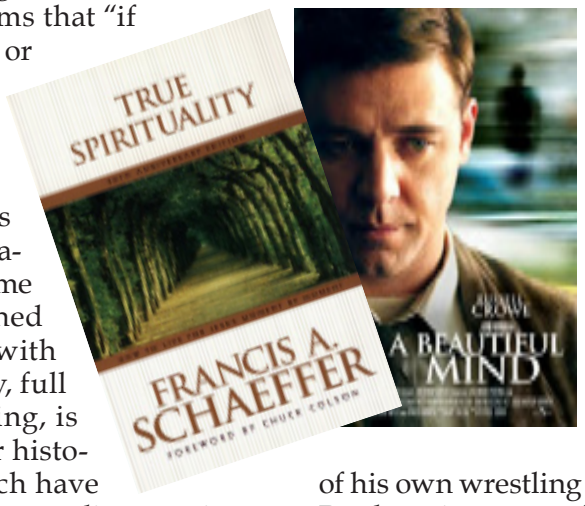
KNOWING & DOING
A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind
C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
This article originally appeared in the Spring 2002 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

Substantial Healing, One More Time

Reflections Upon Francis Schaeffer's True Spirituality *and Ron Howard's* A Beautiful Mind

by Steven S. Garber, Ph.D.

Very few days go by that I am not involved with someone somewhere—a Capitol Hill café, a walk in the woods near my home—over the dilemma of the "all or nothing syndrome," as Francis Schaeffer identified it. Getting to that place in the conversation always brings its own pains. But inevitably, the longer I listen the more sure I am that one more son of Adam, one more daughter of Eve, is being stretched taut, because it seems that "if it can't be all that I want (or hope or desire, even for the best of reasons), then maybe I should just walk away and do something else."



A difficult relationship, perhaps a marriage... a wearying work situation, perhaps working against some small or great injustice... a strained relationship in school, perhaps with a dissertation advisor—each story, full as it is of wondering and groaning, is of course completely unique. Our histories as members of families which have shaped us and still shape us, our personalities as diverse as the sand on the seashore, our hopes and dreams, our griefs and sorrows, all together they provide an unending panorama of people among whom we live and move and have our being. The longer I live, the more sure I am of that.

And yet, at the very same time, we suffer and we desire in common; after all is said and done, we are each one image-bearers of the same God.

Thirty years ago, in certain kinds of settings—the kind of people who might find their way to a C.S. Lewis Institute lecture, for example—the language, "Well, Schaeffer says...." was often heard. Sometimes it began a debate, other times it ended one. Now almost two decades after his death, there is a natural sifting process going on: What is it that mattered most in his work? Will it be his cultural critique? His vision of the arts? His practice of community? His understanding of spirituality? God alone knows. I do know that I learned some deep lessons—and am still learning—about following Christ in a fallen world.

I still remember buying my first Schaeffer book. In the fall of my sophomore year, I found *True Spirituality* in my college's bookstore, and took it with me on a weekend trip. I also remember stumbling my way through, trying to understand, and sure that sometimes I was and sometimes I wasn't! I didn't give up, and though years later its cover is worn and taped over, its central themes are deeply embedded in my own vision of a distinctive Christian spirituality.

At the heart of his exploration of the Christian faith is his own honest question, wanting an honest answer: If God is there, what difference does it make in my life, moment by moment? As he tells the tale in the preface, the book grew out of his own wrestling with deep doubts. Ordained as a Presbyterian pastor, for years he had served congregations Word and sacrament, and for some time he and his wife had been missionaries in Europe—and yet, with all this history, he found himself up in the attic of his Swiss home, pacing back and forth, wondering whether it was all true, whether it really made any difference in the way he could and should live.

As the months passed, and his wife prayed downstairs for a great grace upstairs, he found his way into a deeper knowledge of God and of himself. Calvin was right: the two always go together, the one depends upon the other. True for Calvin, true for Schaeffer, and true for every one of us. For Schaeffer that deepened self-knowledge was rooted in a renewed understanding of the meaning of Christ's redemption, *viz*. that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus had transforming consequences for those who were the sons and daughters of God. He argued that the Bible in general, and the letter to the Romans in particular, set forth a vision

of freedom from the bonds of sin, and from the consequences of the bonds of sin, and that that freedom was to be experienced in this life, moment by moment. This sorting and sifting of Schaeffer's soul developed over time into the amazingly fruitful ministry we now know, a half century later, as L'Abri.

