

# The Great Evangelical Fudge

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**Ranald Macaulay** was born in South Africa. He moved to the United Kingdom in 1956 to do a law degree at Cambridge. At the end of his second year he met Francis and Edith Schaeffer. The Schaeffers had just recently started L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland. He visited them at the end of 1959 and decided to join the work. He and Susan Schaeffer were married in April 1961. In 1964 they started the English L'Abri in London. There Ranald completed a BD Hons in theology, at King's College, London. In January 1971 they moved to Hampshire to start a residential branch of L'Abri. In 1978 Ranald co-authored the book *Being Human* with Jerram Barrs (IVP Academic, 1998), on the nature of spiritual experience. A number of his articles have appeared in *Evangelicals Now* and other journals. When Francis Schaeffer died in 1984 the family returned to Switzerland for four years. In 1996 they moved to Cambridge where Ranald founded *Christian Heritage* at the Round Church (since renamed "The Foundation Trust")—the second oldest building in the city built in 1130 AD. Since 2017 he and Susan have been back in Hampshire near the L'Abri house.

2024 was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Francis Schaeffer's final book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*.<sup>1</sup> When it came out in 1984, he had only months to live.

The title sounds alarming, but that was Schaeffer's intention. The same theological drift he had witnessed as a young man was now threatening Evangelicalism. Churches which had once been faithful to the Bible were now in danger. He felt this deeply. In short, the book was the act of a dying and desperate man and should be read as such.

What interests me most about it, however, is not so much its content, crucial as that is, but its *operating principle*. By the 1980s the modern West, whose background and future Schaeffer had sketched so prophetically, was now promoting ideas about gender and sex inimical to the Bible. This was no surprise to him for he knew better than most that, given the culture's rejection of Christianity, it had to happen.

What he also knew was that the church could never compromise over its most basic principle, namely, the authority of the Word of God. It was what Schaeffer had stood for all his life — that human ideas must always be subject to the revelation of God in Scripture.

But why the urgency?

Few realize, I think, that early in 1984, specifically to mark the publication of *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, the publisher arranged a series of speaking engagements at five or six of the leading Evangelical Colleges (universities) across the States. He hoped that, by appearing in person, he might reinforce a stronger commitment to Scriptural authority in the younger generation. Those who had heard him at the Lausanne Congress 10 years earlier disappointed him.

The hallmark of our generation in contrast to the previous generation is that this generation does not believe that truth exists in any form. All is relativistic. There is no such thing as truth as truth. The issue is clear: is the Bible true-truth and infallible, wherever it speaks, including where it speaks of *history and the cosmos*, or is it only in some sense revelational where it touches religious subjects? ... There is no use in Evangelicalism seeming to get larger and larger if at the same time appreciable parts of Evangelicalism are getting soft at that which is the central core of Evangelicalism, namely, the Scriptures. There is no use having greater numbers if the whole thing is deluded.<sup>2</sup>

By 1984, despite his warnings, the drift had continued. Perhaps the young would prove more attentive. In the event his health, already compromised by cancer, deteriorated rapidly and he died in Rochester, Minnesota, on May 15, 1984.<sup>3</sup> Those who heard him in those last months said it was like hearing a voice from the grave.

Why then, in such extreme circumstances, did Schaeffer do this? Why write a controversial book, then crisscross the States within weeks of his death? The closing sentences of his preface tell us: "I would say that the statement I am making in the pages of this book is perhaps the most important statement I have ever written."<sup>4</sup>

Schaeffer may well be overstating his case here for surely his observations about the *background* to the West's growing antipathy to biblical ethics were his most important legacy. However, in relation to the immediate fall-

out of the society's repudiation of God's existence and revelation, the book was critical. It was a timely warning.

## BACKGROUND

The larger background, however, is where we need to begin.

When Schaeffer was preparing for ordination in the Presbyterian Church in the early 1930s, old-fashioned liberalism had already overwhelmed the seminaries. Princeton was no longer a bastion of Protestant orthodoxy. The greats of the past, like the two Hodges and B. B. Warfield, were no more. J. Gresham Machen, one of Schaeffer's main influences, had recently attempted a counter-offensive, but was defrocked for his pains and kicked out in 1936. Since the church was still a significant voice in society, Machen's expulsion made front-line news. Schaeffer highlights this to emphasize the rapidity with which American society was changing. The limited respect that ordinary folk had for the old ways (e.g., for the sanctity of marriage and of the unborn) was still evident. But within a decade that was swept aside. From then on it was open season. The so-called sexual liberation had begun.

