

francis schaeffer how should we then live

Francis Schaeffer: How Should We Then Live? A Comprehensive Exploration

Francis Schaeffer's seminal work, "How Should We Then Live? The Unique Role of Christianity in the Modern World," remains a foundational text for understanding the intersection of faith, philosophy, and culture. This article delves deep into Schaeffer's compelling arguments, examining his historical analysis of Western civilization and his passionate plea for a renewed Christian worldview. We will explore his critique of modern thought, his emphasis on the importance of a consistent biblical worldview, and the practical implications for how Christians ought to live in response to the challenges of our time. Prepare to engage with a profound thinker who sought to equip believers to live faithfully and thoughtfully in a world increasingly shaped by secular humanism and relativism.

- Introduction to Francis Schaeffer and "How Should We Then Live?"
- The Historical Trajectory: From Theism to Existentialism
- Key Themes and Arguments in Schaeffer's Work
 - The Problem of the "Ghost/Machine" Split
 - The Authority of Scripture and Reason
 - The Nature of True Humanism
 - The Christian's Role in Culture
- Relevance of "How Should We Then Live?" Today
- Applying Schaeffer's Principles to Contemporary Issues
- Conclusion: Living Faithfully in a Modern World

Understanding Francis Schaeffer and "How Should We Then Live?"

Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) was a theologian, philosopher, and evangelist whose influence on evangelical Christianity in the 20th century cannot be overstated. His work, particularly "How Should We Then Live?", sought to bridge the gap between intellectual inquiry and practical Christian living. Schaeffer's central concern was the erosion of a cohesive, God-centered worldview in Western society and the subsequent impact on individuals and culture. He argued that the fragmentation of knowledge and the rise of relativistic thinking had led to a profound spiritual and existential crisis. In

this groundbreaking book, Schaeffer masterfully traced the historical development of Western thought, demonstrating how a shift away from biblical presuppositions had paved the way for nihilism and despair. He didn't just diagnose the problem; he offered a robust, biblical framework for responding to it, urging Christians to live out their faith with intellectual integrity and cultural engagement.

The core question posed by the title, "How Should We Then Live?", reflects Schaeffer's desire to provide a practical, actionable response to the intellectual and cultural challenges of his day. He believed that a correct understanding of God and reality, grounded in Scripture, should directly inform the way believers conduct their lives and interact with the world around them. This article will unpack the intricate arguments presented in "How Should We Then Live?", highlighting Schaeffer's distinctive approach to apologetics and cultural critique. By understanding his historical analysis and theological convictions, readers can gain valuable insights into living a more purposeful and biblically informed life in the 21st century.

The Historical Trajectory: From Theism to Existentialism in Western Thought

A cornerstone of Francis Schaeffer's thesis in "How Should We Then Live?" is his meticulously crafted historical survey of Western civilization, charting its intellectual and spiritual descent from a theistic worldview to the prevalent existentialism and humanism of his time. Schaeffer argued that for centuries, Western thought and culture were deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian understanding of a personal, transcendent God who created all things and revealed Himself through Scripture. This theistic framework provided a cohesive and meaningful understanding of reality, human purpose, and morality. It was the bedrock upon which art, philosophy, law, and society were built.

Schaeffer meticulously illustrates how a gradual shift began to occur, marked by key philosophical movements and thinkers. He identifies the Enlightenment as a crucial turning point, where reason, as opposed to divine revelation, increasingly became the ultimate arbiter of truth. This emphasis on human autonomy, while seemingly liberating, gradually led to a fragmentation of knowledge and a questioning of absolute truth. Schaeffer traces this trajectory through figures like Descartes, who introduced the mind-body dualism, and later philosophers who further separated the spiritual realm from the material. This separation, often termed the "ghost/machine" split by Schaeffer, created a fundamental disconnect between faith and reason, between the subjective experience and objective reality.

As Schaeffer progresses through history, he highlights the rise of Romanticism, with its emphasis on subjective experience and emotion, and the subsequent development of existentialism. Thinkers like Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus are presented as logical outgrowths of this philosophical journey, culminating in a worldview where meaning and value are not inherent but are created by individuals in a godless universe. Schaeffer argues that this "death of God" or the rejection of absolute truth leads inevitably to nihilism and a loss of genuine humanism, as individuals are left adrift without any objective foundation for their existence. His historical narrative is not merely academic; it serves as a powerful demonstration of how philosophical shifts have tangible consequences for the way people live and understand themselves.

