Eric Metaxas, Francis Schaeffer, and The Great Evangelical Disaster

Two prophets and their critiques of compromised Christianity

John G. West

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Forty years ago on May 15, evangelical Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer died after a long battle against cancer. He went out with a bang, not a whimper. A few months before his passing, Schaeffer published his final book, ***The Great Evangelical Disaster***. Many of his last weeks were spent promoting its message. Schaeffer's book indicted the evangelical leadership class for abandoning historic Christianity in a quest for cultural acceptance – especially in the areas of biblical authority, the value of human life, sex and gender, and politics.

"[T]he problem of evangelical accommodation," Schaeffer observed, "is that [it]… has constantly been in one direction – that is, to accommodate with whatever is in vogue with the form of the world spirit which is dominant today. It is this same world spirit which is destroying both church and society" [*Great Evangelical Disaster* (GED), 150].

Schaeffer ended his book by calling for a new generation of Christians willing to confront the world rather than embrace it: "I call for Christian radicals, and especially young Christian radicals, to stand up in loving confrontation… with all that is wrong and destructive in the church, our culture, and the state [GED, 151].

Schaeffer warned that if loving confrontation didn't occur, evangelical Christianity would lose its identity:

> [I]f we do not have the courage to draw lines even when we wish we did not have to, then history will look back at this time as the time when certain "evangelical colleges" went the way of Harvard and Yale, when certain "evangelical seminaries" went the way of Union Seminary in New York, and the time when other "evangelical organizations" were lost to Christ's cause – forever. [GED, 151]

I was an undergraduate at a state university when I first read Schaeffer's book. It helped inspire me to want to be part of the solution. It's a testament to Schaeffer's influence – and the influence of some other evangelical leaders of his era – that a new generation of biblically faithful Protestants did arise in America. They were joined by a new generation of faithful Catholics. Together, these Protestants and Catholics staved off complete cultural collapse, and they built new institutions and movements that continue to exert a positive impact today. They helped give American society a new – if temporary – lease on life.

The Great Evangelical Disaster Today

Eric Metaxas's provocative new book, ***Religionless Christianity*** (2024), reminds me a lot of Francis Schaeffer's *The Great Evangelical Disaster*. That's not to say there aren't also some differences.

Schaeffer wrote explicitly to evangelicals. Metaxas is writing to evangelicals, but also to a broader audience of Christians, including Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

Schaeffer went out of his way to stress the importance of Christians treating with love those with whom they disagree. At the end of his book, Schaeffer even appended a booklet he wrote years earlier, *The Mark of the Christian*, that advocates this idea in more detail. Metaxas is more blunt than Schaeffer, less "winsome," if you will. But the bluntness is understandable. We live in an age where "winsomeness" has become a cudgel used to bludgeon those who raise inconvenient truths, and Metaxas in his book rightly pushes back at this effort to censor legitimate criticisms and debate.

Despite these differences, the similarities between the two men and their books are striking.

First and foremost, like Schaeffer's *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, Metaxas's *Religionless Christianity* indicts Christian leaders today for being shaped by the secular culture rather than trying to transform it. Metaxas asks a series of pointed questions that every American Christian should ponder:

In our fear of seeming odd and off-putting to nonbelievers, haven't we accepted too much of the world's secular assessment of things? Has our salt lost its saltiness? How much of the secular cultural narrative have we accepted without realizing it, such that we are no longer the prophetic voices of God in our generation and are therefore a mere shadow of the true Christian faith? For what we imagine is the sake of our 'witness,' have we become the domesticated house cat version of what God intended to be a wild and fearsome lion of truth faith? [*Religionless Christianity* [RC], Kindle edition, 13-15]

I can already predict some of the criticisms that are likely to be leveled at Metaxas's new book: It is too harsh. It is too political, taking sides on issues where Christians can legitimately disagree. It overplays the analogy between what happened to the church in Germany in the 1930s and what is happening to the church in America now.

I'm sympathetic to some of these concerns, and I don't agree with everything in the book. But I agree with most of it – and I suspect many of the complaints that will be offered about *Religionless Christianity* will avoid the real reason some people don't like it. It's not because Metaxas has somehow missed the mark that his book will be so provoking to certain people. It's because he hits too close to home.

For me, Metaxas's book is spot-on in its central message, which is that many American Christians have been secularized to the point of insipidity. If we want to stave off the complete collapse of our society in our own day, Christian churches need to reform themselves from within.

Christianity Applies to All of Life

Schaeffer was known for insisting that Christianity is applicable to all of life, not just "religious" issues. As Schaeffer put it: "If Christ is indeed Lord, he must be Lord of all of life – in spiritual matters, of course, but just as much across the whole spectrum of life, including intellectual matters and the areas of culture, law, and government" [GED, 11].

Metaxas likewise argues against "the lie that the only reality with which we need to concern ourselves is the 'theological' part, as though it were an island unconnected to the rest of reality. This is the central lie of our time" [RC, 21]. Echoing Schaeffer, Metaxas declares:

> Christian faith cannot, under any circumstances, confine itself to sermons or to Sunday mornings or to particular buildings – or to merely ecclesiastical or "religious" issues. It will inevitably touch on everything, as it is precisely God's will for it to do. It will have something to say about how a government operates and about every kind of issue – cultural, social, and otherwise [RC, 60].