Interestingly, Schaeffer lays the blame for this moral collapse at the feet of the Bible-believing churches themselves. Why? Because, when the leaders knew this would happen, they failed to prevent it. He says,

It was *this drift* (in the mainline denominations from 1900–1936) which laid the base for the cultural, social, moral, legal and governmental changes from that time to the present. Without *this drift* in the denominations, I am convinced that the changes in our society over the past 50 years would have produced very different results from what we see now. When the Reformation churches shifted, the Reformation consensus was undercut.<sup>5</sup>

After 1936 the mainline denominations began to hemorrhage badly. Why go to church to hear moral platitudes only. Their Bible-believing counterparts by contrast surged. An unashamed commitment to the gospel and to the historical reliability of the Bible proved appealing. Time magazine even ran a cover-story about the new phenomenon: an Evangelical majority in the American nation!

But nothing was as it seemed. Church growth had brought a false sense of security. When speaking at the Billy Graham Congress in Berlin in 1966 Schaeffer tried to address this.<sup>6</sup> The liberal pressures had if anything intensified: modernism had morphed into existentialism and existentialism into postmodernism. The deceptions were more subtle but more dangerous. According to the new theologians, statements in the Bible could be *spiritually* meaningful even though *factually* untrue. Jesus may not have risen from the dead, but that did not matter: his “resurrection” retained spiritual force, as a concept. He called this “the existential methodology” and considered it potent enough to destroy civilization as we know it. This theological drift would become an abiding threat.

Finally, on his deathbed, he bared his soul for the last time. He feared that Evangelicalism was about to repeat the mistake of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

And what was it? In his own words: “the drift in the denominations”—more specifically, the drift away from the principle of Biblical authority. As he put it in Lausanne: “Is the Bible true-truth and infallible, *wherever it speaks*, including where it speaks of history and the cosmos, or is it only in some sense revelational where it touches on religious subjects?”<sup>7</sup>

Which brings us naturally to “the Great Evangelical Fudge.”

## THE FUDGE

Framing his question as he did (and speaking to some 2,700 participants and guests from over 150 nations) it was incumbent upon him to keep his message tight. In a sense he was using shorthand; so when he said “where (the Bible) speaks of history and the cosmos” he was referring principally to Genesis 1–3. This would have been obvious to those present. It was his way of saying that, not only were his own writings built on the foundational reality of a space-time creation and Fall, but so too those of the Old and New Testaments and of the historic creeds of the church. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, no church had hesitated to teach the traditional view: that Adam and Eve were two individual human beings like ourselves (*homo sapiens* made “in the image of God”); that they were the progenitors of the human race; that by a unique act of creation they had been formed as finite and moral beings without sin or any inherent defect; that only when tempted

and seduced had the actual reality of evil, suffering and physical death entered their experience.

The fact that he received a standing ovation is remarkable. He could hardly have been more direct: “In our day . . . holding to a strong view of Scripture or not holding to it is the watershed of the evangelical world.”<sup>8</sup>

### **THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM**

The elephant in the room, of course, was evolution. From 1859, when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* appeared, a new scientific consensus had developed. Whatever Darwin himself thought about God, the general assumption was that a supernatural Creator was no longer necessary. The Genesis account was just a myth. What had actually happened was just a physical phenomenon of some sort (later the “Big Bang”). Life then developed as a result of physical and chemical processes only. Eventually, human beings emerged through natural selection working upon chance mutations.

I call this the “elephant in the room” because I do not think Schaeffer’s audience fully appreciated just how radical he was being. On one hand they liked what he said about apologetics. His challenge of modern philosophy reminded them of the apostle Paul. Had not Paul used the same sort of logic at Athens and also in his letter to the Romans? When human beings turn away from God’s revealed truth their alternatives end up looking ridiculous.<sup>9</sup> Schaeffer’s potted sketches of western thought—from Enlightenment rationalism to Existentialistic irrationalism and so on—fleshed this out. His hearers could see from the way humanistic ideas had imploded in the West (damaging people’s lives along the way) that scientific materialism was a dead end. Schaeffer’s approach was exciting and moving: they even gave him a standing ovation.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Schaeffer sounded uncomfortably reactionary. Did Evangelicals really have to hold on to Biblical infallibility like *this*? Wasn’t he asking them to bury their heads in the sand? Hadn’t evolution been shown to be scientifically true? (There were other scholarly concerns, of course, but Genesis 1–3 must suffice for the present).

