

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Christian Manifesto

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A Christian Manifesto, by Francis A. Schaeffer, Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981. Pp. 157. \$5.95. Paper.

There are few writers in recent evangelical Christian history and circles who have had a sustained and significant impact, as has Francis Schaeffer. It is difficult to imagine anyone in the Christian reading public who has not been affected in some way by one or more of the important works by this popular and leading voice of Christianity. This very fact causes this reviewer to be a bit disconcerted about the possible and probable impact of *A Christian Manifesto*. If the reader comes to this volume in an uncritical fashion, perhaps thinking that Schaeffer's scholarship and conclusions concerning contemporary issues are always sound and above critique, then such a reader will run the risk of having been seduced by the mystique of the Schaefferian cult.

The first reading of this book left me very uneasy. Subsequent readings have added to the uneasiness, as the assumptions, dependence upon certain selected sources, and nearly total lack of dealing with the biblical data have been discerned. Before the disappointing portions are reviewed, it is important to survey Schaeffer's burden and many valuable thoughts.

Schaeffer begins his treatise by lamenting that Christians have tunnel vision. They typically miss the forest for the trees. They have the capacity to become exercised over specific issues (e.g., abortion, pornography, homosexuality, prayer in public schools), but they have failed to see the whole fabric being woven, the total world view that is being developed. This shift in world views Schaeffer characterizes as "impersonal matter or energy shaped into its present form by impersonal chance" (p. 18). This world view is not only different from the Christian one, it is antithetical and antagonistic to it. Schaeffer correctly assesses that these two world views utterly oppose one another, both in content and results. This "us versus them" characterization is repeated throughout the book.

An attendant problem which Schaeffer addresses is that Christians must bear their share of the responsibility for the burgeoning development and current dominance of the material-energy chance view. Owing to its own excessive attachment to pietism and its persistent platonic dichotomizing between the material and spiritual worlds, Christians have systematically failed

to see the totality of human existence. Particularly, the intellectual dimension has been neglected (pp. 18–19). Schaeffer ably sounds an urgent plea for Christians to return to a thorough-going Christian perspective. This Christian view begins with the transcendent God of the Bible who has disclosed himself in written propositional form. This view understands truth as a totally integrated whole in the Creator rather than as a series of truths without necessary and essential cohesion.

Throughout the early portion of Schaeffer's book there is helpful and synthesized discussion of some complex philosophical and historical matters. Among them are some excellent thoughts on the distinction between humanism and humanitarianism. "Christians should be the most humanitarian of all people" (p. 23). By virtue of the fact that they are created in the image of the Creator, Christians must be interested in the humanities. It is "proper to speak of a Christian humanist" (p. 23). But Schaeffer is careful to distinguish what he terms a Christian humanist from the man-centered and biblically false system which is popular today.

From these very valuable and helpful opening thoughts, Schaeffer moves in chapter two to develop his view of the early days of our nation and how the founding fathers understood the relationship between one's world view and the government under which he is to live. It is here that some of Schaeffer's assumptions become troublesome and his line of reasoning might be questioned.

Revealing what appears to be excessive dependence upon Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) and Rutherford's *Lex Rex* ("that law, and no one else, is king," p. 32), Schaeffer begins a rather strained case that our founding fathers clearly knew what they were doing. "We cannot say too strongly that they really understood the basis of the government which they were founding" (p. 32). Then, in an almost inexplicable fashion, Schaeffer itemizes a series of "proofs" (?) to establish his point. He cites such things as the "In God we trust" which appears in our national jargon, the phrase "certain inalienable rights" in our founding documents, the fact that Congress has a paid chaplain, that prayer is offered before sessions of Congress, and even that one of our earliest national holidays was Thanksgiving Day.

But one might respond, "So what?" What do such externals prove? Do such citations clearly establish that this nation's foundations and pursuits were clearly Christian? I think not! This is like saying that prayer before class is that which makes our education Christian. Moreover, upon what or whose god are we claiming this foundation? The deistic god of Thomas Jefferson, *et al.*? Schaeffer appears to confuse deism and Christianity. Surely many of our founding fathers were theists, but were they Christians, with a thorough-going Christian world view? Are we really prepared to say that the god of Jefferson and the governmental theories of John Locke were Christian?