As we move from modern to postmodern, with all that those terms mean and do not mean, I find myself thinking more and more about the meaning of the last century, wanting to understand where we have come from as we ponder where we are going. My reading and reflection goes far and wide, but it keeps coming back to Schaeffer. This much seems clear: He was writing not only for the Church, as a pastor, but he was also responding to the culture, as an apologist. His concern was to honestly account for human freedom, *viz.* what can it possibly mean in a universe where the weight of necessity bears down upon us so heavily? What does freedom mean, if we are also responsible? Those are deeply human questions that Christians have to answer too.

With his own through-a-glass-darkly lens, Schaeffer was writing as a Christian about the same ideas and issues which so plagued other thoughtful people in the mid-20th-century, people such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Sometimes we call them "existentialist" philosophers, as they were passionate to understand the meaning of human existence as it is lived day by day, moment by moment. Fifty years later it is not possible to read them without hearing debates and discussions which continue to echo through the early days of the 21st century. At the core, their worries and laments are perennial, their questions press upon us all, waiting for a response. Read Ecclesiastes again, and then watch the film "Magnolia." There is nothing new under the sun.

Schaeffer understood this, reading the human heart as sorely tempted by the "all or nothing" problem—not premodern, modern, or postmodern, so much as a *human* problem. We long for things to be as they ought to be, from the most personal areas of concern to the most public arenas of responsibility. We strain against our own weaknesses and frailties, even as we groan against those of others. We want sin and its consequences settled, once and for all. At our most faithful we are willing to work at it for a time, maybe even a long time; but sometime, we want it done with, we want it to be the way we want it to be. And many times, by grace that vision is passionately influenced by a vision of the holiness of God, of what we know of God's heart. We know that God himself yearns for the doing of justice and the loving of mercy—and we want that too!

But when we don't find it, when we see how horribly complex the political, economic, social, artistic brokenness is, we are tempted to give up. Simply, it seems too hard.

In *True Spirituality* Schaeffer introduced a theological motif that is both profoundly biblical and deeply sustaining, at least for those of us who struggle with "all or nothing." Situating his vision within the scope of redemptive history, and so the grand story of God's work from creation to consummation, he argued that we should pray for and labor towards substantial healing. I have been reading these words for years and years, and they continue to nourish me.

> *The alternatives are not between being perfect or being nothing. Just as people smash marriages because they are looking for what is romantically and sexually perfect and in this poor world do not find it, so human beings often smash what could have been possible in a true church or true Christian group. It is not just the "they" involved who are not yet perfect, but the "I" is not yet perfect either. In the absence of present perfection, Christians are to help each other on to increasingly substantial healing on the basis of the finished work of Christ. This is our calling.*

Substantial healing allows one to navigate his way through the Scylla and Charybdis of life in this now-but-not-yet world, a world in which Jesus is Lord of the whole of life, all of reality, and yet where we do not see his Lordship fully acknowledged—not only in the lives of others but in our own, not only in other cultures but in our own. We do lament, we do grieve, because in every arena of human existence the world is not the way it ought to be— "everything is broken," as Dylan once put it. We do cry, and yet because of the finished work of Christ not as those who have no hope.

Several weeks ago this all came home to me once more as I watched the film "A Beautiful Mind." As they say, "loosely" based upon the life of the Nobel Prize-winning Princeton professor John Nash, the Ron Howard-directed film is a wonderfully told tale of a man severely broken by schizophrenia. Amazingly gifted academically, Nash (played by Russell Crowe) is the incarnation of what the novelist Walker Percy warns us all about: it is possible to get all A's and still flunk life. Even his first grade teacher saw it coming, as he remembers her saying, "John, you've been given a double portion of brain, but only a half portion of heart." In the complexity of human life, the prognosis plays its way out with horrible pain over the next

decades—even as he shows his genius to peers and professors from Pittsburgh to Princeton.

Offering a 25 page dissertation that catapults him into the stratosphere of academic prominence, the rift within himself between heart and mind and body begins to overwhelm Nash. But even as this is breaking him, he finds himself growing in love with the most wonderful woman (played by Jennifer Connelly). In a film, of course, people can be paid and persuaded to say and do anything—for blessing and for curse. The director had many choices here, and he chose to portray a wife with an unusual steadfast love, what the Hebrews called *chesed.* Eyes wide open to the sorrows, she chooses time and again to love her husband. Through hospitalization and the horrors of shock treatments, to home stays full of continued pains, Nash's wife loves and loves again—even as she screams out into the night, full of grief for herself and her husband.