The elements of the fudge were beginning to form. *Step one*: the biblical account of origins is in conflict with science. *Step two*: an adjustment to the meaning of the text is considered necessary. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

the new orthodoxy of *theistic evolution* had been widely accepted. Only “fundamentalists” thought otherwise.

Few seemed to realize the enormity of what was happening. Most leaders ignored the issues and kept preaching “the Genesis story” as if nothing had happened. They assumed that it was still possible to maintain the framework of “Creation-Sin-Salvation” even if the details were a bit blurred. The fudge was necessary: nothing *too* robust should be said about design in creation,<sup>11</sup> or the nature of humanity at the beginning, or the fact that death came through the Fall. The details had to be kept fuzzy. This was *Step three*.

### **HUMAN DEATH BEFORE THE FALL?**

And what were those details? The main problem was human death. If Adam and Eve were not the first human beings on the planet and if pre-humans were dying continuously during the evolutionary process, when did *the law of sin and death* that the NT refers to come into effect?<sup>12</sup> Did not Genesis 1–3 say explicitly that human death would *follow* human sin? Isn’t the NT equally explicit about it?<sup>13</sup>

What brought things into sharp relief for me personally was my contact with Denis Alexander at the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup> Around 1996, when my wife and I moved to Cambridge, I was handed a copy of one of his recent lectures. This brought me face to face with the ideas I had hoped never to encounter inside the evangelical church. For the first time I realized that the goalposts were now as far outside the ballpark as possible: human death was no longer *a consequence* of the Fall. Instead, it ante-dated the Fall (whatever that might mean in this new scenario).<sup>15</sup> In other words, human death was as ‘natural’ for human beings as it was for animal and plant life, just a fact of carbon-based life.

The only concession to the Genesis account seemed to be the assertion that, in some mysterious way, the whole process was under God’s providential control.

I realized at a stroke how serious this is. If human death isn’t related to the sinfulness of the human race, what was Jesus doing on the cross? Yes, he was serving as a substitutionary atonement for human guilt, but wasn’t he

also *conquering death* through his physical resurrection (after the tragedy of physical death)? I thought that's what the church had always believed!

Hence the useful dictum: *if human death was not in the Fall how can it be in the Cross?*

This is radical stuff. First, it contradicts the teaching of the church historically. What makes it doubly problematic is that the theory sounds increasingly implausible. Why? Because the *raison d'être* for theistic evolution (the fact of evolution, which earlier seemed so compelling) is a lot less certain than originally thought. Evolution is now being challenged more than at any time since 1859. Not that evolutionists have renounced the Neo-Darwinian formula, by no means; but the model now faces strong headwinds. Chief amongst these are the scientific discoveries of the past 70 years—especially Crick and Watson's double-helix breakthrough in 1953. These have brought to light “hard facts” that raise insuperable problems for the theory. Complexity within the microscopic world is now known to be so profuse that it makes purely physical explanations absurd—something we will hear more about in the coming years. At which point this anecdote about Richard Dawkins deserves notice: in a filmed interview he admits that “no one has any idea how life began!”<sup>16</sup> But wasn't that Darwin's point—to explain the origin of life? With a hole that size in the theory, one wonders why the experts are so confident about it?

By contrast Schaeffer was never persuaded by evolution. He agreed that there are things in Genesis less clear than others and advised against dogmatism in such cases. His simple rule was “go where Scripture goes and stop where Scripture stops.” (He frequently pointed out, for example, that on purely linguistic grounds, the word “day” in Genesis 1 allows for several meanings—not simply 24 hours). But he never said this to be evasive. For example, he never excluded the possibility of a six 24 hour day creation. He preferred to remain agnostic on some issues and retained a healthy skepticism about the science. A public discussion/debate he had in London in about 1982 puts this beyond doubt.<sup>17</sup> I had heard of a young PhD research scientist, Arthur Jones, who in the late 1960s worked on an anti-Darwinian thesis in the Zoology Department of Birmingham University.<sup>18</sup> I made contact and encouraged him to keep speaking out on the issue. Meanwhile, members of the Victoria Institute,<sup>19</sup> all committed evolutionists, also took note of this maverick biologist. They arranged a debate with him and

asked Schaeffer to represent the anti-evolutionary view theologically. Arthur dealt with the science. The discussion was amicable and moderately useful, but it illustrated the fudge well. All insisted that Darwinian science *has* to take precedence over the biblical accounts.<sup>20</sup> Instead of following our 16<sup>th</sup> century forefathers' and repudiating any "parallel authority" (to Scripture), they seemed oblivious to the irony involved: that the whole Bible teaches explicitly that human death is the result of the Fall — yet theistic evolution chooses to deny that.

