The Church at the End of the 20th Century

By Mark Edwards
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In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

Francis Schaeffer has changed thousands of lives, including mine. This other, earlier "Pope Francis" might not bear the same weight he once did. However, a *Christianity Today* readers' poll once placed him above John Calvin in influence. Following World War II, Schaeffer had left behind separatist fundamentalism to help Billy Graham and the Jesus Movement usher in a golden age of evangelical conservative prestige.

From their shelter in the Swiss Alps, Schaeffer and his family amassed explanations for what had gone wrong with Western Christian civilization—and who was to blame. If Christ was Lord over all of life, they maintained, then it was up to the Bible-believers to recapture modern thought, culture, and humanity. Francis eventually descended from the mountains to pen more than 20 books, produce two video series (including a groundbreaking national tour on abortion), and protect biblical inerrancy everywhere, including Princeton, MIT, and the White House. He could count among his legions of disciples Jerry Falwell, Larry Norman, and Jack Kemp. Today, early new evangelical writings such as Schaeffer's are experiencing a kind of renaissance among China's house churches.

But I didn't know any of that when I picked up a copy of *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (1977) in 1991, shortly after I had become a professing Christian. Schaeffer's publishers still heralded him then as one of the greatest intellectuals of the age—and he looked smart—so that was enough for me. Seriously, though: Reading that book was a transformative experience. It's not that I necessarily agreed with everything Schaeffer was saying about the Enlightenment, modern philosophy, John Cage, or Karl Barth (although as a sophomore in college I didn't have much frame of reference). My own separatist fundamentalist heritage had taught me to believe America was always going to hell—the blessings it received from its pro-Israeli policy notwithstanding—but I wasn't convinced like Schaeffer that you could pinpoint a particular moment when the West had been laid to rest.

What got me about Schaeffer was that he was even trying, as a Christian, to engage with philosophy, history, art, literature, movies, music, and so on—all of the things I had been warned to be afraid of. In the midst of a vocational crisis, Schaeffer's holy worldliness convinced me that I could still make a difference for Christ through the study of some secular subject like history.

My love affair with the "line of despair" ended about as soon as it had begun, though. As I pored over Schaeffer's books, I became aware of two things: that I would write an intellectual biography of Schaeffer for my honors thesis and that it would not be nice. There was simply too much disconnect between both the content and purpose of historical scholarship and Schaeffer's David Barton-esque body of work. In retrospect, why should that be surprising? Schaeffer was not a career historian but a conservative Christian apologist, wedded to fairly narrow ideology and trying to force history, philosophy, and art to make a fairly narrow point that they didn't necessarily want to make. The person who helped me put all this together was one of Schaeffer's archenemies, Mark Noll. Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994) proclaimed that fidelity to American evangelical distinctives was antithetical to cultivating real intellect. I simply reapplied Noll's argument: Schaeffer never really did come out from fundamentalism, which hindered his efforts to create a lasting, convincing critique of Western civilization from a Christian viewpoint. His followers would be better off turning to Schaeffer's kindred antimodernist spirits, Jacques Ellul or Reinhold Niebuhr. I myself descended "below the line" to study Niebuhr in graduate school.

Every now and then, I wrestle with Schaeffer's legacy, yet more as a hobby than personal necessity. I've been aided in this endeavor by Barry Hankins's wonderful biography of Schaeffer and by Molly Worthen's *Apostles of Reason*, the latter finding Schaeffer a fomenter of culture war. That said, I live with the regret of forcing Schaeffer to bear a lot of my own spiritual baggage. To focus exclusively on Schaeffer's apologetics—with all its factual shortcomings, misplaced anxieties, and implicit anger—is to miss the genius of his generous soul. I was reminded of this recently while reviewing his reflections on John 13:33-35 from *Church at the End* (pages 133-39). "We are to love our fellowmen, to love all men, in fact, as neighbors," he wrote. "Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic."

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