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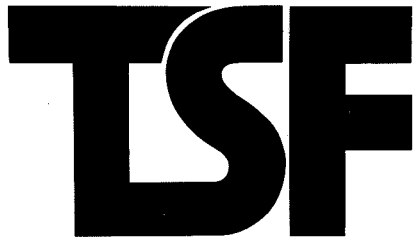
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BULLETIN

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1984

Vol. 8, No. 1

\$3.50

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proach, again, in our judgment, misconstrues the nature of the "sensu literalis" of Scripture, for literal interpretation of a "symbol" must *sustain* the text as symbolic or it ceases from being, any longer, "literal." Unless a biblical text is really a secret code (perhaps of parables, cf. Lk. 8:10) which only the insiders rightly understand, then the very power of symbolic texts lies in their multi-valency, their endless ability to contribute to the imagery and imagination of faith without allowing a single translation to end their symbolic interpretation once and for all or in favor of *our own* views of the world.

Only the return of Jesus Christ could end the symbolic interpretation of these apocalyptic prophecies in the same way as did the person and work of Christ in the first-century regarding the Christian eschatological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. A prime example of the danger in premature speculation, like that proffered by so many fundamentalist dispensationalists, can perhaps be found in the Gospel story of Peter's confession of Jesus in Matt. 16:13-23. Recall how Jesus posed the key question to his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" After other disciples volunteer various opinions, Peter responds with the confession, "You are the Christ (lit. "the Messiah"); the Son of the Living God: (v. 16). Jesus seems elated: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona!" We next find the classic text in which Peter is given the so-called "power of the keys" and made the rock upon which a future Christian church will be built.

Then, in this new atmosphere of understanding, Jesus begins to tell his disciples for the first time that he will suffer, die and be resurrected. Immediately, the same Peter, in some sense relying upon his own orthodox eschatology chart regarding the future of the Messiah, rebuffs Jesus, "God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (v. 22b). This disciple whom Jesus had just blessed, then received the strongest rebuke ever given a disciple: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." (v. 23) While Peter may have had the correct christology, he had a wrongly presumptuous eschatology which reduced the mystery of God's revelation to his own literalistic assessment of biblical prophecy. Modern views to the degree that they venture the same presumption, often at the price of marginalizing even the "plain" teaching of Jesus, invite the same rebuke from God who will surprise us and in whose hands the future must remain. The idea that America as a nation could tempt Jesus to return by offering him the burnt sacrifice of a world-in-nuclear-flames is a blasphemous parody of Christianity. Prophecy was never offered to sanction such an attack on creation.

The symbolism of prophecy checks those who cannot withstand surprises or mysteries deeper than any flicker of light within a crystal ball. If Augustine can describe even a creed as "a fence around a mystery," a symbolic fence around a mystery like that found in the apocalyptic writings of the Bible ought to make us more cautious than ever.

Our concern with Reagan's comments are, finally, twofold. First, the popular literature upon which he relies on is for us theologically dangerous and presumptuous, risking a rebuke from God like Christ gives to Peter. Of course, this theological critique does not depreciate either the value of apocalyptic literature in Scripture or the necessity of hope, with freedom to imagine what the future might portend. Second, an equally serious concern is that Reagan has been linking these speculative, fundamentalist views of Bible prophecy to his pragmatic vision of the world and to the role his presidential policies play in it. It is one thing to speculate about implications of Bible prophecy, it is another to take one's speculation as seriously as established facts which then can be cited in support of one's political decisions. Reagan has been cautious not to voice his position on biblical prophecy in major public speeches, but he has, at a minimum, confirmed a connection between prophecy and some of his policies to insiders in a casual but direct manner. Moreover, Reagan has openly supported the fundamentalist dispensationalist teachers, like George Otis and Jerry Falwell, who then publicize their special rapport with the President on these matters and leave no doubt that a ballot cast for Reagan is a vote for the right team in the final World Series of these last days.

In sum, not every fundamentalist dispensationalist crosses the line from speculation to confident prediction regarding contemporary political events. But the history of dispensationalists doing so is a long and disturbing one. At stake also is the most difficult issue of how religious belief ought to influence one's decisions in public political office. In 1980, a public confession of being "born again" was almost required of serious presidential contenders. We hope that the presidential election in 1984 does not become a mandate to experimentally test the dispensationalist hypothesis with a war of our own making.

