

# What can we learn from this father and son?

Making sense of Frank Schaeffer's disturbing book, *Crazy for God*

by David R. Swartz

I grew up thinking that my faith was intellectually credible. Many in my parents' generation did not—until they came across their liberator, Francis Schaeffer. A starched fundamentalist Presbyterian until his forties, he moved to Switzerland as a missionary in the 1950s. Pleasant encounters with European bohemians soon turned Schaeffer into something of a hippie guru who mixed a countercultural style with traditional defenses of the faith. Soon Schaeffer's Swiss chalet and his reputation as a thinker willing to take on all philosophical comers attracted youths traveling from India to the West still high on opium as well as earnest evangelical students traveling east from America. They all came in search of resolution to existential questions. Clad in knee-high knickers, beige Nehru jackets, long hair, and a white goatee, Schaeffer engaged them through rambling lectures delivered in a peculiarly high-pitched, American-Austrian accent over modest meals of soup, bread, and cheese.

He engaged American evangelicals more widely through his prolific writings. As a child I first encountered Schaeffer in my parents' bookshelves. *Escape from Reason* and *The God Who Is There*, they told me, had been assigned to them in the 1970s by Rosedale Bible Institute instructors. In these books Schaeffer led readers on a sweeping journey through modern phi-

losophy and culture. The Reformation synthesis of reason, truth, and faith, Schaeffer expounded, had been lost. The "new theology," which denied "the God behind truth," was soft. It had separated the "lower story" of natural revelation from the "upper story" of divine revelation. This separation, marked by a "line of despair," left the "upper story" unhinged and susceptible to mysticism, despair, and the nihilism of modern existentialism. Conservative evangelical faith, rooted in verifiable natural theology, alone offered the truth that the counterculture sought in vain. Schaeffer thus insisted that Christians can and should "rationally prove the authority of the Bible." In the context of a "God-is-dead" theology so prominent in the 1960s, Schaeffer's confidence was inspiring indeed.

Schaeffer's use of modern culture proved even more thrilling to many evangelicals, for he sought to marshal secularism against itself through its films, music, and literature. Out of a tradition that often demanded distance from contemporary culture, Schaeffer spoke with fluency of Van Gogh, Henry Miller, the Beatles, and Federico Fellini, describing their common cries of despair and how that contributed to modern ailments such as environmental degradation, racism, and the "plastic culture." While evangelical scholars typically dismissed Schaeffer's analyses as lightweight, his attraction to evangelical students often unversed in high or popular culture was evident. He introduced young evangelicals to the exotica of the counterculture under the guise of criticism. For evangelical students struggling with college administrations that had outlawed the movie *Bambi*, Schaeffer's calm, didactic discussions of Fellini in campus chapel services felt both incongruous and liberating. Schaeffer's riffs on John Cage and Salvador Dali delighted students worried about intellectual integrity.

Thousands of young American evangelicals made their way through the Swiss mountains to L'Abri.



Those who didn't make the journey heard Schaeffer speak at their evangelical college campuses—or read one of his books (InterVarsity Press published over 2.5 million copies of his eighteen books from 1965 to 1975). Schaeffer, idolized by millions, had become the intellectual guru of evangelicalism.

And then last year his son Frank released a bombshell, a book entitled *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*. Notable not only for its very long and bombastic subtitle, the book also painted an unorthodox portrait of the evangelical idol. Frank portrays his father as inattentive (as a father), impious (for not publicly praying for meals while on vacation), immoderate (for being demanding of his wife Edith), naïve (for being co-opted politically in the late 1970s), and duplicitous (for helping religious right leaders despite loathing them). *Crazy for God* is a surprisingly riveting tale, not at all what you would expect out of a memoir about growing up the son of a theologian-philosopher. It is also a morality tale full of insights about the dilemmas of confession, celebrity, and politics.

