

*Francis A. Schaeffer's Unity Concept For Doing
Christian Apologetics*

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Introduction

The late, Christian apologist Francis A. Schaeffer taught that there is a real unity between God and man on the basis of personality: God is personal and man made in His image and likeness is personal as well. According to Schaeffer, Christian apologetics should be aimed at demonstrating this unity. Thus, this paper is intended to explicate and analyze what I am calling Schaeffer's "unity concept."

Before we approach Schaeffer's teaching, however, it will be helpful to try to grasp how he approaches apologetics in general before proceeding to the specifics of his thoughts in regards his unity concept.

In the book *Classical Apologetics* by R.C. Sproul et al., Schaeffer is grouped with "others in the classical tradition."¹ It seems implied that Schaeffer is not a presuppositionalist. However, if you listen to Schaeffer himself he often sounds like one. In the context of explaining how rationalism failed to bring about uniformity of knowledge, he describes the importance of recognizing philosophical shifts that occurred during the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

The use of classical apologetics before this shift took place was effective only because non-Christians were functioning, on the surface, on the same presuppositions, even if they had an inadequate base for them. In classical apologetics though, presuppositions were rarely analysed, discussed or taken into account.²

¹ R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 126.

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 15.

Schaeffer goes onto assert: “...more than ever before, a presuppositional Apologetic is imperative.”³ Upon further inspection, however, what Schaeffer considers presuppositionalism is significantly qualified when compared to other proponents of this method such as Van Til. After citing that Schaeffer studied under Van Til, Greg L. Bahnsen is clearly critical of Schaeffer’s brand of presuppositionalism and states that Schaeffer “treated a ‘presupposition’ as merely a hypothesis to be tested over against competing presuppositions by the standard of observational experience.”⁴ Bahnsen’s observations are warranted. As we will demonstrate below, the unity concept takes for granted that the unbeliever may come to see the inconsistency of his own worldview and realize how rationale and reasonable the Christian faith based on the Bible really is.

Francis A. Schaeffer in other words appears to be a veritable hybrid of the two major apologetic poles, presuppositionalism and evidentialism. While emphasizing the difference between major presuppositional worldviews, he definitely does *not* advocate fideism and in explaining the two purposes of Christian apologetics does not reduce them to a mere negative apologetic:

There are two purposes of Christian apologetics. The first is defence. The second is to communicate Christianity in a way that any given generation can understand. Defence is proper and necessary because in every age historic Christianity will be

³ Ibid. p. 15.

⁴ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1998), p. 16. Later in this same work, I think Bahnsen is quite accurate in stating: “Schaeffer does not contend that the non-Christian’s worldview is philosophically unintelligible, but simply that it is incomplete.” (p. 52) It appears then that while Schaeffer emphasizes the importance of recognizing presuppositions *per se* that he is not “true blue” to the methodology as Van Til crystallized it. Furthermore, since Schaeffer appreciates showing the trustworthiness and reasonableness of Scripture, he oftentimes sounds and operates as an evidentialist.

under attack. Defence does not mean being on the defensive. One must not be embarrassed about the use of the word *defence*. The proponents of any position who are alive to their own generation must give a sufficient answer for it when questions are raised about it. Thus, the word defence is not used here in a negative sense, because, in any conversation, in any communication which is really dialogue, answers must be given to objections raised...We [also] have a responsibility to communicate the Gospel to our generation...No one can become a Christian unless he understands what Christianity is saying...*So the positive side of apologetics is the communication of the Gospel to the present generation in terms that they can all understand.*⁵

Perhaps nothing is more revealing of Schaeffer's apologetic approach than his core theology, especially as it pertains to the doctrine of man. Man is fallen yes, but this "does not mean that he has ceased to bear God's image. He has not ceased to be man because he is fallen."⁶

The analysis above is important to keep in mind as we are about to embark on the explication and analysis of Schaeffer's unity concept. As we approach apologetics, there is according to Schaeffer tremendous common ground and the unbeliever is very much capable of realizing a point of tension between his false views and his or her need for the saving Gospel. For Schaeffer, his unity concept is designed to help people understand their own inconsistencies and to reveal the power of the Gospel unto salvation for all men.

I: The Explication of Schaeffer's Unity Concept:

A. The Essence and Goal of the Unity Concept:

To understand Schaeffer's apologetics we must understand that his goal is to lead the unbeliever to realize that there is unity between himself/herself and all that exists -- what is seen and unseen -- and most importantly, there is unity with one's

⁵*The God Who Is There*, pp. 139, 140.

⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason: A Penetrating Analysis of Trends in Modern Thought*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 88.

