

Francis Schaeffer's Philosophy of History

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Contra Mundum, No. 2, 1992

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Death in the City, The God Who Is There, He Is There and He is Not Silent: many of us remember the spiritual and intellectual excitement that came with reading those books and seeing how clearly the Bible alone has a consistent world and life view. Truth, absolute Truth, rooted in the person and character of God, was what we needed. We discovered that God's "divine power has given us everything we need for the life and godliness" including intellectually-satisfying answers to basic questions of life.

Our starting point is the holy and righteous Creator of the Universe, the gracious God who became Man in the Person of Jesus Christ and redeemed us from our sins, giving us assurance of eternal life. With that came the promise of significance and meaning in life. We are all significant, meaningful people because we were created in the very image of God Himself. It was Francis and Edith Schaeffer who pointed these things out in such a clear and intellectually honest fashion to my generation. It was he, too, who spoke forcefully of the inadequacy of an orthodox, Biblical theology, without also a Biblical life-style, one which exhibited the compassion and servanthood of our Lord. Show us the power of the Living God in our lives, he challenged a generation of young people, and their teachers as well.

It is time for a reminder of those Biblical truths and it is time to introduce a new generation to those great truths. We must echo Psalm 33:11: "The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of His heart through all generations."

A Flow to History

History is linear; it is not cyclical. There is a flow to history that shows a continuity from before the beginning when God the Trinity communicated and planned the creation of man in His image, giving man a true volition. God, in effect, told Adam and Eve: "Believe Me and stand in your place as a creature, not as one who is autonomous. Believe Me and love Me as a creature to his Creator, and all will be well. This is the place for which I have made you."

Created in the Image of God, but Fallen

But Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator, opening the door to the catastrophe of human history: a broken relationship with God, with each other in human society, and within themselves. The effects of the Fall on human history were enormous but they did not change the continuity of history which is rooted in eternity past and continues through both advents of Christ into eternity future when the original creation will be restored to God's original design. God created immortal human beings. "Watch a man as he dies. Five minutes later he still exists. There is no such thing as stopping the existence of man. He still goes on. By the Fall man has not lost his being as a human being. He has not lost those things which he intrinsically is as a man. He has not become an animal or a machine. I live in a personal world, and God is dealing with me not for a few short years but forever. And I can make different value judgments as I look at the world because I understand that reality does not exist only between birth and death. A personal God is acting in a true history that goes on forever." Man *qua* man in human history reflects the image of God in the way he was made and in the way he acts. Inevitably human beings fulfill the cultural mandate to subdue and have dominion over God's creation even if all the while professing themselves to be autonomous and independent of God. The human predicament is a moral problem; it is not metaphysical.

Not everything that happens in the world is "natural"... Everything in history is not equally "normal". Because of the abnormality brought about by man, not everything which occurs in history should be there. Thus, not all that history brings forth is right just because it happens, and not all personal drives and motives are equally good. It is possible for Christians to speak of things as absolutely wrong, for they are not original in human society, but are derived from the Fall. They are in that sense 'abnormal'. We can stand against what is wrong and cruel without standing against God, for He did not make the world as it now is.

God is Sovereign

History is one. There has been but one history: that which has actually happened as opposed to what *might* have happened or what *could* have happened. Contingency, though, is no problem in the Biblical system of thought and historical explanation. The modalities of life are in the hands of the sovereign God who does all things after the counsel of His own will. The First Cause is always the Sovereign Creator God of the Universe and no man can stay His hand or say, "What doest thou?" Nevertheless within the limitations of God's sovereign decrees, plans, and purposes, human beings have the incredible ability "to affect the external form of the universe". Whether we plant a flower, write a book, build a city, or destroy a civilization, man in the image of God has created and built, alleviated suffering or brutalized his contemporaries. But he is always limited and controlled by the sovereign God who controls the fullness of time and the historical context wherein man acts. "If", Jesus said, "the mighty works" done in Capernaum had

been done in Sodom, the Sodomites *would* have repented and “it *would* have remained to Jesus' day.”