### Confessing our sins

*Crazy for God* is, on the face of it, a confession. Frank (then called Franky) admits to sleeping around with young female visitors to L'Abri, smacking his young daughter in a fit of rage, and failing (despite heroic efforts) to quench an insufferable thirst for attention. The problem is that Frank not only confesses his own sins, but others' sins, especially his parents'. He calls his mother Edith, who is still living, a "high-powered nut" and describes her as a wannabe Euro-sophisticate "best at the martyrdom game." Bitter, disturbingly explicit, and self-flagellating, Frank in the end comes off more as a tattle-tale than a penitent confessor.

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Franky and Francis

In the right context, this sort of confrontation might be helpful and appropriate. The problem is not only that he is unkind or that his memory is faulty (many reviewers have disputed his accuracy and perspective), but also that he seems to have failed to follow biblical rules of confrontation. Rather than privately approaching his parents in a spirit of humility—or failing that, with two or three others—Frank exposes their foibles before a watching world. "If I read it," Edith told a family friend about one of Frank's earlier books, "it would probably break my heart." This book too would have disappointed her, and it prompted me, a young father of three, to pledge all over again to be a good family man just in case one of my sons is an articulate novelist with few qualms about spilling prurient family secrets.

Despite himself, Frank does make several important points, both theological and practical. First, he wants his parents' idolizers to know that the great Francis and Edith Schaeffer have "feet of clay." All of us sin, even the most talented, most holy, most spiritual. We all need redemption through Jesus' death and resurrection. And no followers of Christ, Frank suggests, are perfect. No one, not even the great Francis Schaeffer, can be completely trusted on matters as diverse as the family, politics, philosophy, and spirituality.

Second, he reminds us that specificity in confession is cathartic and biblical. There is value in the recitation of sin. While jarring and uncomfortable for the reader, Frank is helped by disclosing his failings. And he will undoubtedly help others who read about these failings. I remember when my parents told me a particularly shocking (for me) secret far back in my genealogy. It kept me from idolizing the past and warned me of the consequences of imprudence. While we must be careful in how and where and when, it is important to expose and repent of sin.

### Books warning of the political seduction of evangelicals:

- Charles Colson, *Born Again* (1976): The story of a top Nixon aide implicated in the Watergate scandal. Colson describes how he found new life in Jesus rather than success and power.
- Ed Dobson and Cal Thomas, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (1999): Two former religious right insiders decry the political entrapment of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell out of raw ambition and by conservative operatives.
- David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (2006): An expose of how the Bush Administration used the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives for political purposes while ridiculing evangelical voters.

### Books by Frank Schaeffer

- *Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th-Century Christians and the Arts* (1982): a condemnation of Christian kitsch. He writes, "Whenever Christians, and evangelicals in particular, have attempted to 'reach the world' through the media—TV, film, publishing and so on—the thinking public gets the firm idea that, like soup in a bad restaurant, Christians' brains are best left unstirred." Frank rather urges evangelicals to seek excellence in writing, painting, and filmmaking.
- *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality* (1982): An angry book that advocates non-stop picketing of abortion clinics and the harassment of abortion doctors to the point that they are "driven from our communities." "Ours has been a religion of faith without deeds for too long. It is time that mighty deeds be done again. Truth equals confrontation." James Dobson once gave out 150,000 copies of this book to his radio listeners.
- *Keeping Faith: A Father-Son Story about Love and the U.S. Marine Corps* (2002): A memoir co-written

with his son John about the terror and pride of serving in the Marine Corps.

- *Dancing Alone: The Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religion* (1994): Details Frank's journey toward the Greek Orthodox Church, which he appreciates for its "embrace of paradox and mystery"
- *Portofino: A Novel* (1992): a best-selling novel translated into seven languages that is a barely disguised memoir of his childhood vacations in Portofino, Italy.