A Rejection of Theocracy

Schaeffer's call for Christians to apply their faith to all of life was sometimes misrepresented. So it is important to understand what he did not mean by saying this. In Schaeffer's time, some fringe Christian voices were calling for a

theocracy where the government would impose Christianity by force of law. Schaeffer was absolutely opposed to that kind of thinking.

In his book *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), Schaeffer was unequivocal on this point: "We are not talking about some kind, or any kind, of a theocracy… There is no New Testament basis for a linking of church and state until Christ, the King, returns. The whole 'Constantine mentality' from the fourth century up to our day was a mistake" [CM, 120-121]. As a result, Schaeffer wholeheartedly supported the American Founders' vision of a limited government that secured liberty for all people, Christians and non-Christians alike. He opposed any effort to treat non-Christians as second class citizens. Instead, he sought "freedom for all and especially freedom for all religion. That was the original purpose of the First Amendment" [CM, 136].

It's worth noting that Schaeffer also defended racial equality and criticized his fellow white Christians in America for their historical failure to treat blacks justly and compassionately. He urged white evangelicals to do more to heal racial divides: "As Christians, by identification with our forebears, we must acknowledge this wrong and twisted view of race and beyond this make every effort to eliminate racial prejudice today" [GED, 115-116].

In our own day, some on the fringe Christian right are calling for a "Christian prince" or a "Protestant Franco" or (if you are Catholic) just another Franco. [The ideology of "Christian Reconstructionism," "Dominionism or "Theonomy."] They pine for an authoritarian strongman who will impose Christianity, essentially repudiating the work of America's Founders. Some even attack the First Amendment and its guarantee of religious liberty.

Like Schaeffer, Metaxas wisely rejects these toxic ideas and embraces the American Founders' vision of limited government and constitutional freedoms for all. Far from adopting what Schaeffer called the "Constantine mentality" [i.e., "Christendom"], Metaxas argues that Christianity post-Constantine was actually diluted, not strengthened: "after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire – everyone became 'officially' Christian. As a result, almost no one was actually Christian in the way they had been under persecution" [RC, 31]. Like Schaeffer, Metaxas argues that a biblical worldview supplied the basis for human equality (including racial equality), helping the poor, religious liberty, and free speech [RC,148]. Like Schaeffer, Metaxas is clear that Christians ought to support free speech and religious liberty for everyone, not just for their fellow Christians.

During an extended critique of "cancel culture," Metaxas argues that "the idea that we have free speech and must tolerate different views lies at the heart of all our liberties." In his words:

> [I]t is not enough for us to stand with those with whom we agree who are being attacked… we must also stand on principle with anyone who is being attacked in this way. We must discern the spirit behind the canceling and know that it is at war with God's ideas of mercy and justice and grace. It is also at war with the American idea of liberty, for which millions of patriots have died. That idea of liberty is God's idea of liberty. We must not be afraid to acknowledge that all the best ideas throughout history have their roots in God; therefore, we can understand that those who are at war with the American ideals of freedom of speech and freedom of religion are at war with God, because standing up for free speech and freedom of religion is what God calls us to do [RC, 76-77].

A Willingness to Act in an Imperfect World

In Schaeffer's time, some evangelicals were reticent to become involved in politics. They thought it was a distraction from the gospel, or they were repelled by its dirtiness and its pragmatism. So when some Christians formed groups like the Moral Majority to push back against public policies they thought were

anti-Christian, other Christians turned up their noses. Because the Moral Majority was imperfect, they justified doing nothing. They did not want to soil their hands by supporting something imperfect.

Schaeffer argued otherwise. He did not claim the Moral Majority was ideal. "Some of us may perhaps have some questions about the Moral Majority and some of the things they have said," he acknowledged (CM, 56). But he thought some Christians were in danger of missing the big picture:

> [R]egardless of whether we think the Moral Majority has… made some mistakes… they have certainly done one thing right: they have used the freedom we still have in the political arena to stand against the other total entity [materialism/secular humanism]. They have carried the fact that law is king, law is above the lawmakers, and God is above the law into this area of life where it always should have been. And this is a part of true spirituality [CM, 61].

Schaeffer issued a challenge to the Christian critics of the Moral Majority: "if you personally do not like some of the details of what they have done, do it better. But you must understand that all Christians have got to do the same kind of thing or you are simply not showing the Lordship of Christ in the totality of life" [CM, 62].

In his book, Metaxas writes about a similar phenomenon, what he calls the "idol of purity." This "is the temptation to say that above all else, I must keep my hands clean. I must not allow myself to become soiled in any way… It matters more that I am 'pure' than what might happen to others if I do something I think might 'dirty my hands'" (RC, 90).

Metaxas gives the example of Christians who refrain from voting in an election because no candidate is good enough, even though one flawed candidate may be much better than another. "We are pretending there is a third way out—to vote for no one, as though that choice clears us of having allowed whoever is elected into office, whose policies will affect millions" (RC, 91). Not voting for either candidate may make us feel good, but it is a cop-out according to Metaxas.