Key Themes and Arguments in Schaeffer's Work

Francis Schaeffer's "How Should We Then Live?" is rich with interconnected themes that form a coherent and compelling argument for a biblical worldview. His analysis goes beyond a simple historical review; it presents a profound critique of modern thought and a robust defense of the Christian faith as the only worldview capable of providing a coherent and meaningful existence.

The Problem of the "Ghost/Machine" Split

One of Schaeffer's most persistent critiques is the philosophical dualism that permeated Western thought, which he famously termed the "ghost/machine" split. This refers to the separation of the spiritual, subjective realm (the ghost) from the material, objective realm (the machine). Schaeffer argued that this dualism, stemming from thinkers like Descartes, created an artificial dichotomy where faith, values, and personal experience were relegated to the private, subjective sphere, while the material world was understood through purely scientific and mechanistic principles. This led to a situation where Christianity was often seen as irrelevant to scientific inquiry or practical living, and where individuals struggled to find a unified understanding of reality. Schaeffer contended that this split impoverished both realms, leaving the material world devoid of inherent meaning and the spiritual realm detached from reality.

The Authority of Scripture and Reason

Central to Schaeffer's apologetic is his unwavering conviction in the authority of Scripture and its compatibility with reason. He rejected the notion that faith and reason were in inherent conflict. Instead, Schaeffer posited that the Bible provided the foundational "preconditions of rationality" – the very assumptions necessary for coherent thought and understanding. He argued that the biblical worldview, with its assertion of a personal God, the creation of a rational universe, and the reliability of human reason (as God's creation), provided the necessary framework for all knowledge and meaning. Schaeffer championed what he called "true reason," which is reason rightly ordered under God, and contrasted it with the relativistic and subjective reason that dominated modern thought. He believed that a consistent application of biblical principles would lead to a flourishing of both intellectual pursuit and genuine human flourishing.

The Nature of True Humanism

Schaeffer drew a sharp distinction between what he called "true humanism" and the human-centered philosophies that were prevalent in his day. For Schaeffer, true humanism was not the exaltation of man apart from God, but rather the understanding of humanity as God's creation, made in His image, and therefore possessing inherent dignity and value. He argued that only a worldview that acknowledged the Creator could provide a solid foundation for human rights, personal worth, and objective morality. In contrast, he saw secular humanism as ultimately leading to the devaluation of human life, as it lacked any ultimate basis for human significance. When man is seen as merely a product of random evolutionary processes, without an eternal destiny or divine purpose, his value can easily be eroded.

The Christian's Role in Culture

A powerful and enduring message in "How Should We Then Live?" is Schaeffer's call for Christians to be active and engaged participants in culture, not isolated from it. He believed that believers were called to be salt and light in the world, influencing society through the consistent application of biblical truth. Schaeffer famously stated that Christians should not be "escapists" but should engage with the intellectual and artistic currents of their time. He encouraged Christians to create art, philosophy, and social structures that reflected God's truth, thereby offering a compelling alternative to the prevailing secular narratives. This engagement, for Schaeffer, was not about compromise but about demonstrating the relevance and superiority of a Christian worldview in all spheres of life. He saw the arts and philosophy as crucial battlegrounds for the hearts and minds of people.

Relevance of "How Should We Then Live?" Today

Despite being written decades ago, the insights and arguments presented in Francis Schaeffer's "How Should We Then Live?" remain remarkably relevant, perhaps even more so, in the contemporary world. The trends Schaeffer identified – the fragmentation of knowledge, the rise of relativism, the erosion of absolute truth, and the decline of a cohesive worldview – have only intensified in the 21st century. We live in an era saturated with information but often lacking in wisdom, where personal opinion is frequently elevated above objective reality, and where the very foundations of morality are constantly debated.

Schaeffer's analysis of the "ghost/machine" split continues to resonate as many individuals struggle to reconcile their faith with scientific or philosophical ideas. The secularization of society has further entrenched the separation of the sacred and the secular, leaving many Christians feeling ill-equipped to engage in meaningful dialogue about their faith in public forums. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of postmodern thought, with its emphasis on deconstruction and subjective interpretation, echoes the very issues Schaeffer addressed regarding the loss of objective truth. His call for Christians to engage with culture, to be intellectually rigorous, and to present a consistent worldview is a vital directive for believers navigating the complexities of modern life.

