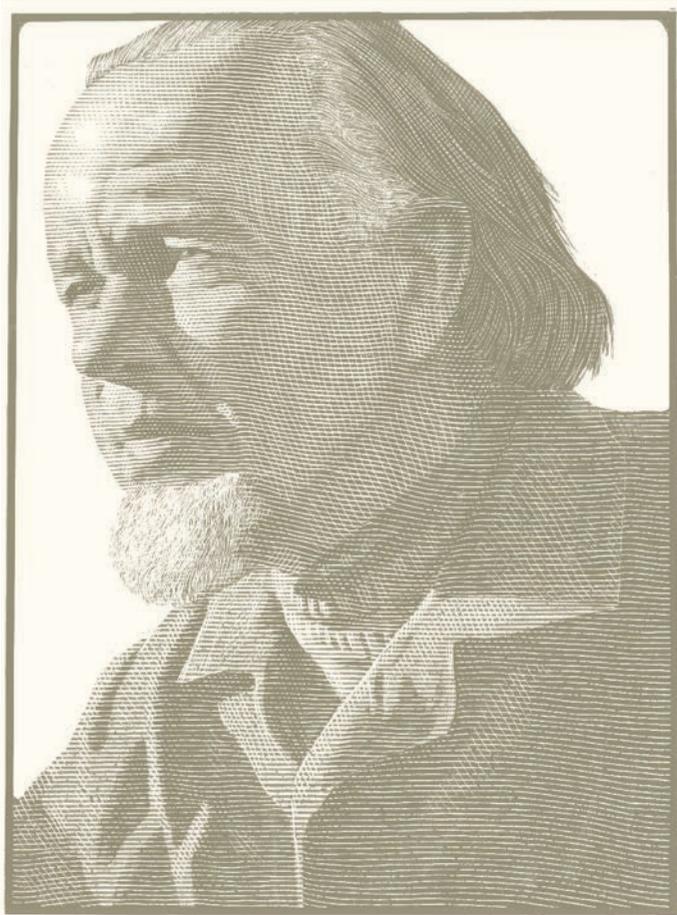


WILLIAM EDGAR



SCHAEFFER

*on the Christian Life*

COUNTERCULTURAL SPIRITUALITY



“Friendly, passionate, intellectual, and constantly engaged with people as well as ideas and contemporary affairs, Francis Schaeffer comes alive in Edgar’s objective but affectionate portrait. Rescued from the distortions of both lionizers and demonizers, here is Schaeffer as so many of us knew him in the great years of L’Abri—and with so much to contribute to our world today.”

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“Francis Schaeffer was small of stature but a giant in his tenacious concern for truth, for God, for people, and for reality. He became convinced that Christian faith is the radical path for our own day, the realistic answer to the hard questions of a troubled modern world. William Edgar’s compulsively readable study of Schaeffer’s thought is set in the context of Schaeffer’s rough-edged life and his brilliantly inspired work in the L’Abri community he established with his remarkable wife, Edith. L’Abri, perched high on the slopes of a remote alpine valley, drew a motley procession of mainly young travelers from the ends of the earth. Schaeffer’s own, sometimes anguished, quest to communicate the ancient biblical text in a century of unprecedented historical changes attracted and opened doors for a generation of Christians. It also convinced many outside the faith with honest questions (like Bill Edgar himself) to follow the way of Christ. This engaging book captures the fire of Francis Schaeffer’s thought and concerns, and revisits and reinvigorates the still-urgent challenge he presented to the church in the modern world.”

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“In a brilliant combination of personal recollections and thorough analysis, William Edgar demonstrates convincingly that the Schaeffers’ encounter with the triune God who is there is central to the rise, growth, and impact of L’Abri. This refreshing study will arouse the enthusiasm of all who yearn for a true spirituality that transforms minds and lives, regenerates the church, and ‘flows into the total culture.’”