Cinematically, stories are hard to tell. For all the money that goes into a major film, it never ceases to surprise me how few are really artfully composed, with a compelling narrative that unfolds over time. *A Beautiful Mind* is an exception, and finds a way to keep us connected to the drama, even though no one gets shot in the face with blood splattered on the kitchen wall, and no one's bare bottom is offered for public perusal. There is an integrity to the story as Howard tells it that allows us to both feel the anguish of the Nashes, as well as to hope with them for healing.

And healing comes, a substantial healing, that is. Even as the love of his wife transforms his heart, and the collegiality of his academic peers provides him with necessary support and stimulation, it is his determination to get better that is the heart of his healing. He wants things to be different, longing for his heart and mind and body to be one. With unusual insight Howard offers us a window into the meaning of substantial healing. All the way through his Nobel Prize-moment of great glory, Nash still wrestles with his demons, his schizophrenic companions who have for years, as Sirens singing, called him into a nether world. By grace, by choice, in the mystery of their integral relationship, Nash finds a way to live redemptively, rather than destructively. He has formed habits of heart which allow him to say no, and he walks away. (In a fascinating article in *The Washington Post,* "Beautiful—But Not Rare—Recovery," playing off of the current interest in Nash's life, there are many similar stories told of people, against all clinical hopes, who found healing from schizophrenia. In and through them all, there are of course no cheap answers. February 12, 2002, F1)

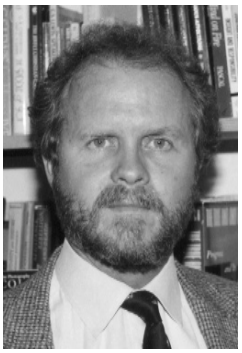
The wisdom of Walker Percy, again: "Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition." It is true of films, too. The story is not a Christian one, in a superficial sense. It is truthful, and that matters more. With great clarity, it underscores the reality of our responsibility, our ability to respond. As the great Czech playwright and politician Vaclav Havel sees it, "The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility." If one has ears to hear and eyes to see, the film tells the truth about the human condition. It does *not* tell about the central event in human history—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—but what it does tell is a story about someone straining between the now and the not yet, between all or nothing. And we, each one, know that story.

Schaeffer put it this way, in a chapter, "Substantial Healing of Psychological Problems."

> *This also does not mean that we will be perfect in this life psychologically any more than we are physically. But thank God, now I can move; I am no longer running on ice, that is the difference. It does not need to be the old, endless circle. It is not any longer the dog chasing his tail. The light is let in. Things are orientated, and I can move as a whole man, with all the rationality I possess utterly in place. I will not expect to be perfect. I will wait for the second coming of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the body, to be perfect morally, physically, and psychologically; but there now can be a substantive overcoming of this psychological division in the present life on the basis of Christ's finished work. It will not be perfect, but it can be real and substantial.*
>
> *Let us be clear about this. All men since the fall have had some psychological problems. It is utter nonsense, a romanticism that has nothing to do with biblical Christianity, to say that a Christian never has a psychological problem. All men have psychological problems. They differ in degree and they differ in kind, but since the fall all men have more or less a problem psychologically. And dealing with this, too, is a part of the present aspect of the gospel and of the finished work of Christ on Calvary's cross.*

They are words we can live with, as they reflect the reality of human life under the sun— even for those whose deepest selves are one with Christ. Straining, longing, hoping, yearning, we struggle to find a way to live redemptively amidst the brokenness in this life—even as we pray for and labor towards the

healing of all things, including our selves. Substantial healing is a vision that is both biblical and sustaining—true, honest, real, but never perfect or complete this side of the consummation. Good theologies, like good books and good films, tell the truth about the human condition. Thanks be to God.



Steven Garber has lived his life among students. The author of The Fabric of Faithfulness, *for many years he has taught at the American Studies Program, an interdisciplinary semester on Capitol Hill. With his wife, Meg, their five children, and several chickens, he lives in Burke, Virginia. Some thirty years ago he traveled to L'Abri and found a world of ideas and relationships that have sustained him ever since. His daughter, Eden, is currently a helper at the Swiss L'Abri, after having spent six months there as a student two years ago.*

8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*