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Whatever Happened to the Human Race?—a 25th Anniversary

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This year marks the 25th anniversary of *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* by Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop. The anniversary serves to remind us all of just how unaware and unawake most evangelicals really were twenty-five years ago—and how prophetic were the voices of Schaeffer and Koop.

Whatever Happened to the Human Race? was both a book project and a film series, and was the fruit of an unusual collaboration between Francis Schaeffer, one of the truly significant figures of twentieth century evangelicalism, and C. Everett Koop, one of the nation’s most illustrious pediatric surgeons. They were an odd couple of sorts, but on the crucial issues of human dignity and the threat of what would later be called the “Culture of Death,” they were absolutely united.

Francis Schaeffer, who died in 1984, was nothing less than a twentieth century prophet. He was a genuine eccentric, given to wearing leather breeches and sporting a goatee—then quite unusual for anyone in the evangelical establishment. Then again, Schaeffer was really never a member of any establishment, and that is partly why a generation of questioning young people made their way to his Swiss study center known as L’Abri.

Big ideas were Schaeffer’s business—and the Christian worldview was his consistent framework. Long before most evangelicals even knew they had a worldview, Schaeffer was taking alternative worldviews apart and inculcating in his students a love for the architecture of Christian truth and the dignity of ideas. Key figures on the evangelical left wrote him off as a crank, and he returned the favor by denying that they were evangelicals at all. They complained that he did not follow their rules for scholarly publication. He pointed out that people actually read his books—and young people frustrated with cultural Christianity read his books by the thousands. They were looking for someone with ideas big enough for the age, relevant for the questions of the times, and based without compromise in Christian truth. Francis Schaeffer—knee pants and all—became a prophet for the age.

Dr. C. Everett Koop, on the other hand, is a paragon of the American establishment—a former Surgeon-in-Chief of the Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia and [later] Surgeon General of the United States under President Ronald Reagan. In 1974 Koop catapulted to international attention by performing the first successful surgical separation of Siamese twins. A Presbyterian layman, Koop lives in quasi-retirement in Pennsylvania. His surgical procedures remain textbook cases for medical students today.

Whatever Happened to the Human Race? awakened American evangelicals to the anti-human technologies and ideologies that then threatened human dignity. Most urgently, the project put abortion unquestionably on the front burner of evangelical concern. The tenor of the times is seen in the fact that Schaeffer and Koop had to argue to evangelicals in

the late 1970s that abortion was not just a “Catholic” issue. They taught many evangelicals a new and urgently needed vocabulary about embryo ethics, euthanasia, and infanticide. They knew they were running out of time.

“Each era faces its own unique blend of problems,” they argued. “Our time is no exception. Those who regard individuals as expendable raw material—to be molded, exploited, and then discarded—do battle on many fronts with those who see each person as unique and special, worthwhile, and irreplaceable.”

Every age is marked by both the “thinkable” and the “unthinkable,” they asserted—and the “thinkable” of late-twentieth century Western cultures was dangerously anti-human. The lessons of the century—with the Holocaust at its center—should be sufficient to drive the point home. The problem, as illustrated by those who worked in Hitler’s death camps, was the inevitable result of a loss of conscience and moral truth. They were “people just like all of us,” Koop and Schaeffer reminded. “We seem to be in danger of forgetting our seemingly unlimited capacities for evil, once boundaries to certain behavior are removed.”

By the last quarter of the century, life and death were treated as mere matters of choice. “The schizophrenic nature of our society became further evident as it became common practice for pediatricians to provide the maximum of resuscitative and supportive care in newborn intensive-care nurseries where premature infants were under their care—while obstetricians in the same medical centers were routinely destroying enormous numbers of unborn babies who were normal and frequently of larger size. Minors who could not legally purchase liquor and cigarettes could have an abortion-on-demand and without parental consent or knowledge.”

Schaeffer and Koop pointed to other examples of moral schizophrenia. Disabled persons were given new access to facilities and services in the name of human rights, while preborn infants diagnosed with the same disabilities were often aborted—with the advice that it would be “wrong” to bring such a baby into the world.

Long before the discovery of stem cells and calls for the use of human embryos for such experimentation, Schaeffer and Koop warned of attacks upon human life at its earliest stage. “Embryos ‘created’ in the biologist’s laboratory raise special questions because they have the potential for growth and development if planted in the womb. The disposal of these live embryos is a cause for ethical and moral concern.”

They also saw the specter of infanticide and euthanasia. Infanticide, including what are now called “partial birth abortion,” is murder, they argued. “Infanticide is being practiced right now in this country, and the saddest thing about this is that it is being carried on by the very segment of the medical profession which has always stood in the role of advocate for the lives of children.” Long before the formal acceptance of euthanasia in countries like the Netherlands, Koop and Schaeffer saw the rise of a “duty to die” argument used against the old, the very sick, and the unproductive. They rejected euthanasia in the case of a “so-called vegetative existence” and warned all humanity that disaster awaited a society that lusted for a “beautiful death.”

“Abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia are not only questions for women and other relatives directly involved—nor are they the prerogatives of a few people who have thought through the wider ramifications,” they declared. “They are life-and-death issues that concern the whole human race equally and should be addressed as such.”

How did this happen? This embrace of an anti-human “humanism” could only be explained by the rejection of the Christian worldview. “Judeo-Christian teaching was never perfectly applied,” they acknowledged, “but it did lay a foundation for a high view of human life in concept and practice.” Through the inculcation of biblical values, “people viewed human life as unique—to be protected and loved—because each individual is made in the image of God.”

Two great enemies of truth were blamed for this loss of biblical truth—modern secularism and theological liberalism. The secularists insist on the imposition of a “humanism” that defines humanity in terms of productivity, arbitrary standards of beauty and health, and an inverted system of value. Theological liberalism, denying the truthfulness of the Bible, robs the church and the society of any solid authority. The biblical concept of humanity made in the image of God is treated as poetry rather than as truth. But, “if people are not made in the image of God, the pessimistic, realistic humanist is right: The human race is indeed an abnormal wart on the smooth face of a silent and meaningless universe.”

Everything else simply follows. “In this setting, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia . . . are completely logical. Any person can be obliterated for what society at one moment thinks of as its own social or economic good.” Once human life

and human dignity are devalued to this degree, recovery is extremely difficult—if not impossible.

The past twenty-five years has been a period of even more rapid technological and moral change. We now face threats to human dignity unimaginable just a quarter-century ago. We must now deal with the ethical challenges of embryo research, human cloning, the Human Genome Project, and the rise of transhuman technologies. Even with many Christians aware and active on these issues, we are losing ground.

Francis Schaeffer and Everett Koop ended their book with a call for action. “If, in this last part of the twentieth century, the Christian community does not take a prolonged and vocal stand for the dignity of the individual and each person’s right to life—for the right of each person to be treated as created in the image of God, rather than as a collection of molecules with no unique value—we feel that as Christians we have failed the greatest moral test to be put before us in this century.”

In this new century, that warning is even more threatening and more urgent. The challenges of the twenty-first century are even greater than those faced in the century before. This should make us even more thankful for the prophetic witness of Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop—and even more determined to contend for life. Humanity still stands on the brink of that abyss.

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