The book's exploration of humanism, its critique of its secular manifestations, and its articulation of true humanism grounded in God's image remain pertinent in discussions about human dignity, bioethics, and social justice. Schaeffer's emphasis on the necessity of a biblical worldview as the foundation for meaning, purpose, and morality provides a much-needed anchor in a world often adrift in uncertainty. Therefore, "How Should We Then Live?" continues to serve as an essential resource for understanding the cultural landscape and for equipping Christians to live out their faith with clarity and conviction.

Applying Schaeffer's Principles to Contemporary Issues

The enduring power of Francis Schaeffer's "How Should We Then Live?" lies in its applicability to the pressing issues of our time. His framework for understanding cultural trends and responding with a biblically grounded worldview offers practical guidance for Christians seeking to live faithfully in the modern era.

One key area of application is in the realm of public discourse and apologetics. Schaeffer's emphasis on starting with biblical presuppositions and engaging with opposing viewpoints from a position of intellectual confidence empowers Christians to articulate their faith effectively. Whether discussing topics like the origin of life, the nature of morality, or the existence of God, believers can draw upon Schaeffer's insights to demonstrate the rationality and coherence of the Christian worldview. This involves not merely presenting biblical propositions but also showing how they provide the necessary foundation for all rational thought and human experience.

Schaeffer's critique of relativism is particularly relevant in an age where truth claims are often seen as a matter of personal preference or cultural consensus. Applying his principles means actively challenging relativistic assumptions and advocating for the existence of objective truth, grounded in the immutable character of God. This can be applied to discussions on gender, sexuality, ethics, and virtually any area where moral and philosophical debates are taking place. Christians are called to be a counter-cultural force, offering a message of hope and truth grounded in something more enduring than fleeting human opinion.

Furthermore, Schaeffer's call to engage with culture extends to the arts, media, and technology. Christians are encouraged to consume and create cultural products that reflect biblical values, offering alternative narratives and challenging prevailing secular assumptions. This means being discerning consumers of media, critical evaluators of artistic expression, and thoughtful contributors to the cultural conversation. It involves moving beyond passive consumption to active participation, seeking to imbue culture with the beauty and truth of God's creation and redemption. His emphasis on the arts as a crucial arena for worldview engagement remains a vital directive for contemporary believers.

Conclusion: Living Faithfully in a Modern World

Francis Schaeffer's "How Should We Then Live?" provides an indispensable roadmap for Christians seeking to navigate the complexities of the modern world with intellectual integrity and faithful action. By meticulously tracing the historical trajectory of Western thought from theism to existentialism, Schaeffer illuminated the profound consequences of departing from a biblical worldview. His critiques of the "ghost/machine" split and relativistic thinking, coupled with his robust defense of Scripture as the ultimate source of truth and reason, offer a powerful framework for understanding our cultural landscape.

The central takeaway from Schaeffer's work is the imperative for believers to live out their faith consistently across all aspects of life. This means not compartmentalizing faith from intellect or culture, but rather integrating biblical truth into every endeavor. It calls for a deep engagement with philosophy, art, and social issues, presenting a winsome and compelling alternative to secular humanism and nihilism. "How Should We Then Live?" is not merely an academic treatise; it is a passionate exhortation to live a life that reflects the fullness of God's truth, impacting culture and glorifying Him in the process. By embracing Schaeffer's insights, Christians can be better equipped to be the salt and light the world so desperately needs.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central thesis of Francis Schaeffer's 'How Should We Then Live'?

The central thesis of 'How Should We Then Live' is that a society's worldview, particularly its understanding of God and human nature, directly shapes its art, philosophy, ethics, and ultimately, its way of life. Schaeffer argues that a Christian worldview provides a coherent and meaningful foundation for a flourishing society, contrasting it with the perceived decay and irrationality stemming from humanistic or materialistic worldviews.

How does Schaeffer connect art and culture to a society's worldview in the book?

Schaeffer traces the development of Western art and culture, arguing that they reflect underlying philosophical shifts. He uses artistic movements like the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and modern abstract expressionism as markers of changing worldviews, demonstrating how a loss of transcendent truth leads to fragmentation, despair, and ultimately, meaninglessness in cultural expressions.

What is Schaeffer's view on the impact of the Enlightenment and rationalism on society?