¹ The description of Reagan's meeting with Boone, Otis, Bredesen, and Ellingwood is a composite drawn from published statements and especially through interviews by Joe Cuomo of WBAI, New York City. Cuomo and, at times, Larry Jones, have had extensive telephone conversations about these matters with Otis, Bredesen, and Ellingwood. References to "a reporter" primarily have Cuomo in mind. A documentary on the subject, with Larry Jones and Gerald T. Sheppard serving as consultants and commentators, has been aired several times in the New York City area and will, in a revised form, be aired internationally in the next few months. Among the many recently published journalistic investigations on Reagan and eschatology is "Does Reagan Expect a Nuclear Armageddon?" which was the lead editorial in the *Washington Post*, Sunday, April 18, 1984. It was written by Ronnie Dugger, publisher of the *Texas Observer*, with Larry Jones. Another article on the same subject by Dugger and Jones will appear in the next issue of *Mother Jones*.

² *The New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1981.

³ *God of the Oppressed*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 56-57.

⁴ Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1925*, (New York: Oxford, 1979), p. 13-42.

⁵ Smith, p. 21-24

⁶ Gerald T. Sheppard, "Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship," p. 1-26, in *Pastoral Problems in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movement*, ed. by Harold D. Hunter (Cleveland: Church of God School of Theology, 1982). A paper delivered to the Society of Pentecostal Studies, held Nov. 3-5, 1983.

⁷ Weber, p. 52.

⁸ Cf., also, E. R. Chamberlin, *Antichrist and the Millennium*, (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1975).

Well's Introduction to Francis Schaeffer's Jeremiad

by Ronald A. Wells

When the editors of the *Bulletin* requested permission to reprint my article from the *Reformed Journal*, the late Francis A. Schaeffer had not yet commented on it. Since then his last book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Crossway Books, 1983) has appeared, so the editors asked that I take that writing into account and append the following for clarification. Even though Mr. Schaeffer is no longer with us, there are many persons who have been influenced by him, and it is with them that I would engage in dialogue.

While Mr. Schaeffer and I may well have disagreed on certain matters, that disagreement always proceeded in an atmosphere

of mutual respect. I am very pleased by the high tone and personal grace of his final evaluation of my writing—a tone which is in marked contrast to the critique on the same subject offered by his son, Franky, in his book, *Bad News for Modern Man* (Crossway Books, 1984). The younger Schaeffer's book has rightly been called "an ugly book" by Gilbert Beers of *Christianity Today*. Its treatment of a host of Christian scholars and institutions is beneath criticism, if not contempt, and it will not be discussed here. Francis A. Schaeffer's *Evangelical Disaster*, while hard-hitting, is nevertheless scholarly in tone and intent, and it is at one with the character of the author whose life and was work typified by an unflinching grace.

The subject on which we disagreed was the Reformation, or, more accurately, the uses to which the Reformation may be put

for apologetic purposes. Throughout his many books, Mr. Schaeffer repeatedly used the term "the Reformation Base." To him the Reformation was the reference point from which modern society ought to be evaluated. In it he finds socio-religious propositions which are re said to be "true," and it is the abandonment of those "true" propositions which account for the malaise of our own time. In short, he asked, if we do not have an ahistorical and propositional basis to judge modern culture, the cause is lost. As he wrote in *Evangelical Disaster*, if one follows my views, "Everything the Reformation stood for is swallowed up in a morass of synthesis and relativity" (p. 118).

I need not remake the points in the above article, but would add a few points of clarification on the relationship of Renaissance humanism to the Reformation. Humanism in the Renaissance was not so much a philosophy as a methodology by which a number of philosophies—both sacred and profane—were possible. At its most basic, humanism was about the right of private conscience to govern action. Some humanists asserted this right individually and contemporaneously, others corporately and historically (what Crane Brinton called, respectively, "exuberant" and "spare" humanisms, in his classic book, *The Shaping of Modern Thought*). Exuberant humanists are clearly forerunners of the democratic individualists of modern times. Most humanists, however, and especially those religiously inclined in Northern Europe, should come under the rubric of "spare." From them, their rebellion was not against authority itself, but "wrong" authority, in their view. But, how was one to know "wrong" authority? Herein is the basis of the humanist methodology—i.e., in its insistence that a better prescription for "right" authority can be found in antique sources, hence the insistence that scholars learn Greek, Latin and Hebrew. The majority of intellectuals in the Renaissance employed the humanist methodology insofar as they judged then-contemporary culture by the standards of the past, to which they had access to the writings of past wisdom (the "classics").

