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Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique (Book Review)

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to glory pays homage to the doctrine of sphere sovereignty. Even though it continues to live in sin, Calvin College remains the endearing denominational alma mater, the most visible manifestation of CRC identity, even with four other regional colleges now educating significant numbers of CRC students.

In Fred Manfred's wonderful story-forward to John J. Timmerman's *Through A Glass Lightly*, he claims this book is "must reading" to anyone "who has ever been associated with Calvin College." He's right. The word *association* is well-chosen, however, for Manfred knows the milieu of the CRC well enough to understand that it's not only Calvin graduates that "know" Calvin College. In the CRC, anyone who's read her *Banner* knows the institution—even its history—well enough to prepare a half dozen sketches for a Who's Who.

So *Through A Glass Lightly*, written by a Calvin Professor Emeritus, is not just a book for Calvin grads. It's a book for anyone who cares about denominational history, about its characters, and its own wonderfully colorful psychological profile. It is *our* book, in a tribal sense, not only because Calvin is still *onze school*, but also because the stories Timmerman remembers include anecdotes from churches and schools in Orange City, Grundy Center, and Paterson, in addition to Grand Rapids. Timmerman's memory of the early days at Eastern Christian Academy, for instance, is a New Jersey story with a far broader appeal; it belongs to anyone who's waged crusades for Christian education—in Hull, Iowa, or Sheboygan, Wisconsin, or Escondido, California. This loosely secured gathering of reminiscences belongs to all of us, and we owe Eerdmans our gratitude for making it available.

But Timmerman's book is not some generic history. It is our book, but it is also, certainly, his. The narratives are sequenced to follow Timmerman down his own life's path, from his adoption, as an infant, into a parsonage in northwest Iowa, to his attempts to bring peace to chaos next door, to a neighbor who simply couldn't bring her life under control.

And the chronicles are tempered in Timmerman's voice. Anyone who has ever met him will feel him in the texture of the prose, always perfectly honed and smooth. One of the arts of writing, it seems to me, is the judicious use of surprise. Ultimately, surprise delights us, whether in plots or anecdotes. But even Timmerman's sentences beg you to chase them, like a mischievous kid might, towards some unseen hideaway: "We moved into a six-room apartment that we rented for $20 a month from a Lithuanian woman who had a green thumb with roses but who surreptitiously stole our coal." That's apt and unforgettable characterization; but in addition, there's joy in following sentences like that, in not knowing exactly how the unexpected twists will turn.

But it's not Timmerman's cleverness that you're left with once the last page is turned; it's his commitment—to teaching students (not all of them geniuses); to literature (not all of it perfectly kosher); to the ethnic-religious heritage which is his (for all its foibles); and finally, to the Lord God Almighty, from whence comes, it's clear, this man's strength.

This is Timmerman's book because the voice is clear and loving and God-glorifying, whether he's remembering a one-hundred-and-twenty-car freight train or the unforgettable sound of horsehide against hickory; whether he's remembering novelist Peter De Vries or the catcher who rifled a pick-off throw into right field and, as they say, wrested defeat from the jaws of certain victory.

It's a fine book. I'm glad he's written it, and I'm happy that he's given it to all of us.

Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique. Thomas V. Morris. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987, 133 pp. $5.95. Reviewed by Nick R. Van Til, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy.

For the past twenty-five years many American evangelicals had claimed Francis Schaeffer as their premier philosopher-theologian. Or as Jack Rogers of the Fuller Theological Seminary noted in a June 1977 *Reformed Journal* article, Schaeffer "is a symbol, an intellectual Daniel standing tall for [Christians] amidst the frightening lions of secular scholarship (J.R. p.19).

Jack Rogers, Arthur F. Holmes in a forward to this work by Morris, and Morris himself, all call attention to the fact that Schaeffer's apologetic proofs mostly are not tightly argued syllogisms that are logically valid. They are more of the nature of loosely fashioned appeals to common sense.

Morris first covered the apologetics of Schaeffer in a little 1976 volume titled *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics*. He was then a graduate student at Yale while now he teaches Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame. Morris did not alter his perspective since then, and concerning Schaeffer's publication between 1976 and his death in 1984 Morris wrote:

> The arguments and themes I address here were never substantially altered or displaced as the logical core of his apologetic efforts. It is for this reason that it is possible to reissue the present study of his apologetics and have it be just as relevant to an assessment of Schaeffer's work as on the day it was first released (p.9).