One Reality

In both history and life there is but “one reality”. The “supernatural” and the “natural” are both part of what is. They are not separate realms. The unseen invisible spiritual world is here in human time/space history. When Elisha was surrounded by Syrian troops, God opened the eyes of his servant so that he could see what was already there: “the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha”. That was why Elisha had told his servant, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” (II Kings 6:15-17) The New Testament echoes that passage with almost identical words: “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” (I John 4:4)

When Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, they were not in another realm but on the very same mountain that Jesus and the disciples climbed in Palestine. Jesus was glorified in a shining light in this world. When they came down from the mount, time has passed: it was “the next day” (Luke 9:37). There is no platonic view of reality and time stopping in a different realm, but simply the sequence of events within a single reality. Dividing “realms” into spiritual and natural categories does not separate them into two realities. There is but one reality, that which actually exists and exists coterminously.

After Jesus was glorified and appeared on this earth for forty days, his disciples touched him, saw him, ate with him. When Jesus ascended, “it was at an hour of the day, on a day of the calendar. There was a moment when His feet left the Mount of Olives.” And there will be a day in the history of the world when He returns to stand at the identical geographical location.

The apostle Paul saw the risen Lord on the Damascus Road. It was at midday in the desert and the light of Christ's glory was so brilliant that Paul was physically blinded by it. Not only so; he heard a voice speaking to him *in the Hebrew tongue*.

Jesus appeared.... speaking in a normal language, using normal words and normal grammar, to a man named Saul. With this, there is a complete denial of the twentieth-century projection of these things into a religiously 'other' world. Here we are in the realm of space, time, history, normal communication, and normal language.

Open System

In a word, the Biblical philosophy of history is an “open system” in which the supernatural is just as much a part of reality as the “natural phenomenon” of everyday

life. It is simply not a closed, naturalistic system. This was a point Schaeffer made again and again.

Perspective Point of History

The perspective point of history is the incarnation and work of Christ in this world. Even before the foundation of the world the direction of history was towards the coming of Christ in His first advent. The victory Jesus brought over sin, death, and hell has given meaning and purpose to life and history ever since. It is still our perspective point while we await His second advent, when the original creation will be restored in a new creation in eternity future.

History to modern man is absurd, Schaeffer concluded, because he has no perspective point and no absolutes by which to judge history. His starting point is wrong and that has thrown off all his calculations. He starts with puny, finite, flawed, limited man and every extension from himself leads only down a blind alley. He looks at the form of the universe: it is “obviously not just a handful of pebbles thrown out there”. Where did it come from? Why does it have form - and such a beautiful, spectacularly complex form? If one begins with an impersonal universe, there is no explanation of the existence of personality and man himself gets lost in the assumption of the eternity of matter.

“Give up creation and space-time historic reality and all that is left is uncreatedness. It is not that something does not exist, but that it just stands there, autonomous to itself, without solutions and without answers... Modern man's [despair] rests primarily upon his losing the reality of the createdness of all things except the personal God who always has been.” All of these things, of course, have enormous significance for the study of history: how can we study “human” history without knowing who man is or where he came from or what his essential nature is.

Schaeffer, of course, found in the Bible and in traditional Biblical theology the explanation for the historical “problem of evil” in the world. In the Biblical system Schaeffer found that man and woman were created flawless without moral impediment but with genuine volition which could say “no” to God as well as “yes”. When they did just that, sin entered the world and death by sin and so the evils of history passed upon all.

Judgment of God

And with sin came the judgment of God. In his forceful exposition of Romans chapter one Schaeffer commented that man became foolish in his reasonings. “He has accepted a position that is intellectually foolish not only with regard to what the Bible says, but also to what exists—the universe and its form and the nature of man. In turning away from God and the truth which He has given, man has thus become foolish in regard to what man is and what the universe is. He is left with a position with which he cannot live, and is

caught in a multitude of intellectual and personal tensions.”