In the Reformation the Protestants employed the "humanist methodology" insofar as they objected to then-current religious doctrine and practice. For most of them, their protest was not against religious authority itself, but against "wrong" authority, in their view. For them, the antique source to which they repaired, via the ancient languages, was the Christian scriptures. This led to the Protestant slogan "scripture alone," by which it was meant that the Bible was the source for Christian believing and behaving. So, most Protestants conformed, methodologically, to the spare tradition of humanism. Let it be restated that humanism was not so much a philosophy but a method by which

a number of philosophies were possible. Let it also be said that, while the methodology of referring to antique sources united the users, it is of fundamental difference that one referred to the "wisdom" of Greece and Rome and the other to the Christian scriptures as authoritative. But like any movement based on free choice and selective reading of texts, they could not agree on much more than the Bible was "authoritative" and they were no longer content to remain within the historical church. Moreover, even though Lutherans and Mennonites both were Protestants they shared very little; indeed, if Lutherans had to choose, they would find much more in common with the Roman pontiff than Menno Simons.

Much more could be said on the subject, but suffice limitations of space to say that this extremely complex and paradoxical movement known as Protestantism simply cannot be wrenched out of its time and made a repository of timeless truth. Indeed, which "truth" of the various Protestantisms (singular won't do here) can one cite if a "base" is looked for?

The pity of Schaeffer's work is that his notion of "the antithesis" blinded him to the possibilities of creative interpretations. If one cannot accept the Reformation as a propositional "base," then, in his view, one must be a relativist who accommodates to modernity. This is the unfortunate mind of fundamentalism; in its predisposition to regard things as all-or nothing—either one is "reformational" or one has accommodated to modernity. This is a false antithesis. The Christian message *does* provide an alternative hope for a fallen world, but that message is not the sole province of one expression of the Christian tradition. The Reformation *is* part of the Christian tradition and I am glad to count myself as standing in that expression. But the majority of Christians, after all, stand in other expressions of the faith, and our main evangelical writers must allow them to stand with us, as we accept them and respect their expressions of the faith. The key to understanding Christian history is its continuity, not its change. There has always been a paradoxical relationship between Christianity and culture, and—Calvinist triumphalism to the contrary notwithstanding—that was also true in the sixteenth century. To believe as I do that the Reformation was an important revitalization movement in the history of the church—but not a "base"—is to open possibilities for the gospel, not to close them. It is in that task of bringing the claims of a fully-orbed gospel to bear on modern culture that I would join with all Christians in the various expressions of the faith. The question remains, however, if Schaefferites and other sectarian neo-fundamentalists can leave aside their triumphalism and join the rest of us.

Francis Schaeffer's Jeremiad: A Review Article

by Ronald A. Wells

Social commentators from all ideological persuasions seem agreed on a central proposition: There is something very wrong indeed with modern society, especially American society. Whether it be Robert Heilbroner, speaking for the liberal humanist tradition in *The Inquiry in the Human Prospect*, or Christopher Lasch, speaking for the radical tradition in *The Culture of Narcissism*, intellectuals of note are agreed we are adrift in a sea of indecision in modern culture, that the malaise of the human spirit has nearly reached its nadir. It is no longer necessary for intellectuals to demonstrate that something is fundamentally wrong with Western culture; they assume a reader already knows that, so that the critic may merely illustrate the difficulty on the way to offering a way out.

In Francis A. Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1981), we have a best-selling book which is another example of this, but in this instance speaking from an evangelical Christian perspective. Thoughtful Christians, such as readers of this journal, must be immediately interested in the contribution offered by Schaeffer in his latest essay.

Schaeffer's work over the past fifteen years has become a *cause celebre* in evangelical Christianity. He is hailed far and wide as the leading intellectual of the evangelical movement, and his various books, pamphlets, and films have been widely appreciated and commercially successful. Since his work arises out of the Reformed tradition of Protestantism, his latest book should be of considerable interest to people who found their religious lives in the Calvinist tradition.

Schaeffer is a Reformed Presbyterian clergyman who has lived in Switzerland for more than thirty years. With his wife Edith, he founded *L'Abri* (the shelter), a place in the Swiss Alps to which many of us have gone. During the first half of his ministry at *L'Abri*, Schaeffer was little known. His first essay, *Escape from Reason*, was not published until the late 1960s. *The God who Is There* quickly made Schaeffer a force to be reckoned with in the evangelical movement, an intellectual with an increasingly large popular following. *A Christian Manifesto* rounds out a score of Schaeffer publications over the past fifteen years on a variety of subjects, ranging from biblical criticism to art history to social comment.

I first heard Francis Schaeffer lecture while I was a graduate student in Boston in the mid-1960s. He had not yet published any-

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