One of the casualties of the fudge was apologetics. When evangelicals became embarrassed by the Genesis account, they made it harder for themselves to mount a suitable response to philosophical materialism.<sup>21</sup> Instead, they withdrew to what seemed like safer biblical ground, namely Christ's physical resurrection. This would fill the gap left by science for "physical evidence" of supernatural reality. Nature could not provide that. According to their science, it was simply the product of chance!

By comparison, Schaeffer took this as his starting point, his presupposition. He then showed that materialism proves too much. On the one hand, it provides answers to physical questions (about aeronautics or medical infections etc.) and does that well. On the other hand, it explains away the very mind(s) through which the scientific answers were arrived at in the first place! Surely this cannot be right. If our materialistic view of science leads us to deny our own humanity, the picture of reality we are left with starts to look like a self-destruct machine. This was why the Existentialists ended up the way they did.<sup>22</sup> They *had* to concede that knowledge, too, is relative. But they could not live like that. Hence the force — and attraction — of Schaeffer's apologetic. In essence what he was doing was flipping the argument on its head. If everything about human experience looks designed, it is because it *is* designed. It testifies to a different sort of reality, one which "fits" with personhood — that is, a universe made by the personal God of the Bible. Personality and nature are real and can be known. Although knowledge is never exhaustive it works. Reality is not a sick joke. The facts speak for themselves. The materialistic nightmare which imagines (by faith) that things pop into existence by themselves is contradicted by the evidence. In effect, humanism is hoisted by its own petard. Science belongs to God.

## CONCLUSION

It is time to return to where we began.

Schaeffer's final book was a desperate attempt to keep Evangelicalism off the rocks. He had seen what theological drift does to the church when left unchallenged. Whole denominations had foundered because of a failure to uphold the authority of Scripture. In his final months he felt he needed to speak up. A "disaster" was in the making and he realized someone should sound the alarm. Was he right? Time will tell.

What I have tried to clarify about the book is the role evolution played behind the scenes. Although he did not use the expression itself, this was clearly what was in his mind. His actual words in Lausanne in 1974 were, "where the Bible speaks about history *and the cosmos*." Central to that commitment was the fact that human death is a result of the Fall. The theme runs consistently through his writings. Again, he may not have spelled it out at length in relation to evolution theory, but to those who worked alongside him, this was obvious.

The addition I have made concerns the status of theistic evolution within Evangelicalism. The fact that Bible-believing churches accept a high degree of ambiguity when it comes to Adam and Eve, or the garden of Eden or original sin is no small matter. Although one can understand that proponents of theistic evolution feel threatened by the weight of scientific opinion, this simply reinforces Schaeffer's point: at no time in history should the church submit to current intellectual fashions. Whatever the statistics and however plausible they seem to be it *has* to be a wrong move — on principle.

In fact, over the past century this fudging of Genesis 1–3 has damaged the church more than any other single factor. For one thing it has weakened her understanding and enjoyment of the truth. For another it has undermined her ability to challenge falsehood. Now that the fudge has been superseded by a denial of the fact that human death is a result of the Fall, insult has been added to injury. It begins now to look uncomfortably like another gospel.

That being the case, a final question is in order. What should the church's attitude be to this form of theistic evolution? Obviously, in terms of drawing lines in the sand it is a sensitive issue and needs to be handled carefully. On the one hand, the fundamentals of the faith need to be secured; on the other hand, the human tendency towards acrimony in debate needs

to be considered. (Schaeffer's contribution at this point was a small book which many consider his finest, *The Mark of a Christian*. It highlights the biblical imperative: whenever controversy arises over important doctrinal matters, love in the midst of serious disagreement is the ultimate test of spiritual integrity).

What happened within the original Christian Student Movement in the United Kingdom serves as a helpful object lesson. The UCCF (Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) of today emerged from it when, under the pressure of liberal ideas—principally about Christ's substitutionary death—some felt that the gospel was being compromised. The two sides discussed their differences and a split became inevitable. In 1910 the conservative element broke away to form the UCCF. Interestingly, although the SCM (Student Christian Movement) was the larger segment at the time of the break, it steadily declined in numbers and influence and eventually folded and died.<sup>23</sup>

To keep theological drift (and fudge?) going unchecked, the UCCF resorted to a statement of faith which speakers at formal gatherings (and all officers of course) had to sign. Apart from the fudge issue, the strategy worked well. Perhaps this is what now needs to happen in relation to the doctrine of the Fall. A simple statement like that would surely not be difficult to devise. In the light of present discussions about fudges and falsehoods, it would help to bring greater clarity. More importantly, it might save the evangelical ship from being wrecked on the reefs of what some have described as a myth—possibly the most perverse of all time.<sup>24</sup> Throughout its history the church has had only one reliable means of distinguishing between “myths and fancies” and (what Schaeffer called) “true-truth”—the Word of God!