In *Death in the City* Schaeffer described Romans one as referring not only to the original fall, but also to a historical principle of the judgment of God against any nation or culture that turns its back on God. And that judgment is not only in the eschatological future, but is also here and now in the events of history. A nation which turns away from God has forgotten that the chief end of man is to love God and to have fellowship with Him. And in that forgetting the nation has forgotten the purpose of man made in the image of God—to be in relationship to the God who is there. In whatever period of history the effect is the same: man forgets his purpose and thus he forgets who he is and what life means.

The hand of God is down into our culture in judgment... Unlike Zeus, whom men imagined hurling down great thunderbolts, *God has turned away in judgment as our generation turned away from Him, and He is allowing cause and effect to take its course in history.*

“God can bring His judgment in one of two ways: either by direct intervention in history or by the turning of the wheels of history.”

The Reformation brought “the wonderful gift of freedom... a balance of form and freedom in state and society. Yet once we turn away from the Christian base, it is this very freedom, now as a freedom without form, that brings a judgment upon us in the turning of the wheels of history... There is death in the *polis*, there is death in the city!”

History is not mechanical. God works into history on the basis of His character. Israel was carried off into Babylonian captivity not just for military or economic reasons, but because a holy God had judged them because they had turned away from Him. He will do the same in our generation. That's part of the reality of history.

God, History, and Evangelism

Schaeffer saw God's sovereign actions in evangelism as an example of how God acts in history.

There is no chance back of God, but history has real meaning. In Christianity, cause and effect in space-time history has real meaning. The rational moral creatures whom God created (of whom we know two classes—angels and men) influence history by choice. In twentieth century terms, man is not programmed... Even nonpersonal elements of God's creation have a significance in history on their own level. The wind is the cause that blows down the tree. In other words, mechanical cause and effect is significant in history, and on another level, moral and rational creatures are significant in history by choice... The marvel is that God created a universe with significance, that the things He created have significance.

God, having created history, acts into history. It is not that history has no meaning to God; it is not as though He is suspended above it... God acts into history at every given moment in such a way that He respects its being there; that is, He acts into it truly.

Schaeffer saw those same historical principles involved in election, evangelism, and eternal salvation.

There is no chance back of God... What this means since the Fall is that when man accepts Christ as Savior, there is a work of the Holy Spirit, yet man is not simply a zero; there is a conscious side to justification.

If we fail to see that there is a conscious side to justification, we soon come to the place where we must say that either the gospel is not universally offered or that man is a zero. But neither is the case. The Bible makes very plain that the gospel is universally offered and that man is significant...

Magnificence of Man

One of Schaeffer's most memorable characteristics was his emphasis on the glory and creativity of men and women created in the very image of God Himself and made not only for their creator but for each other. God gave them an inner drive to produce and create and to seek beauty and truth. Art, music, and literature reflect not only the fallenness of man, but also the image of God in man and woman. Throughout history human beings have fulfilled the Cultural Mandate even when they were not consciously obeying God.

Eternity Future

The culmination of history centers around the return of Christ to this earth. Francis Schaeffer was pre-millennial in his eschatology.

True Christians, those who have put their faith in Christ as Savior, shall be caught up to meet Christ in the air and then come with Him. It is at this time that the bodies of Christians who have died will be raised from the dead and that living Christians will be glorified in a twinkling of an eye.

Before Christ's coming visibly and in glory with His saints, there will be a period of great apostasy with a dictator, called the "Antichrist", ruling the world... He will control governmental and economic life and will be worshiped as god."

Christ will return visibly and in glory. "He overthrows the assembled might of the world organized against Him by the Antichrist and Satan. This is the battle of Armageddon on the plain of Megiddo in Palestine. Christ rules the earth for a thousand years...."

“There will be a new Heaven, a new earth, and a heavenly city. It is definite so that Revelation 21-22 states the size of the heavenly city, that from which it is constructed, that from which its foundations, gates, and streets are made. It is an objective reality. It is eternal - forever and ever, without end.” So human history has a continuity from eternity past to eternity future, controlled sovereignly by God Himself.