Creator. To make this one's goal is to seek to fulfill the greatest innate needs that face humanity. There are three great needs every person needs fulfilled: 1) The need to validate and verify individual personality and that we are not the result of blind macroevolution; that we are not machines; 2) The need to know that there is such a thing as real knowledge and a true unity of knowledge pertaining to what is seen and unseen and that we have genuine purpose; and 3) The need to discover the true dilemma of man. That is, people seem to realize that there is something wrong; that there is indeed a true tension in life, an abnormality. Where does this come from? Christian apologetics gives a rational and logical answer that points to a moral cause when "God, being non-determined, created man as a non-determined person" who violated the law of God and became morally culpable before God.⁷ Of course, to discover the true dilemma is to be put on course to discover God's answer in the Lord Jesus Christ through the reliable witness of the Holy Scriptures. People need clarity as to the true dilemma before they can receive new life through the Gospel of Christ.

B. The Origin and Development of the Crisis Pertaining To Unity:

One of Schaeffer's main methods for revealing the problem of disunity is to analyze the history of man's attempts to find unity. He provides a vivid picture of the historical, philosophical tension by appreciating a work of art by Raphael:

...it is worthwhile to look at Raphael's (1483-1520) painting *The School of Athens* (c. 1510) to comprehend some of the discussions and influences which followed in the

⁷ *The God Who Is There*, p. 103. pp. 87ff is on the first need that seems to be related to the realm of metaphysics; pp. 92ff is on the second need that seems to be related to the realm of epistemology; and pp. 100ff is on the third need that clearly relates to morality and ethics.

Renaissance period. The fresco is in the Vatican. In *The School of Athens* Raphael painted Plato with one finger pointed upward, which means that he pointed toward absolutes or ideals. In contrast, he pictured Aristotle with his fingers spread wide and thrust down toward the earth, which means that he emphasized particulars. By particulars we mean the individual things which are about us; a chair is a particular, as is each molecule which makes up the chair, and so on. The individual person is also a particular and thus you are a particular.⁸

Schaeffer goes on to explain that the Greeks recognized the dilemma between the particulars and the universals. They understood that finite aspects (particulars) could have no enduring meaning apart from their relationship with an infinite reference point (universal). “Unless the particulars have a universal over them, the particulars have no meaning.”⁹ The dilemma, however, truly takes shape when it is discovered that when man begins with particulars, they are never able to derive the universal; they are never able to discover lasting meaning.¹⁰ The Greeks invested in both their city-state/society and in their man-made pantheon. Both failed to provide enduring meaning.

As history has advanced, however, the dilemma did not become less pronounced, but more pronounced. Schaeffer reveals that the problem reached a significant impasse when Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) came on the scene.

Theologically, Aquinas did not view the fall of man as thorough. He viewed that the will of man was fallen, but not his intellect. Through this theological orientation, “man’s intellect became autonomous. In one realm man was now independent, autonomous.”¹¹ In the Church especially this was the first step away

⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*, (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1976), p. 52.

⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 11.

¹¹ *Escape from Reason*, p. 11.

from the authority of God's Word. Now natural theology could be pursued and developed apart from Scripture while relying upon man's intellect and reason. "But the important point in what followed was that a really autonomous area was set up."¹² In this theological context, Aquinas "opened the way for the discussion of what is usually called 'nature and grace'."¹³ Here is Schaeffer's diagram depicting this approach to life:

**GRACE, THE HIGHER: GOD THE CREATOR; HEAVEN AND HEAVENLY THINGS;
THE UNSEEN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE EARTH;
MAN'S SOUL; UNITY**

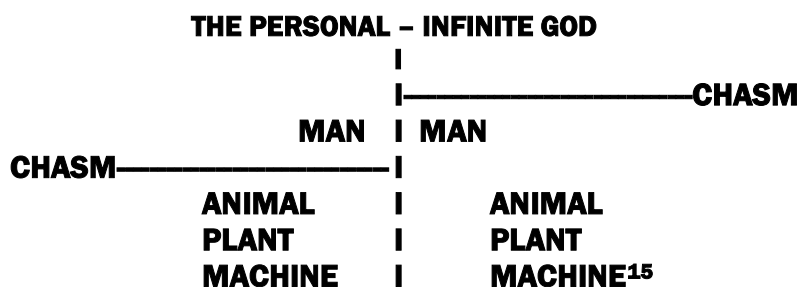
**NATURE, THE LOWER: THE CREATED; EARTH AND EARTHLY THINGS;
THE VISIBLE AND WHAT NATURE AND MAN
DO ON EARTH; MAN'S BODY; DIVERSITY¹⁴**

Schaeffer's point in presenting this diagram and the many others he presents is to show that throughout history, man has treated the question of particulars and universals as a genuine dichotomy, things that are inherently separate. There is a real dualism in life and the nature of things. There are things above and things below and it appears that never shall the two actually meet. It is the goal of Francis A. Schaeffer in his apologetics to depict unity between these two realms. That there must be a dichotomy and dualism is a myth, a false presupposition. While God is certainly separated from us in regards His infinity, He is not all separate from us in regards His personality. Thus, Schaeffer begins to address the separation Aquinas introduced through this diagram:

¹² Ibid. p. 11.