**Pierre Berthoud**, Professor Emeritus, Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en Provence

*Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality*

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## SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

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Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor



# PREFACE

When I was first approached to write this book, I declined. There have been a number of significant biographies of Francis Schaeffer, as well as a thorough accounting of his family's life and times by Edith Schaeffer. Much of this material is thoughtful, though some of it is merely hagiographical, and some of it unjustly critical. To be sure, I have my own take on this extraordinary ministry and its astonishing founder. Indeed, it is because of L'Abri that my own eyes were opened to the beauties of the Christian faith many years ago. But it seemed to me that there was plenty of material and that one more study would be extraneous. Besides, opinions run strong, even this many years after Dr. Schaeffer's departure from this earth, and my temperament is sensitive, making me particularly susceptible to the inevitable criticisms such a book would receive.

A couple of things changed my mind. The first is that despite all of the analysis already done on Francis Schaeffer and the work of L'Abri, very little has been said in any kind of depth about their most significant *raison d'être*, that is, Christian spirituality. There is a need for a careful study of the subject Schaeffer himself considered central to all his work. Second, I began to think how important to my own thinking and self-evaluation such a study could be now nearly fifty years after my initial encounter with the man. Not, I trust, a thinly veiled attempt at self-discovery, which would be not only narcissistic but also of little benefit to the reading public, the present exploration has afforded me the opportunity to think through issues that matter greatly to the church and the world. No doubt I could have accomplished that without publishing a book on the subject, but there is something about getting words on a page, and then receiving peer review, that can help make such a task more than personal

musings, edifying or not. Third, I have always been grateful to Crossway for their vision, especially their desire to promote the work of L'Abri and the thought of Francis and Edith Schaeffer. Writing this book gives me the chance to respond in gratitude to that vision and possibly to make a small contribution to its goals.

The format of this volume needs a word of explanation. Because I was privileged personally to witness many of the themes and personalities connected with Francis Schaeffer and L'Abri, I have begun and ended with some narrative involving my own story. Thus, the first chapter is a personal introduction explaining the way in which I saw Francis Schaeffer "up close and personal." In the afterword I offer a few concluding personal reflections. They are not meant to distract from the analytical portions of the book, but to make them more personable. I trust the reader will enjoy these reflections rather than be put off by them.

Is Francis Schaeffer in the same league as Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the other figures in the *Theologians on the Christian Life* series? Had you asked me twenty years ago, I would have said no. It would be hard to overstate my love for the man. However, I thought he had neither the academic standing nor perhaps the influence wielded by these giants. His writings and films often seemed dated, and his principal legacy is no doubt people, not a movement based on revolutionary ideas. I was always a bit troubled by comparisons made between him and C. S. Lewis, whose stature is nothing if not towering. But today I gladly agree that Schaeffer belongs to this hall of fame.

A legacy of people is just the reason why. Schaeffer's importance is because of the way he could take God, thinkers, and truth and make them so profoundly exciting—to people! Os Guinness, one of Schaeffer's closest associates, tells us he has never met anyone like him anywhere "who took God so passionately seriously, people so passionately seriously, and truth so passionately seriously."<sup>1</sup> While a number of Schaeffer's ideas or historical assessments could and should be put into question, what is unquestionable is the way Francis Schaeffer moved from the heart of the Christian faith, or "true spirituality," into every realm of life, with absolute continuity and astonishing freshness, and communicated all of that to so many people. I am honored to be asked to help defend such a legacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Os Guinness, "Fathers and Sons," *Books and Culture* 14, no. 2 (March/April 2008): 33.

One challenge that presents itself in discussions of a figure such as Francis Schaeffer is that he was not typically speaking as a systematic theologian in an academic setting. Like many thinkers and spokespersons called “for such a time as this” (Est. 4:14), he responded to his generation with those portions of the truth he deemed most needful. Although he was committed to preaching “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), he naturally did not spend an equal amount of time on every locus of theology. If you are looking for an extended treatment of, say, the nature of the covenant or the ethics of marriage and divorce, you should probably look elsewhere. Schaeffer had his views on such subjects and indeed knew the big picture, as his series on the Westminster Standards will attest, but the balance of his work was on apologetics, cultural analysis, the defense of the Bible, and the like.

