

Francis Schaeffer's Warning: The Idols of Personal Peace, Affluence, and Expressive Individualism in Professional Class Christianity



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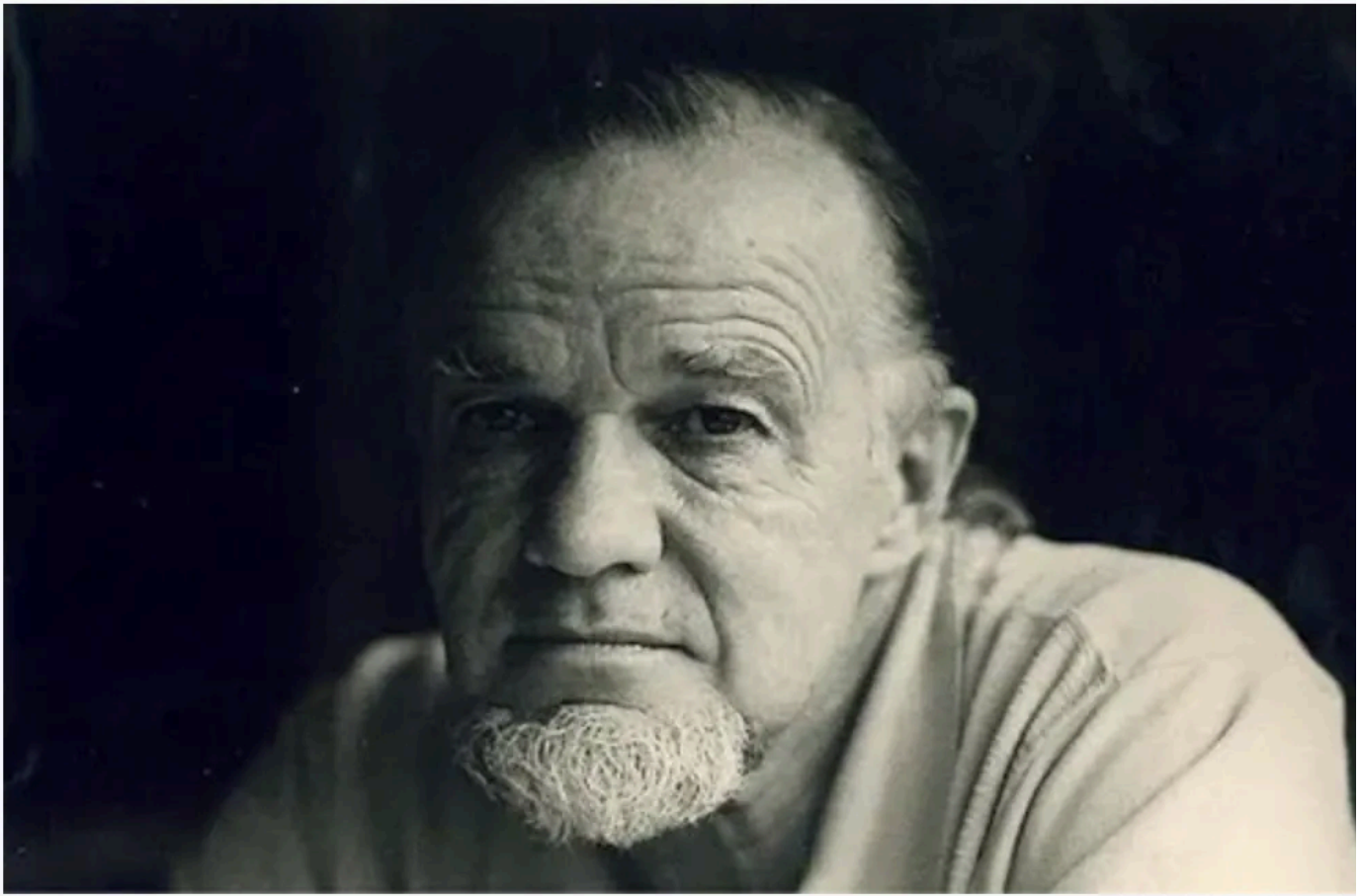


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Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. ~1 John 5:21

Francis Schaeffer's [*How Should We Then Live?*](#) is as relevant today as ever. Modern society, shaped by a secular and humanistic worldview, stands at a crucial juncture. What can Schaeffer teach us? Over the past decades, a cultural narrative has emerged and solidified—a narrative proclaiming that human autonomy and material progress are sufficient foundations for meaning and value. This narrative has come at great cost. From the arts to philosophy, from politics to personal lifestyles, one message dominates: humanity, unaided by divine revelation, has no answers. Reason, untethered from God, leads not to hope but to despair, resignation, and consumption. Tragically, in 2024, it seems that much of middle-class and upper-class American Christianity seems to have been impacted by this as well.