Burning Your Boats: The Lonely Life of a Prophet

Schaeffer's final book did not win him plaudits from the cultural elites of his day, and Metaxas's current book likely won't win him much praise from current elites.

Schaeffer's *Great Evangelical Disaster* was likely the final nail in the coffin of his reputation. In his earlier years, Schaeffer had been the hip evangelical thinker, attracting many by his discussions of avant-garde European films and art and the newest trends in philosophy. Enshrined in the mountains of Switzerland for his work as a missionary, Schaeffer had an undeniable mystique. And when he wrote about the evils of pollution, or the need to advance racial equality, or the dangers of the uncompassionate use of wealth, he gained a lot of respect from people of varying views.

But when Schaeffer saw the cultural collapse in America accelerating in the early 1970s, he made a fateful choice. His final books – ***How Should We Then Live?*** (1976), ***Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*** (1979), ***A Christian Manifesto*** (1981), and ***The Great Evangelical Disaster*** (1984) – expressed with increasing clarity social and political views that weren't hip at all.

Schaeffer attacked Soviet bloc communism, and he defended the Christian influence on America's founding. Along with medical doctor C. Everett Koop, his book and film series *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* made a full-throated appeal to evangelicals to join the battle against abortion and euthanasia alongside Catholics. (The effort helped propel Koop to the post of Surgeon General in the Reagan Administration.) Schaeffer's final book critiqued evangelicals wrongly entranced by socialism and feminism. He was accused of getting taken in by right-wing politics, and a growing number of both secular and evangelical elites soured on him.

Schaeffer's rise and fall among the cultural elites is neatly bookended by two articles. In 1960, TIME ran a largely favorable profile titled "Mission to Intellectuals," which described his growing outreach to the future shapers of culture. As TIME reported, "each weekend the Schaeffers are overrun by a crowd of young men and women mostly from the universities – painters, writers, actors, singers, dancers and beatniks – professing every shade of belief and disbelief. There are existentialists and Catholics, Protestants, Jews and left-wing atheists… The one thing they have in common is that they are intellectuals."

Two decades later, *Newsweek* ran its own profile of Schaeffer. But this time the assessment was no longer sympathetic. Derisively titled "Guru of Fundamentalism," the piece dripped with hostility and condescension. And the condescension didn't come just from avowed secularists. The article ended by quoting criticisms of Schaeffer by two professors from Wheaton College, often viewed as evangelicalism's Harvard. Historian Mark Noll sniped: "The danger is that people will take him for a scholar, which he is not."

In his own book, Metaxas warns against what he calls the "idol of respectability," the tendency of many Christians to self-censor in order to seek the approval of the secular world. "Are we afraid to be called 'divisive' or 'fundamentalist' or 'unsophisticated for saying what we know the Bible makes clear?" he asks [RC, 88]. Metaxas also stresses the importance of "burn[ing] your boats." Sometimes a battle is so important, you need to go all in, even if that means giving up your options for returning to respectability.

Francis Schaeffer burned his boats and gave up his respectability when he entered the cultural fray in the late1970s. To his credit, I think the same is true of Metaxas today.

Metaxas developed a reputation as a culturally-hip evangelical Christian who had connections with thinkers, artists, and pundits across the political spectrum. But then came the polarizing Obama and Trump years and the further disintegration of our culture. Rather than play it safe as our culture burned down, Metaxas chose to take a stand. Like Schaeffer, he has given up his respectability and burned his boats by speaking inconvenient truths many evangelical and secular elites don't want to hear.

I can only imagine the friendships lost by both Schaeffer and Metaxas after they decided to go "all in."

Yet Schaeffer's life shows how spurning the "idol of respectability" can be used powerfully by God. Scorned by the elites of his day, Schaeffer ended up having a far greater influence on American culture than many of his critics. His writings, lectures, and film series helped mobilize thousands of evangelicals to enter academia, the arts, politics, law, journalism, the non-profit world, and more in the 1970s and 80s. I don't have time here to describe all the things that were influenced in some way by Schaeffer's willingness to stand for truth. But his work inspired efforts to defend biblical authority, broaden the pro-life movement, defend free speech and religious liberty, promote a compassionate use of wealth, and preserve historic Christian sexual ethics.

Metaxas has issued a powerful plea to mobilize Christians in our own day. The question now is: How will we respond?

John G. West is Vice President of the Seattle-based Discovery Institute and Managing Director of the Institute's Center for Science and Culture. Formerly the Chair of the Department of Political Science and Geography at Seattle Pacific University, West is an award-winning author and documentary filmmaker who has written or edited 12 books, including *Darwin Day in America: How Our Politics and Culture Have Been Dehumanized in the Name of Science* and *The Magician's Twin: C. S. Lewis on Science, Scientism, and Society*.

West holds a PhD in Government from Claremont Graduate University, and he has been interviewed by media outlets such as CNN, Fox News, Reuters, *Time* magazine, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and others.