Thus, some of what you read in these pages may seem one-sided. Most frequently, though, that is not because Schaeffer was unbalanced, but because he was acutely aware that to respond to all kinds of issues but not the most urgent ones is to fail to herald the gospel at that point. Schaeffer often quoted a saying attributed to Martin Luther, but in fact spoken by the character “Fritz” in a historical novel, whose voice supports Luther’s ideas: “If I profess, with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition, every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer also used to say fairly regularly that his own writings were only one aspect of the work of L’Abri. If one wanted to obtain a full grasp of the overall message, one needed to consult not only Edith’s books, but also his sermons and lecture series. This I have endeavored to do.

I wish here to express my thanks to a number of people and institutions that have given me much-needed though ill-deserved support throughout the writing of this book. First, I thank my kind and generous editors at Crossway for their inspiration and also their meticulous editing work. They represent the gold standard.

Second, I would like to express my thanks to three people who have brought particular insight to this project. The first is my wife, Barbara, who not only caught a number of infelicities but also made helpful editorial comments. She also sacrificed our dining room table for the better part

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Rundle Charles, *Chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta Family* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1864), 276.

of four months so that I could spread all my sources out for easy access. The second is Colin Duriez, Schaeffer's biographer, who not only has been most encouraging to me but also made a number of very helpful editorial comments.

Third, I am very grateful to Jerram Barrs, whose wise and pointed comments made this a much better book than it might have been. Finally, thanks are due to Westminster Theological Seminary, which was kind enough to rearrange my schedule so that I could have blocks of time in which to work on this text. The president, the dean, my dear colleagues, and the staff of the seminary have supported me in my lifelong attempts at saying no to the urgent, and yes to the vital.

William Edgar  
Philadelphia

## CHAPTER I

# A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION TO FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

*Schaeffer might be dismissed as a scholar or even original thinker (though it can be argued he was both, but particularly the latter), but his realistic, existential Christianity is remarkable and perhaps unique for someone of his biblical orthodoxy in his generation and is the secret, perhaps, of his impact on many people of diverse backgrounds and nationalities.*

COLIN DURIEZ

### **First Impressions**

I hopped off the mail bus on a warm afternoon in July 1964, having asked the driver, “Arrêtez-vous, s’il vous plaît, à L’Abri.” The name L’Abri means “The Shelter,” and it was first coined by Francis Schaeffer in Champéry, the village in Switzerland where the family had lived before relocating to Huémoz-sur-Ollon, a tiny village in the Protestant canton de Vaud. The name is based on Psalm 91:1:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

I was unaware of any of the history of this magical place, arriving at the Schaeffers’ door as a rising college junior, aged nineteen.

My whole life was about to change. I was not a believer at the time and so was unaware of many of the claims for the Christian view of the world. Yet, thanks to a man named Joe Brown, I had become intrigued and was open to hearing about spiritual matters in a way I had never been before. A marvelous instructor at Harvard College, Harold O. J. Brown (1933–2007), presented the glories of the Christian faith to his classes during the academic year 1963–1964. By the spring Joe and I had become good friends. He saw that I was spiritually hungry, and he urged me to visit his friend Francis Schaeffer over the summer, in the hopes that I could learn more about the same worldview that he had labored to commend in his lectures. Indeed, as I would soon learn, he really sent me there in the hopes that I could embrace the Christian faith.

Joe was a teaching assistant for a large course in the history of Western epic and drama, known affectionately as “Hum 2” by the students. The main lecturer was the legendary John Finley, crafter of America’s postwar general education approach to university studies. As an article about him in the *Harvard Crimson* put it, in appearance he combined the best traits of Henry James’s English gentleman and Robert Frost’s New England farmer.<sup>1</sup> His concern was that a person was not truly educated if he became so specialized that he lost sight of the big picture, including issues such as meaning, fulfillment, and human flourishing. This meant students had to be much more aware than they typically were of Western history and traditional humanistic values.