By the mid-20th century, the absence of fixed moral absolutes resulted in the ascendancy of two horrendous values—*personal peace* and *affluence*. These are the defining idols of our time. By personal peace, Schaeffer means the pursuit of a life undisturbed—an insistence on being left alone, even at the expense of the suffering of others or the well-being of future generations. A life of comfort and hobbies. By affluence, Schaeffer means the obsessive accumulation of material goods, measured success and prosperity. A life dedicated to avoiding discomfort. These values now dominate every corner of Western society, casting a long shadow over its institutions, families, and moral fabric.

In 2024, this pursuit of personal peace manifests in an obsessive focus on individual comfort, disengagement, and self-expression. Whether through endless streams of entertainment, the curation of digital identities, or the insulation of life within echo chambers, many have withdrawn from meaningful engagement with the world's struggles. Affluence, meanwhile, feeds an insatiable consumer culture, where even relationships and communities are commodified. These idols have not only eroded societies—they have failed us utterly.

Schaeffer's analysis challenges us to reconsider how we've allowed secular values to infiltrate the values of our churches, shaping how we teach children about success,

how think about parenting, and how we define the good life. Instead of forming the next generation willing to live lives of sacrifice, discipline, and suffering, middle-class and upper-class Christianity often produces spiritually shallow individuals driven by personal comfort and material gain. GenZers and Gen Alpha teens and young adults know it's empty so they quietly revolt through their consumption patterns and social media activity.

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How Christianity Lost Its Countercultural Edge

Schaeffer observed that, by the 1960s, Western culture had been consumed by the pursuit of personal peace—being left undisturbed—and affluence, defined as the relentless accumulation of possessions and wealth. These values, he argued, were rooted in secular humanism and a rejection of transcendent truth.

Rather than resisting this cultural drift, middle-class and upper-class Christianity seems to have absorbed it, creating a version of faith that prioritizes success, ease, and self-fulfillment. This has reshaped the very fabric of how families and churches operate. Children are often raised to prioritize academic, athletic, and career achievements over spiritual formation. Parents, consciously or not, teach their kids that the ultimate goal is personal success, not sacrificial evil fighting.

This shift is deeply intertwined with expressive individualism, which insists that the highest good is self-expression and authenticity. Middle-class and upper-class Christians often unknowingly baptize this worldview, encouraging young people to “follow their dreams,” asking “what are you passionate about,” and “live their truth. This is not the call of life in light of the Resurrection. Schaeffer warned that when

Christians embrace cultural idols, they abandon the countercultural nature of the work and person Christ.

The Achievement Culture: Success Over Sacrifice

[Middle-class and upper-class families often measure success through the lens of material gain, status, and accolades.](#) As I've mentioned before, in her book *Never Enough*, Jennifer Breheny Wallace describes how children in achievement-driven households are conditioned to see their worth through external accomplishments like grades, trophies, and college admissions. This "professionalized childhood" leaves little room for reflection, rest, or even basic joy.

Christian families are not exempt from this pressure, unfortunately. In fact, they often reinforce it by conflating worldly success with God's blessing. This sends a dangerous message to young people: that God's favor is tied to performance and that their identity lies in what they achieve, not who they are in union with Christ.

The result is burnout, anxiety, and spiritual emptiness. The emptiness results in substance abuse, laziness, decadence, life-as-entertainment, obesity, cell phone and video addiction, and so on. Teens raised in this culture often feel the same mental health burdens as their non-Christian peers, driven by an insatiable need to prove their worth. Schaeffer would lament how middle-class and upper-class Christianity has traded eternal truths for American cultural assimilation.

