some of the others, could be providing the kind of leadership to evangelicals that would solve this accommodation problem.

F.S. - I think Jerry Falwell is trying to take an always more balanced position, but not in the direction of going from "separatist" to "ecumenical." So, I wouldn't agree with everything the Moral Majority does, by any means, but they are coming from the right side, and that is the understanding that rather than having the automatic, knee-jerk mentality toward accommodation, there is the realization that, with tears, at times you have to face confrontation. In this, I would say, they are providing a good mentality, without saying I agree with everything they have said and done.

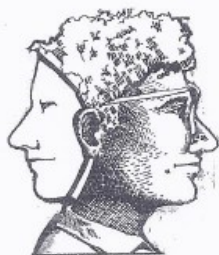
commonlife - In your book *The Church At the End of the 20th Century* you come down with a powerful conclusion and call to Christians to unity in an effort of community and reaching out to the poor and to the young. It's been 10 years, this year, since you wrote that. What role do you see community having, especially with a new movement of communities springing up over the last decade, what would you like to see them doing?

F.S. - Well of course I think I would always make a distinction. Words of course are always according to definition. I would make a distinction between what I would call community and commune. I think there is a real difference according to my own definition now. A community is a place where under the Lordship of Christ you care for each other over the totality of life including the material things. A commune, as it is developed in people's minds, is a group that has everything in common and in some of the communities even the children. I would say it is turned inward. L'Abri for example, of course is not a commune, it is a community. I feel that very strongly. And then, you have to realize two things regarding the proper sense of community. First of all you are not a New Testament church if there

isn't community in the definition I have given. The other thing is that the practice of that community is going to be different in different places. So if you have a local church, it will be different there than if you were in a place like L'Abri. So you have to have a concept of the need of orthodoxy of community and yet under the leading of the Lord for what it means for a given locality. And it would depend on the kind of churches you have. If you have a small church of certain small number, you can have community of this kind for a whole church. If you have a church of a thousand, five thousand, then you have to find ways to have groups that really know each other and practice this kind of community. So I think what we must see is: we need the community, first within—among the brothers and sisters in Christ—and then reaching our neighbors outside. But secondly, there's no one mechanical formula that can be forced on what form the community will take.

commonlife - What hope do you see for evangelicalism and especially for those evangelicals who have been trying to express community as you've described and are trying to deal with the current political climate.

F.S. - Maybe I can phrase it like this, and that is the question of whether I am an optimist or a pessimist. I'm an optimist in that I believe that the United States has greater possibilities than any country in the world at this particular moment. I wouldn't have said so 20 years ago, but today I would. For instance, twenty years ago I would have thought there had been more possibility of England. Today not at all, I think it's here. And there are two reasons for that. One is that there are more Bible-believing Christians in the United States proportionally than any country in the world, I think. And, they wouldn't agree with each other in all the minor points of doctrine, but in the broader sense we could call them Bible-believing. The second thing is that we have more Bible-believing seminaries in this country than probably all the rest of the world's put together. And the third optimism is that people are much more understanding that Christianity is more than just a conversion experience than ten, fifteen years ago. That is, there are more people today with that understanding and comprehension. The pessimism which comes, though, is whether or not they're going to do anything about it. And this I don't know yet. There are many good signs. For example, after the project, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, Christians are much more involved in the understanding of the importance of human life. The response to the *Manifesto* is good and I hope that it continues. So there are good things. But whether we're so far down the road and the people won't be stirred sufficiently, I'm not sure. So I am optimistic and am waiting to see, and am praying a great deal about it. □



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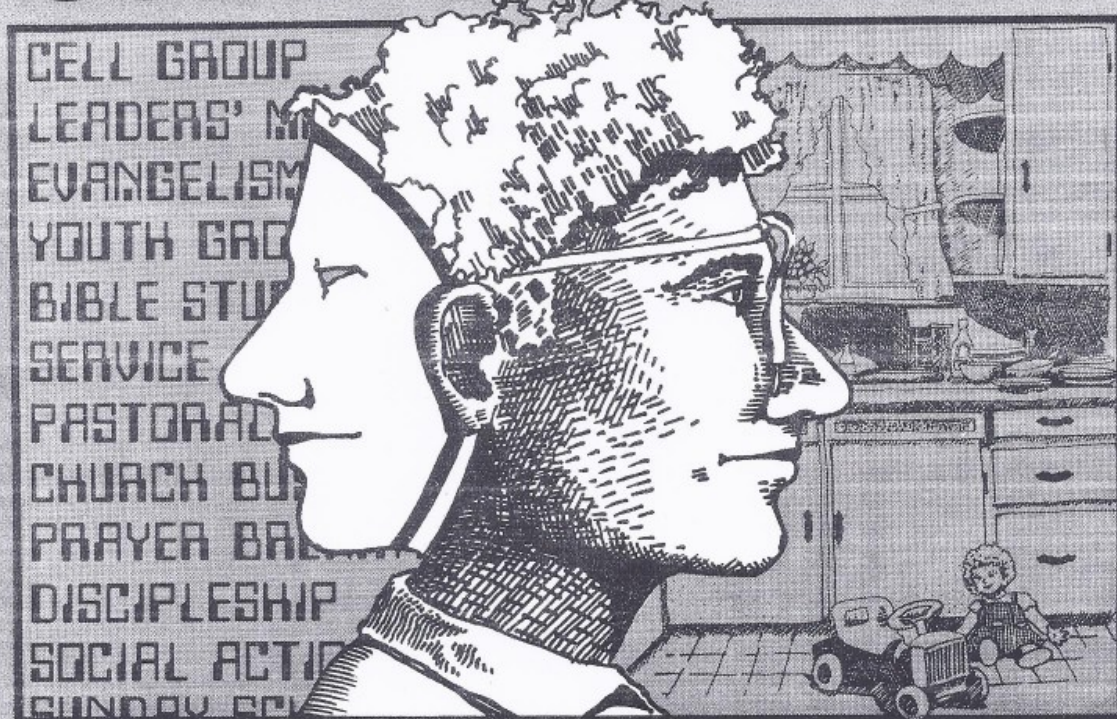
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