In Jack Rogers' 1977 treatment of Schaeffer's work, already alluded to, after his reference to the reaction of

evangelicals generally, his basic criticism is as follows:

> A second group also, mostly young people, become ardent disciples of Schaeffer. They accept his system as ultimate and his answers as final. They function best within the context of a L'Abrai community where the entire ethos is controlled by Schaeffer's thought.... Occasionally, life experience or other study somehow impinges on some and show fallacies in Schaeffer's system. I have observed some devotees of a system follow their logic to its conclusion and reject the whole system and with it their Christian faith when faced with the realities of the system's weaknesses (J.R. p.19).

Rogers alleged that Schaeffer's apologetics showed the influence of the earlier Princeton theologians and the influence of the time he spent at Westminster with Cornelius Van Til. Neither Rogers nor Morris point to the differences that later developed between the approach of Van Til and that of Schaeffer. Van Til always insisted that the self-attesting Scriptures need no assistance from empirical or rational corroboration but were themselves to be presupposed as true and the basis for all meaningful predication.

Concerning Schaeffer's "presuppositionalism," Morris writes:

> Although the pre-evangelistic, presuppositional apologetics is set forth in *The God Who Is There* as necessary and indispensable in communicating with modern man, the nature of presuppositions is never clearly discussed. Schaeffer does not clarify what kinds of beliefs or propositions are to count as presuppositions, and are therefore examined by the apologist (p.17).... The definition Schaeffer gives in a glossary is "a belief or theory which is assumed before the next step in logic is developed. Such a prior postulate often consciously or unconsciously affects the way a person subsequently reasons" (p.18).

Schaeffer takes the basic truths of historic Christianity as his basic presuppositions, existence and creation by the "infinite-personal" triune God of the Scriptures. These form the best hypotheses by which to account for the empirical data which we encounter in our daily experiences and our own dispositions, or as Schaeffer has it "the manness of man." Morris adds:

> A somewhat correlative assumption of the pre-evangelistic approach, and one which Schaeffer presents as giving definite direction to the apologist's effort, is that no non-Christian can be consistent with the logic of his presuppositions (p.21).

Schaeffer's critics, as already intimated, have maintained that Schaeffer's conclusions also do not follow logically from his presuppositions. Already in the early seventeenth-century the French mathematician-logician Blaisé Pascal showed that one could not logically infer the God of the Scriptures, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from the "five ways of Thomas Aquinas" which were a summation of the empirical-rational proofs.

Some have argued that by the empirical-rational route we can arrive at a kind of generic theism. But even that fails because any theism worthy of the name implies a Transcendant One. But empirical-rational arguments cannot bridge the chasm of our immanent experience to the wholly other of transcendence.

Wrongly, according to some critics, but rightly according to Morris, what Schaeffer does then is to give an overview of our external environment and his own dispositions and then presents Christian presuppositions as the most logical hypothesis by way of explaining their origin. He can do this successfully because those to whom he ministers, while having logical difficulties, are not morally and emotionally committed to a thorough-going secularism.

Morris is convinced that those who have come back into the Christian fold through Schaeffer's influence have done so more through the fervor of Schaeffer's pastoring than through the force and validity of his logic.

Morris faults Schaeffer ever so lightly by calling attention to the fact that Schaeffer's so-called intellectual emphasis, which at best was faulty, caused him to neglect at last formally the dispositional factors which enter into one's commitment to the Christian faith. Morris wrote:

> This general condition for a new belief, that of consistency, has implications for Christian apologetics. If we wish to present anyone with a credible case we must be prepared to speak to more than one area of life. We must show him that Christian faith is not an isolated religious activity divorced from the rest of life. This can be accomplished fully only by a combination of two things. First, we must proclaim and describe the relevance of biblical truth for every realm of life. We must also show forth in our lives that relevance (p.112).

We should thank Morris for that insight and praise the Lord for the evangelical fervor of Schaeffer's pastoring which for the most part overcame and effaced the weakness of his apologetics.*

*For a more extended discussion of Schaeffer's apologetics see my "Schaeffer in Review," *Pro Rege*, Vol. VI, No. 4, June, 1978.