While much discerning care and critical analysis is needed in this portion of Schaeffer's work, he manages to salvage this chapter with some excellent thoughts on the First Amendment. He argues that the doctrine is used and abused today, having moved away from its original purposes, toward an oppressive effort to silence the church by secularizing it and prohibiting it from having a voice in issues of national concern.

Chapter three, entitled "The Destruction of Faith and Freedom," outlines the author's scenario regarding how and why our nation has moved away from the original base of the Creator giving "certain inalienable rights," toward a sociological law which has as a foundation principle that which seems good for society at any given moment, i.e., situationism. Again, there is in this discussion a mixture of very helpful thoughts and troublesome assumptions that are never examined. Schaeffer's valuable insights include the assertion that the material-energy chance concept of reality could never have produced a form-freedom balance in government (pp. 42-45). In fact this world view is destroying it. His discussion of the definition and problems in contemporary "pluralism" is helpful (pp. 45-47). Schaeffer chides Christian lawyers for their abdication of their responsibility which so greatly contributed to the decline into sociological law. He also scores Christian theologians and educators as well.

What is left unsaid in this chapter leaves this reviewer uneasy. Schaeffer's continuing assumptions concerning God-given "inalienable rights" needs examination. Where is it written in stone tablets that inalienable rights, the right to personal freedom seeming to be the central concern, is a divine gift which is to be pursued at all costs? Where is there a balanced discussion of biblical and historical data regarding early Christians who faithfully lived certain biblical principles by submitting to authority, even ungodly oppressive manifestations of authority? Where is there consideration of peace-making, living *under* authority (Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2)? Where is there an exposition of our Lord's statements and reactions to his "loss of freedom"? What of learning to be conquerors by living *in* tribulation, persecution, or sword (Rom 8:35-37)? To be sure, this reviewer rejoices in the relative liberties which we enjoy in this land. My prayer is that, in God's providence, these will be preserved. However, personal liberty is not the ultimate good and all-consuming goal of life as most conservatives imply. Learning to live biblically, *whatever* the circumstances, is the goal of life (Qoh 12:12-13).

Another troublesome assumption perpetuated by Schaeffer and many others concerns the "small group of people" who decide the good for all of society and who have "forced their will on the majority" (pp. 48-49). Such remarks strike the reviewer as only so much naive wishful thinking. Schaeffer and many others these days persist in the notion that there presently exists a Christian consensus in our culture, albeit a rather quiet one. A strong case can and should be made that a depraved and sinful majority has been ruling ever since Genesis 3. This nation (and the world) is in exactly the moral condition it prefers. The majority *is* in control and, moreover, 2 Timothy 3 warns us that conditions will continue to degenerate until divine intervention occurs when the King returns to establish *his* kingdom. Yet we keep wishing that "if we could only get control and put the minority in its place!" Such a misguided reading of biblical and historical data is most disappointing.

Chapter four, "The Humanist Religion" contains some excellent remarks on the rise and impact of contemporary humanism. Schaeffer attempts to synthesize the impact of the Humanist Manifestos I and II, recent decisions by the Supreme Court, and the effect of the media in diminishing the Christian viewpoint while advancing the non-Christian one. It is in this

chapter that Schaeffer begins to display a vague affinity with the Moral Majority and its efforts. It is also here that Schaeffer makes one of his uncritical remarks about the Moral Majority. "The Moral Majority has drawn a line between the total view of reality and the other total view of reality and the results this brings forth in government and law" (pp. 61–62). While it is beyond question that the Moral Majority has done a great service in spotlighting specific issues and raising the Christian consciousness concerning them, it is highly debatable that the Moral Majority is theologically, philosophically, or historically sophisticated enough to have done all that Schaeffer suggests.