¹³ Ibid. p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 9.



In this second diagram, while there is an actual divide between finite beings and the infinite God, yet, because God is personal, we may know Him. To know God the Creator of all things is to find unity between all the created particulars and *THE* universal: God Himself.

Thomas Aquinas, however, was not the end of the problem. He opened the door for the problem of separation and duality to become severe, but it would get much worse in the centuries to come. Schaeffer traces at what point in history things went from bad to worse: enter the Enlightenment and the humanistic philosophers! Schaeffer views two men in particular as having wrought incredible damage to the cause of the orthodox faith: Hegel and Kierkegaard.

It was the German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) who became the first man to open The door into the line of despair. Before his time truth was conceived on the basis of antithesis, not for any adequate reason but because man romantically acted upon it...[Hegel] removed the straight line of previous thought and in its place he has substituted a triangle. Instead of antithesis we have, as modern man's approach to truth, synthesis.¹⁶

More than ever, truth had become relative. The Enlightenment made rationalism king; truth was modified and adjusted more than ever before. This was man's desperate attempt at unity of knowledge. Eventually, however, this attempt towards unity broke down. Something else had to be done: Enter Kierkegaard.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 26.

¹⁶ *The God Who Is There*, p. 20.

Kierkegaard came to the conclusion that you could not arrive at synthesis by reason, Instead, you achieved everything of real importance by a leap of faith. So, he separated absolutely the rational and logical from faith. The reasonable and faith bear no relationship to each other...As a result of this, from that time on, if rationalistic man wants to deal with the real things of human life (such as purpose, significance, the validity of love) he must discard rational thought about them and make a gigantic, non-rational leap of faith. The rationalistic framework had failed to produce an answer on the basis of reason, and so all hope of a uniform field of knowledge has to be adandoned.¹⁷

Here is Schaeffer's depiction of what Kierkegaard produced:

THE NON-RATIONAL AND NON-LOGICAL		EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE; THE FINAL EXPERIENCE; THE FIRST-ORDER EXPERIENCE
<hr/>		<hr/>
THE RATIONAL THE LOGICAL		ONLY PARTICULARS, NO PURPOSE, NO MEAN- ING. MAN IS A MACHINE¹⁸

This "line of despair" was now fully in place. Schaeffer describes the desperation people in the modern world now face:

But man has aspirations; he has what I call his mannishness. He desires that love be more than being in bed with a woman, that moral motions be more than merely sociological something-or-others, that his significance lie in being more than one more cog in a vast machine. He wants a relationship to society or the university other than that of a small machine being manipulated by a big machine. On the basis of modern thought, however, all of these would simply be an illusion. And since there are aspirations which separate man from his impersonal universe, man then faces at the heart of his being a terrible, cosmic, final alienation. He drowns in cosmic alienation, for there is nothing in the universe to fulfill him. That is the position of modern man. There is nothing there to fulfill him in all that there is.¹⁹

C. Offering A Solution To The Crisis:

According to Schaeffer, the Christian apologist must identify what a given unbeliever has put into that "upper story" depicted above. In effect, we are asking what is driving the unbeliever in his or her life in terms of providing hope and

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 21, 22.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 22.

¹⁹ *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, p. 16.

meaning. Any alternative besides Christ is going to yield an upper story answer that is inadequate and bankrupt. But the unbeliever has shielded him/herself from this so-called “point of tension,” that is, they have put a “roof” over their heads from seeing the inconsistency and inadequacy of their worldview. The Christian apologist must therefore engage the unbeliever in dialog and very carefully – Schaeffer takes 1st Peter 3:15 very seriously – “take the roof off” or lead the unbeliever to realize the logical conclusion of a man’s non-Christian presuppositions. Schaeffer explains:

The Christian, lovingly and with true tears, must remove the shelter and allow the truth of the external world and of what man is to beat upon him. When the roof is off, each man must stand naked and wounded before the truth of what is. *The truth that we let in first is not a dogmatic statement of the truth of the Scriptures but the truth of the external world and the truth of what man himself is.* This is what shows him his need. The Scriptures then show him the nature of his lostness and the answer to it. *This, I am convinced, is the true order for our apologetics...for man living under the line of despair.*²⁰

All of this, however, cannot be done unless the Christian has a grasp of Schaeffer’s unity concept. Here Schaeffer explains our crucial approach:

If evangelical Christian begin to slip into a dichotomy, to separate an encounter with Jesus from the content of the Scriptures (including the discussable and the verifiable), we shall, without intending to, be throwing ourselves and the next generation into the millstream of the modern system.²¹

That is, we must eliminate the duality and false dichotomy and present that the universals and the infinite are at least to a certain extent, clearly revealed. We may hold onto rationality and see that God has “revealed something real down into

²⁰ *The God Who Is There*, p. 129.

²¹ *Escape from Reason*, p. 79.

the common things of life.”²² What we have to offer people in the world today is a true unity of thought.

We offer this unity concept by holding to the Reformation view of the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, God tells us about Himself – not exhaustively, but truly – and He tells us about the things of this finite realm, about the particulars and so we are not adrift. And part and parcel of what is revealed in the Scriptures is the truth that man is truly personal rather than impersonal, “because the universe begins with a truly personal beginning...”²³ Thus, what we are doing as apologists is leading the unbeliever to see that his own mannishness is consistent with the Biblical revelation of God in space and time. The marks of mannishness such as love, rationality, longing for significance, fear of non-being, etc. fit this system of God revealed in Christ and through the historical Word of propositional truth. On the other hand, “no humanistic system has provided a justification for man to begin with himself. The Bible’s answer is totally unique.”²⁴

At the same time, as Christians who reach out to unbelievers, we must actually live in this unity for themselves. The supernatural and natural worlds are not far removed from each other, they are in fact united. Schaeffer points out the example of Jacob in Genesis 32 who sets up *Mahanaim* and in so doing, sets up a camp that is for himself and another that is for the angels. Schaeffer also refers to the account in 2nd Kings 6:16-17. While Elijah’s servant does not see the army of angels at first, Elijah was able to put the natural realm crisis in proper perspective

²² Ibid. p. 80.

²³ Ibid. p. 86.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 87.

because he also saw the spiritual realm's help and protection. Schaeffer goes onto say, "the high calling and duty [is] to live in the light of the existence of the two parts of the universe, the seen and the unseen parts, in the realization that the heavenlies are not far off. They are about us here."²⁵ This is important for us to maintain as we do Christian apologetics.

II. Analysis of the Position:

Francis Schaeffer has offered some invaluable contributions to the field of Christian apologetics. I appreciate for example his emphasizing the importance of recognizing presuppositions without entering into the fideism of classical presuppositionalism.

As for his unity concept, I find it to be a sophisticated way of explaining the theological reality of the separation that took place between God and man as a result of the Fall. The "line of despair" that is so powerfully depicted by such philosophers as Kierkegaard is another way of expressing the despair of lost sinners in general. By nature, man replaces *the* faith with various substitutes in the form of one "leap" or another (or one idol or another). But every idol is dumb and there is only One God. Until He is found, there are only the cheap and ineffective substitutes of men.

I am not sure that we can follow Schaeffer's recommendations to a "T". For example, Schaeffer explains above that we ought not put any "dogmatic" statements of Scripture before leading the person to see the true state of the external world and himself. I do not think that that is always possible. Even when St. Paul spoke to the

²⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), p. 67.

Athenians in Acts 17, to speak of the creation first, anthropology second and to save Christology for last did not mean that dogmatic, Scriptural truth was left out until the actual Gospel was proclaimed. Thus, I respect how some evidential approaches start with cosmology and in effect commence with the assertions of Romans 1. This too is an effective way to see the false dichotomy and dualism we set up, that by denying the Creator, we abide in separation from God.

In my opinion, however, the strong points to Schaeffer's unity concept far outweigh any weaknesses. In essence, this unity concept provides a guide for our patiently taking the roof off. It leads us to the fact that all other worldviews will indeed have a point of tension since none of them know where to connect to the One, true God apart from the Christian faith. The unity concept leads us to the points of contact that every man has with God *right now* in the form of personality, the need for purpose (knowledge) and the innate awareness people have of a moral dilemma. In other words, the unity concept provides an immediate "in" with those who need the Gospel and if we can show that every other worldview falls short of meeting those needs via their dichotomy, dualism and non-unity, then those we reach out to may be all the more ready to hear the Gospel and discover where true unity and reconciliation lies.

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