### Selected books by Francis Schaeffer

- *The God Who Is There* (1968): A sharp critique of a Western philosophy stuck in a morass of nihilism and existentialism.
- *Escape from Reason* (1968): Argues that reason points toward a coherent theism that offers hope out of despair, relativism, and self-indulgence.
- *Pollution and the Death of Man*: One of the first evangelical statements on the environment. It was named the Environmental Protection Agency's book of the year in 1970.
- *How Should We Then Live?* (1976): A best-selling book, then film, derivative of Schaeffer's earlier philosophical work. It ends by arguing that the Bible offers freedom from chaos and the tyranny of an authoritarian elite.
- *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (1979): Co-written with C. Everett Koop, future Surgeon General in the Reagan administration, this book and documentary film decry a waning appreciation for life. Schaeffer predicts rises in abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.
- *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1984): After a sudden alignment with the religious right, Schaeffer

## Spiritual celebrities

*Crazy for God* also reveals the danger of celebrity. To the evangelical public, Schaeffer seemed to be a pure, uncompromising prophet. And his confrontation of pagan philosophy and the culture of death that permeated the 1960s and 1970s was in fact courageous. His star rose, especially in America, where his books sold by the millions and strengthened the spiritual lives of even more. And yet by Frank's telling there were chinks in his armor. In this memoir Schaeffer comes off as a crackpot whose celebrity resulted from his eccentric wardrobe and fortuitous discovery by evangelical publishers.

Whether or not Frank's version is trustworthy or balanced, he nevertheless highlights important questions about the nature of evangelicalism: Do we want the market to determine our spokespeople? Do we want Schaeffer as the face of evangelicalism? Very possibly not, despite the many good fruits that came from his ministry. But the very structure of American religion, particularly evangelicalism, lends itself toward representatives who are not very representative. Unlike Catholicism, with its venerable traditions, churchly bureaucratic structures, and a Pope shielded from public pressure, evangelicalism prizes an anti-authoritarian and innovative spirit rooted in the Reformation and "democratized" in American soil. While this adaptive spirit has allowed evangelicalism to fill many fissures in American society and consequently outpace every other religious movement, it also disrupts order and coherence. American evangelicalism thus consists of hundreds of denominations and thousands of para-church organizations with constituents from disparate geographies, socio-economic statuses, and ethnicities.

With notable exceptions, the individuals to emerge out of such a disordered ecclesiology tend to be inordinately innovative and charismatic—like a young Billy Graham—or intensely dogged and ambitious—like James Dobson—or inflammatory—like Carl McIntire, Jimmy Swaggart, and a host of others. Accompanied by glossy brochures,

media attention, and political clout, these evangelical personalities inevitably outshine or outshout quietly faithful shepherds in obscure towns such as Kalona, Irwin, and Castorland.

From an Anabaptist—and for that matter, biblical—perspective the sway of spiritual celebrities is frightening. The Apostle Paul warned about the dangers of dynamic

personalities and divisions in the church, admonishing the Corinthians not to follow Cephas, Paul, or Apollos "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." Anabaptists in turn grounded their life together in local church discipline. Action and theology, they maintained, should be rooted in the church, a context that allows for accountability and helps ensure that leaders' spiritual lives are in order. Menno Simons would have been chagrined to know that an entire tradition—and worse, hun-

dreds of splinter groups—would be named after him. And he would have been aghast at the antics and self-promotions of the many evangelical celebrities we support. Is it any surprise that so many of them flame out under the weight of pressure, self-entitlement, and a lack of accountability? Amidst the horror show of sexual improprieties by Ted Haggard, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim Bakker, Billy Graham is the exception that proves the rule.

The track record is even worse for the children of evangelical celebrities. Frank, describing himself as "an art- and sex-driven wraith," appears to leave no titillating secret masked in *Crazy for God*. He confesses sexual sin at which his father merely winked. He confesses to taking advantage of his father in weak moments, to repeatedly bowing to impulse, to accepting the benefits of nepotism, to naively allowing himself to be used by Republican politicians. Critics of Frank—and Frank himself—attribute these weaknesses to his father's celebrity and the many "benefits" of that celebrity: start-up money from investors and a coddled childhood in which he was refused little. The thousands of students who journeyed through L'Abri called him a "little Napoleon."

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The Schaeffers show that the dangers of celebrity can beset even the most talented, sincere, and noblest Christ-followers.

## What about politics?

If Frank's disclosures about his family bump up against the limits of good taste and biblical allowances, his salvos against evangelical politics are spot on. If Jesus' greatest temptation was the lure of being an earthly, political messiah in a Jewish context, one of evangelicals' greatest temptations is alliance with the Republican Party. In the last half of *Crazy for God*, Frank focuses on his unlikely encounter with American politics.