Which is why Schaeffer wrote *The Great Evangelical Disaster* in the first place.

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- 1 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1984). For a helpful interview about  
the book and Francis Schaeffer in general, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwviNr2CwL8> and  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEsvoOHSN6o&t=2871s>.
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMYEH435os0&t=20s>.
- 3 His final words, echoing Ps 84:5, 7, were “(they go) from strength to strength (... ‘till each appears before  
God in Zion’).”
- 4 Schaeffer, *Great Evangelical Disaster*, 13.
- 5 Schaeffer, *Great Evangelical Disaster*, 35.
- 6 One of Edith Schaeffer’s letters highlights this. A friend of mine, Michael Cassidy, was present at his workshop  
and was so impressed by what he heard that he tried to get things rescheduled so that Schaeffer could speak to  
the whole conference. (Personal letter in author’s possession).
- 7 See endnote 2.
- 8 Schaeffer, *Great Evangelical Disaster*, 51.
- 9 “Thinking themselves to be wise they became fools” (Rom 1:22).
- 10 Meanwhile, behind the scenes his books began to sell by the thousands — and they have kept selling since.
- 11 I even received a brief note from an earlier General Secretary of UCCF (Universities and Colleges Christian  
Fellowship), Oliver Barclay, urging me to be more careful in speaking about design! He and other General  
Secretary’s whom I knew took theistic evolution for granted.
- 12 See 1 Cor 15:26.
- 13 For example, see Rom 5:12.
- 14 Denis Alexander is an eminent geneticist and founder of the Faraday Institute.
- 15 See my two papers entitled “Rescuing Darwin or Wrecking the Faith” ([https://www.e-n.org.uk/2008/11/  
features/rescuing-darwin-or-wrecking-the-faith/?search=1](https://www.e-n.org.uk/2008/11/features/rescuing-darwin-or-wrecking-the-faith/?search=1)) and “An Intrinsic or Extrinsic Image of God”  
(<https://www.e-n.org.uk/2014/10/features/intrinsic-or-extrinsic-image/?search=1>).
- 16 See Stein link: <https://youtu.be/w7ggMpCtr1A?t=5244> (1hr 27:20 mins) or see below [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xmb0lqHddbejrmNYhZ39b2CsdtAOsJHz/edit?usp=drive\\_link&oid=1064364785391  
15328699&rtpof=true&sd=true](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xmb0lqHddbejrmNYhZ39b2CsdtAOsJHz/edit?usp=drive_link&oid=106436478539115328699&rtpof=true&sd=true).
- 17 This paragraph is taken from a book that honors the legacy of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, entitled *He Still  
Speaks* (2020), 19. For the book, inquire at labri.org.
- 18 “Lowenstein told him that he would never let an anti-evolutionist do research in his department. However, he  
did allow Arthur to do research and receive his PhD, perhaps hoping that the lecturers would be able to use  
the time to convince Arthur that evolution was true” (private e-mail November 4, 2020).
- 19 The Victoria Institute is now called “Life and Thought.”
- 20 In answer to one of my questions, a few admitted they were not confident about the physical resurrection.
- 21 As an aside, they also overlooked Paul’s argument in Rom 1:16–32.
- 22 In this context, think of the “Theatre of the Absurd.”
- 23 “After an hour’s talk, I asked Rollo point-blank, ‘Does the SCM put the atoning blood of Christ central?’ He  
hesitated, and then said, ‘Well, we acknowledge it, but not necessarily central.’ Dan Dick and I then said that  
this settled the matter for us in the CICCU (Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union). We could never  
join something that did not maintain the atoning blood of Jesus Christ as its center; and we parted company.”  
[1] [https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2013/09/05/miscellanea-some-snippets-about-the-ciccu-and-  
the-scm-from-google-books/](https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2013/09/05/miscellanea-some-snippets-about-the-ciccu-and-the-scm-from-google-books/).
- 24 See James Le Fanu, *Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves* (New York: Harper, 2009),  
261, 262.