Hum 2 was a large class, and so for practical reasons it was broken down into smaller groups, called sections. Here students could have a more personalized access to the material. Our section instructor was Joe, who was working in the History Department of the graduate school, writing his dissertation on Laski (Johannes Alasco), the Polish reformer of the sixteenth century. Joe was unabashed (though tactful), even brilliant, in his presentation of evangelical Christianity in contrast to various worldviews held by the ancient Greeks or the modern absurdists. All of it was new and immensely fascinating to me, a young man in my late teens. Joe and I became friends and had many long conversations about matters of faith and life.

So, on the strength of Joe’s recommendation, as I traveled through

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Reed, “John Finley: Profile,” *Harvard Crimson*, February 21, 1967, available at <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1967/2/21/john-finley-ponce-upon-a-time/>.

Europe with my brother and a backpack full of essentials, I looked for a chance to check out Francis Schaeffer. In mid-July my brother returned to the States. Now on my own, I took the train down from Zürich, where we had been visiting a colleague of our dad's, to the beautiful city of Lausanne, on the shore of Lake Geneva. I had called in advance and got Mrs. Schaeffer on the phone. She could not have been more welcoming and said that Joe Brown was their good friend. He had no doubt alerted them to my possible visit. She invited me to stay for the weekend, which was a bit curious to me but very agreeable.

The day was Saturday, and I had some time to kill, so on the way to L'Abri I visited the Lausanne Expo 1964, a fascinating display of technology and economic opportunities, couched in the culture of the Cold War. The Swiss architect Marc Saugey had the idea of using large tents for a major part of the Lausanne exhibition. They were meant to symbolize the Swiss Alps with their snow and rocks. They involved membrane structures swinging about and housing artistic and futuristic technological offerings.<sup>2</sup>

After the visit to the expo, I caught the train over to Aigle, a sprawling town at the foot of the Chablais Alps, just beyond the lake to the east. Then, I switched to a cog railroad train up the steep mountain to the small town of Ollon. Perfectly timed, the mail bus then stopped at the station to pick up passengers on their way to Villars, a lovely ski town at the very summit. Huémoz, a tiny village situated at 2,160 feet above sea level, is about half-way to Villars. On the bus's steering wheel was a knob, used by the driver to swing his way around and up the considerably winding road with no shoulders, as he somehow managed to avoid tumbling down the precipitous hills below. The air was pure and the weather temperate, even in the middle of the summer. A couple of other students headed for L'Abri were on the bus with me. Anticipation and some nervousness inhabited my youthful soul. But these were the 1960s. I was on a most excellent adventure!

It was all quite astonishing. At the stop in Huémoz we were greeted by Coxie Priester, Dr. Schaeffer's secretary, who remains my good friend to this day. Right away Coxie asked whether I was a Christian. I wasn't sure, so I told her the question was ambiguous. With a twinkle she remarked that the answer was ambiguous, not the question. I would soon find out

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<sup>2</sup> All this was significant in that the contents of this fair would be the subject of discussion at L'Abri. The whole display was deemed "humanistic," a negative label (unlike what I was used to) that I would hear often in the following weeks.

how right she was. I walked up the stairs to the main house, “Les Mélèzes,” a magnificent old-fashioned Swiss chalet, lined, as the name suggested, with timberline larches. The building boasted two large balconies, several bedrooms, a spacious living room downstairs, and a small but functional kitchen. I was invited to enter the living room, where we were to help prepare Sunday’s dinner. A young woman handed me a brown bag filled with peas in their pods, and asked if I could help remove them. The procedure took a while, as we would be feeding at least forty people. But the time passed easily because our hosts played a tape for us while we worked.