Expressive Individualism: Christianity in Disguise

[Expressive individualism](#) elevates self-expression and personal fulfillment as the highest virtues. It resists external norms, especially those rooted in tradition or religious authority, and instead celebrates autonomy and authenticity. This worldview directly contradicts the gospel, which calls for self-denial, submission to God, and a life oriented toward the good of others.

Yet, many modern Christians have embraced expressive individualism, reframing it in spiritual terms. Messages like “God wants you to live your best life” and “God made you unique to fulfill your dreams” sound appealing but are fundamentally shallow. They encourage believers to view **faith as a tool for achieving personal success and happiness rather than as a transformative journey of obedience, sacrifice, and service.**

Schaeffer would call this out as a distortion of the gospel. Christianity was never meant to affirm our desires but to redirect them toward God's purposes. By adopting the language of expressive individualism, middle-class and upper-class Christianity has lost its prophetic voice.

The Mental Health Crisis: A Symptom of Spiritual Drift

The consequences of this cultural accommodation are most evident in the rising anxiety and depression among young people. Both Jennifer Wallace and Madeline Levine, in *The Price of Privilege*, describe how children raised in high-pressure environments struggle with perfectionism, feelings of inadequacy, and a deep sense of isolation.

Schaeffer would see this as a direct result of prioritizing personal peace and affluence over spiritual formation. When Christian parents teach their children that life is about success and comfort, they neglect to equip them for the challenges of a fallen world. A generation raised without the tools to endure hardship or embrace suffering will inevitably seek quick fixes, whether through vaping, social media escapism, or other unhealthy coping mechanisms.

What Schaeffer Would Say Today

Schaeffer would be deeply critical of how middle-class and upper-class Christianity has conformed to secular culture. He would challenge believers to rediscover the radical nature of the gospel—a call to live counterculturally, reject materialism, and embrace lives marked by sacrifice, discipline, and service.

The early church provides a model of what this looks like. Those first Christians were known for their willingness to suffer for their faith, their radical hospitality, and their rejection of cultural idols. Schaeffer would urge modern Christians to recover this vision, pointing out that a faith focused on personal peace and affluence cannot withstand the pressures of a post-Christian world.

A Call to True Spiritual Formation

Schaeffer's critique is a wake-up call for middle-class and upper-class Christians to reject the idols of success, comfort, and self-expression. True spiritual formation requires a radical reorientation of our lives around the Resurrection. It calls us to embrace suffering, live sacrificially, and find our self-understanding in light of history and redemption.

Parents must model this for their children. They must teach that their worth is not tied to achievements but to their identity as beloved baptized children of the God. Churches must reclaim their prophetic voice, challenging cultural norms rather than conforming to them. This will require more counter-cultural living rather than passively living to an American culture that is less and less familiar to Christianity.

Schaeffer's question—*How should we then live?*—is as pressing today as it was decades ago. The answer lies in rejecting the false promises of American culture and recommitting to a faith that prioritizes ancient, traditional values over temporary comforts.

Now What?

The path forward is not easy, but it seems clear. Christians must reject the idols of personal peace and affluence and rediscover the vision of human flourishing that's consistent with Resurrection. This means creating homes and communities rooted in unconditional love, mutual accountability, and radical hospitality.

By addressing the cultural pressures driving anxiety and spiritual emptiness, we can offer a countercultural vision of life rooted in grace, truth, and eternal hope.

Schaeffer's challenge is not just to critique the culture but to live as a faithful witness within it. Only then can we restore what he called "the reality of true spirituality."

Are we willing to embrace this call? Or will we continue to settle for a faith of comfort and ease? The time to choose is now.

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Emily Harrison Dear Christian Parent Dec 3

♥ Liked by Anthony B. Bradley

Thank you for this! I work to encourage Christian parents, pastors and youth leaders to say no to smartphones, tablets, video games and social media for kids. The data clearly says these things are harming our kids. Schaeffer explains the why is such a powerful way. We must recognize that eternal beings made in the image of God and this spiritual reality is being clouded by modern distractions. Kids need us to wake up.

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1 reply by Anthony B. Bradley



Forrest Horn Forrest Horn Dec 3

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A great challenge!! I see it in my own life and in the lives of my sons. Thank you for this helpful reminder.

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