Chapter five briefly rehearses the history of evangelical leadership and continues his assessment of its failures. Primary focus is upon the early evangelical thrust, by Wesley and Whitefield for example, that salvation should produce an impact upon the social domain and issues. It is also in this chapter that the reader begins to be prepared for subsequent chapters on the possible necessity and appropriateness of civil disobedience (p. 66), by at least two vague remarks that imply historical Christian support for it.

Chapter six is an important transitional chapter. As its title indicates, ("An Open Window"), Schaeffer uses a metaphor to assert that present history and circumstances in our nation are like an open window. I assume that the metaphor implies the opportunity to enter the arena and take up combat in order that "this whole other entity—the material-energy, chance world view—can be rolled back with all its results across all of life" (pp. 73–74). This is the first of what the author calls a "two-track" approach. Christians must enter the foray "praying and struggling" for the reversal of the other world view.

On the other hand, Christians must also be quite prepared for the eventuality that the window will be slammed closed. "What happens in this country if the window does not stay open? What then?" (p. 75). Schaeffer projects that in light of the way our culture appears to be degenerating, and if the so-called "Silent Majority" (there's that assumption again!) remains inert and blends into the culture, then the other view will ultimately win the day and erect an "elite authoritarianism" (p. 79) that will systematically set out to destroy the Christian world view. The major culprit in this elitist posture will be the U.S. Supreme Court which has already begun its work. The chapter concludes with a series of fearful "what ifs" to arrest the reader's attention regarding possible future circumstances.

Schaeffer's persistent optimism perhaps is commendable but it is also biblically, theologically, and historically ill-advised. His assessment of the Supreme Court and its penchant for misreading the Constitution and for making its own law is on target. But the most disquieting thing about this chapter is that the reader has now been prepared for the next three chapters of the book. These three chapters will discuss the limits and use of civil disobedience and force, assuming that the window will be slammed shut. All that follows will be based on Schaeffer's either/or premise that either Christians must ascend to supremacy and get their way, or they assume the worst and fight back, apparently by any means at their disposal.

Schaeffer begins these last important chapters by repeating his errant assumption that the founding fathers knew precisely what they were doing

and upon what basis they built this land. From this imprecise assertion, he moves the reader to what he terms the "bottom line." This bottom line is reached by moving through a series of questions. First, what is the final relationship of Christians to the state (p. 89)? Schaeffer concludes that it is obedience. The next question is, is the state autonomous or are we to obey the state even when it is wrong? What if a government or one of its agencies requires of its constituency that which is contrary to God? Our author concludes that the government has abrogated its authority and it is not to be obeyed (pp. 90-91). It is at this point that Schaeffer makes his first and only sustained reference to the Scripture (Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2). But the conclusions and inferences he draws are troublesome. After agreeing that governments are God-created and sustained institutions to be obeyed, Schaeffer jumps to the unsupported conclusion that governments can and must be disobeyed, depending upon the situation. Moreover, he makes a gigantic leap to assert that even armed rebellion might be appropriate and acceptable! In support he cites numerous historical examples of Reformation successes which resulted from armed revolt. In this section Schaeffer appears to applaud all sorts of reprehensible behavior and one must ask serious questions concerning the basic nature of his ethic.

The remainder of chapter seven reveals Schaeffer's heavy dependence upon Rutherford and his theses. For example, "since tyranny is satanic, not to resist it is to resist God" (p. 101). Is this consistent with Rom 13:1-2: "there is no authority except from God . . . therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God?" Hardly! Rutherford states as a second precept that since the ruler is granted power conditionally, it follows that the people have the power to withdraw their sanction (p. 101). The entire phrase assumes that the people bestowed the authority and can withdraw it as they decide, when the Scripture asserts that *God* bestows and withdraws according to *his* plan. Where is Schaeffer's development of Dan 2:20; 4:17, 25, 34-35; Isa 40:23-24; Prov 21:1, etc.? There is some troublesome material here by this giant of the contemporary Christian scene.