The outline of the religious right's emergence is well known, but Frank offers more color and texture. He describes growing ties between the Schaeffers and Congressman Jack Kemp. Kemp's wife Joanne started a book club called the "Schaeffer Group" in which twenty congressmen's wives met weekly to read and discuss Schaeffer's books. Frank also showed the Kemps, and then the Republican Club (where more than 50 congressmen and 20 senators, including Bob Dole and Henry Hyde, viewed the film), a private screening of *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* From then on, according to Frank Schaeffer, "Jack would give Koop, Dad, and myself access to everyone in the Republican Party." The world of the Kemps, Richard DeVos, and Amway (which gave millions of dollars to the Schaeffers' projects), Frank points out, "was about as slick and worldly and far away from the L'Abri way as anyone could get." Frank portrays the Schaeffers as caught up in this new world of political elites, even though they were dismissive of Kemp's preoccupation with supply-side economics. Frank levels a withering critique against evangelical titans such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and James Kennedy. Francis, Frank remembers, called them "plastic" and "power-hungry." Frank now laments he and his father also "caught the power-trip disease."

What Frank misses is that the same principle applies to the political party he now seems to embrace: the Democratic Party. The risks of political alliances cannot be limited to the Republican Party. The evangelical left of the 1970s and 1980s encountered many of the same dilemmas and compromises inherent in the American two-party electoral system. As was

the case with Reagan's economic and military policies, many evangelicals adopted planks in the Democratic Party not well suited to evangelical sensibilities and biblical priorities.

Though I do not vote, the political approach I personally resonate with the most is the consistent pro-life ethic—anti-abortion, anti-poverty, anti-death penalty, antiwar—launched by the Catholics in the mid-1970s and extended by evangelicals such as Ron Sider in the 1980s. But the American political configuration leaves folks like me without a political home. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats come even close to fitting my political and spiritual agenda, one of the reasons I abstain from party politics. I worry that those who identify very closely with one political party—whatever party it is—will be dangerously tempted to compromise their faithfulness—and their ability to speak out prophetically—on issues that matter to us as disciples of Christ. To be sure, many Christians have found it plausible to vote—even run for office—while maintaining religious integrity. Yet striking challenges—especially avoiding compromise of religious and evangelistic priorities while maintaining relevance in the political world—make political participation a dicey prospect indeed.

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As a model of evangelical spirituality, *Crazy for God* leaves much to be desired. As a warning to spiritual evangelicals, it is helpful. In an age when evangelicals beat the drum for global and cultural transformation, the mixed legacy of the Schaeffers makes Paul's advice to the Thessalonians—"aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders and be dependent on nobody"—suddenly seem sage and worthy of reconsideration. **BB**

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*Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back*

by Frank Schaeffer

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condemned top evangelicals and institutions such as Ron Sider, Wheaton College, and *Christianity Today* for compromising with socialism and tolerating sexual improprieties.

## Selected books by Edith Schaeffer

- *L'Abri* (1969): The story of how L'Abri was founded on principles of prayer, faith in God, and intellectual discourse.
- *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* (1971): On living life and keeping house using artistry found in the ordinary duties of everyday life.

**L'Abri Communities:** L'Abri has thrived since Francis Schaeffer's death in 1984. Seven additional branches have opened up in a half-dozen countries. Each quietly emulates the original Swiss L'Abri in its goal to offer a welcoming place to discuss issues of faith. Thousands of young people still flock to L'Abri to stay for two to three months as they "seek answers to honest questions about God and the significance of human life."

- Huemoz, Switzerland (1955)
- Greatham, England (1971)
- Eck en Wiel, Holland (1971)
- Rochester, Minnesota (1979)
- Southborough, Massachusetts (1980)
- Molle, Sweden (1981)
- Yangyang, South Korea (1994)
- West Vancouver, British Columbia (2003)

For further discussion of *Crazy for God*, including a sharp critique by Francis Schaeffer's colleague Os Guinness and a response by Frank, see the March-April 2008 issue of *Books & Culture*.