Schaeffer views the Enlightenment and its emphasis on human reason divorced from God as a pivotal turning point. While acknowledging its initial contributions, he argues that by rejecting supernatural revelation and objective truth, it ultimately led to a fragmented reality where faith and reason were separated, paving the way for secularism, existentialism, and the erosion of traditional moral and social structures.

What role does Schaeffer assign to Christianity in addressing the perceived problems of modern society?

Schaeffer positions Christianity not just as a personal religion but as a comprehensive worldview that offers a robust answer to the existential questions and societal ills of modernity. He argues that a biblical understanding of God, creation, humanity, and redemption provides the necessary foundation for truth, morality, meaning, and hope, offering a contrast to the despair and nihilism he saw in secular thought.

What is the significance of the title 'How Should We Then Live' in relation to Schaeffer's argument?

The title 'How Should We Then Live' is a direct call to action and a reflection of the book's practical implications. Schaeffer contends that if our foundational beliefs (our worldview) are flawed, then our subsequent actions and societal structures will inevitably be problematic. The book seeks to provide a framework for living authentically and meaningfully by grounding one's life in a Christian worldview.

What are some common criticisms leveled against Francis Schaeffer's 'How Should We Then Live'?

Common criticisms include Schaeffer's perceived oversimplification of complex philosophical and artistic movements, his tendency to present a dichotomous view of worldviews (Christian vs. non-Christian), and accusations of historical determinism. Some also question the direct causal links he draws between specific philosophical ideas and the decline of societal values, suggesting that other factors are at play.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Francis Schaeffer's *How Should We Then Live?*, with brief descriptions:

1. *The Abolition of Man* by C.S. Lewis

This seminal work explores the dangers of reducing humanity to mere biological or psychological mechanisms. Lewis argues against the idea that objective moral values can be discarded without severe consequences for civilization. He champions the importance of preserving a shared understanding of human nature and morality.

2. *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom

Bloom critiques the decline of intellectual rigor and the rise of relativism in American higher education. He contends that the embrace of subjective experience over objective truth has left students ill-equipped to grapple with enduring philosophical questions. The book is a passionate defense of the liberal arts and the pursuit of wisdom.

3. *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins

This book presents a strong argument for atheism, challenging the validity and rationality of religious belief. Dawkins asserts that religion is a harmful delusion that inhibits critical thinking and hinders human progress. It represents a contemporary secular viewpoint contrasting with Schaeffer's theistic worldview.

4. *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

Lewis systematically lays out the fundamental tenets of Christianity in a clear and accessible manner. He addresses common objections to faith and demonstrates the reasonableness of belief from a philosophical perspective. The book aims to provide a solid foundation for understanding Christian doctrine and its implications for life.

5. *Orthodoxy* by G.K. Chesterton

Chesterton articulates his conversion to Christianity, presenting it not as a retreat from reason, but as a triumphant affirmation of it. He argues that Christianity offers a coherent and comprehensive worldview that explains the paradoxes of human experience. The book celebrates the invigorating and liberating nature of Christian truth.

6. *Surprised by Joy* by C.S. Lewis

This autobiography chronicles Lewis's spiritual journey from atheism to Christianity. He vividly describes the experiences and intellectual struggles that led him to embrace faith. The book offers a personal and compelling account of finding meaning and truth in a universe often perceived as indifferent.

7. The Gulag Archipelago by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

This monumental work exposes the brutal realities of the Soviet forced labor camp system. Solzhenitsyn details the systematic oppression and dehumanization inflicted upon millions of innocent people. It serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of totalitarian evil.

8. Against the Grain by Jonathan Rose

Rose argues that the rejection of traditional wisdom and the pursuit of utopian ideals has led to societal decay. He contends that a return to ancient virtues and a recognition of natural law are essential for a flourishing civilization. The book offers a historical perspective on the consequences of modernity's philosophical shifts.

9. A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis

Written in the aftermath of his wife's death, this deeply personal reflection explores the complexities of grief and doubt. Lewis grapples with his faith and his understanding of God in the face of profound loss. The book is a raw and honest examination of the human condition and the search for meaning amidst suffering.

Francis Schaeffer How Should We Then Live

Francis Schaeffer How Should We Then Live

Related Articles

- [frances cress welsing isis papers 2](#)
- [fourier transform and its applications](#)
- [four good days worksheet](#)

[Back to Home](#)