Chapter eight discusses the appropriate use of civil disobedience. Here again Schaeffer follows totally the thoughts of Rutherford who suggested three levels of resistance. A private individual (1) must defend himself by protest, probably via legal action, (2) must flee if at all possible, and (3) may use force if necessary (p. 103). When offense is directed at a larger corporate body, only the first and third steps are possible. So with the help of Rutherford and later John Locke, Schaeffer asserts that the "bottom line" is that there may come a time when civil disobedience and force may be appropriate, indeed morally required. All of this is built on a huge "If," i.e., "if this occurs, then . . ."

Schaeffer cites a number of possible situations which would warrant civil disobedience. He suggests that one day Christians might have to do their duty by withholding their taxes because these funds are used in an ungodly fashion, for instance, to finance abortions. He cites the distinct possibility that because the government prohibits the teaching of creationism in public school, Christians will have to refuse to submit to such "tyranny."

Again Schaeffer's assumptions and uncritical dependence on Rutherford are displayed here. He plays semantic games with Matt 22:21 to get out from

under responsibility of the command that Caesar should *always* get what is his due. He again fails to correlate his thinking with 1 Pet 2:11–25. He never recalls our Lord's submissive response to unjust treatment and that his activity was to be our example. Furthermore, Schaeffer assumes, for example, that God has mandated the teaching of creationism in public schools. Where is that notion found in the biblical data?

Chapter nine, "The Use of Force," continues these troublesome themes. Schaeffer's opening paragraph exhibits one of the inconsistencies in his thinking. "There does come a time when force, even physical force, is appropriate. The Christian is not to take the law into his own hands and become a law unto himself" (p. 117). Can we have it both ways? Our author's illustration of the legitimate and appropriate use of deception in hiding Jews in Nazi Germany runs directly counter to the teaching of Scripture. The rationale that the Nazi government was a counterfeit state will not stand the scrutiny of the Bible. Did Christ say that since the Roman Empire and the caesars had become a false state and rampant in its tyranny, that Christians should rebel, deceive, fail to support, and otherwise subvert it? Or did he say to submit, pray for the king, honor the government, and pay taxes that are due? This reviewer is certain that Schaeffer would say he abhors situation ethics. Yet, tragically, his *Christian Manifesto* appears to encourage Christians to become practitioners of it. If we don't like the law, disobey it. How is that different from those who don't like any other law, say abortion laws, so they will calculatedly disobey it?

To cap off these chapters, the author weaves in the comparison between the possible scenario in America with what is presently occurring in the Soviet Union. While it is true that conditions in the U.S.S.R. are deplorable and it is not a desirable place to live, the reader gets the impression that the only reason for this comparison is to terrorize Christians into doing whatever is necessary so that America will never become like Russia. Somehow this whole analogy strikes this reader as comparing apples and elephants. It only causes readers to react in fear rather than to analyze critically the central issues.

In summary, this reviewer is left with an empty and troubled spirit after reading *A Christian Manifesto*. It does have many strengths. It is fascinating reading, as Schaeffer typically is, but its faults seriously outweigh its values. Its assumptions are largely unexamined. Many of its assertions do not stand up under the scrutiny of biblical data or philosophical analysis. There is minimal interaction with the larger body of biblical material. It leaves the reader with a disquieting feeling in matters pertaining to civil disobedience and force, as Schaeffer appears to endorse a spirit of rebellion and retribution. It is not comprehensive enough, for it avoids applying the lordship of Christ to areas such as the stewardship of the environment, the role of peace-making, the nuclear disarmament debate, the incipient racism in this country, the relationship of Christians to the poor, and a host of relevant issues.

No doubt this book will become very important over the next few years, if for no other reason than because of the immense popularity, contemporary influence, and mystique of the author. Nevertheless, this reviewer would encourage that *A Christian Manifesto* be read by all. However, it is strongly

urged that the book be read with discerning care and that its premises, argumentation, historical analysis, and its use of sources be critically examined. What Schaeffer appears to have written is an *American* manifesto. A biblically consistent, historically informed, theologically and philosophically sophisticated, and adequately comprehensive *Christian* manifesto has yet to be written.