Some readers may remember the reel-to-reel tape machines we had back then. There was loud clicking whenever a section was replayed. In this case the lecturer sounded like a highly qualified woman, who was expounding on existentialism. This was a good test for me of L’Abri’s authenticity, as I had actually read a good deal in this philosophy and indeed fancied myself an existentialist in the tradition of my hero, Albert Camus. Having grown up in France in the 1950s, I had gravitated toward this prophet of the absurd and was fairly convinced of his approach to life and to human justice. The speaker carefully contrasted Camus with Jean-Paul Sartre and rather impressed me with her knowledge. I had been wary of Sartre’s darker approach to life and was glad to hear the lecturer side with Camus. Then she brought in the “religious” existentialists. I cannot remember which names were used. For me the outstanding exponent of religious existentialism was Paul Claudel, the Roman Catholic playwright and philosopher. However, the speaker was most concerned with Søren Kierkegaard, which she pronounced “Kerkigard” and dubbed the father of modern existentialism. I was less sure about this attribution but listened on.

Boiling it down, the Danish theologian’s views were summarized as an invitation to an irrational “leap of faith.”<sup>3</sup> That was the basis for everything that followed, much of which was a quite negative description of

<sup>3</sup> Somewhat later Schaeffer would temper his view by recognizing that the more existentialist interpretation of Kierkegaard may have come from his followers’ applications rather than the man himself (see *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970], 17). In the *Complete Works* the reference is 4:14. Throughout this volume I generally will refer to *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), hereafter *CW*, which unites all of his major writings except *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, published in 1984, and smaller essays and booklets such as *Baptism*. The *Complete Works* are in five volumes, which I will cite by volume number followed by the page number. (For a list of titles in the *Complete Works* by volume numbers, see the appendix.) An advantage to citing this set is that Schaeffer was able to edit or update a number of the texts. Occasionally I will refer also to an original edition, particularly when the date of publication or the unedited original is significant.

the current intellectual climate. The lecturer went on to discuss a larger consideration of what was called “the existentialist methodology,” an approach embraced by both philosophers and theologians. Life in this view was dichotomized between a “lower story” and an “upper story,” so that matters of faith were thought to be beyond reason’s reach. I was deeply impressed, though I could hardly grasp it all.

Strangely, it turned out that the lecturer was none other than Francis Schaeffer! He did have a rather high-pitched voice, but the recording made him sound quite like a woman. The content was riveting. Not only the linear analysis of trends leading to existentialism and beyond, but the vivid illustrations too were captivating.

After the peas were all removed from their pods, I went outside. Along came the man himself. I knew right away who he was, even though I had never seen a picture of him. His face was radiant. Slightly wrinkled, his visage communicated the weight of many years, years of suffering and of pondering deeply, and yet also a fundamental joy. He was fifty-two at the time. He came right up to me, obviously knowing who I was, and extended his hand for a warm greeting. I’ll never forget his broad smile, so full of kindness. He was genuinely glad to see me. I felt right at home in this strange and wonderful place. Joe had not prepared me for any of this, probably wisely so. But I couldn’t wait to get to know Dr. Schaeffer better and find out what the magic was.

That evening we had a cookout—American hot dogs. There I met some remarkable people, mostly non-Americans. They were at various stages of religious understanding, some from a Christian background, but many of them “seekers” (as we would later call them). One of my new friends was Jonathan Bragdon, Edith’s nephew, who was at L’Abri out of curiosity for what this branch of the family had created. His mother had become a Taylorite, part of the extremist wing of the Plymouth Brethren. It called for radical separation from anyone who held to the slightest variant of the true faith. Mrs. Bragdon had even “disfellowshipped” her own husband. Needless to say, this view was not working for Jonathan. He was, and is, a practicing painter. He was quite taken with Paul Klee (1879–1940), someone whose work I loved very much. Since I was studying music at Harvard and had a strong interest in aesthetics, we enjoyed extended conversations about the arts. I had never thought of this subject from a Christian point of view, but soon would be regularly connecting faith to the arts.

After the meal, following cleanup, we went into the living room for the Saturday night discussion group. In fact, “discussion” meant someone would ask a question, and then Dr. Schaeffer would answer it, often taking a good long time to construct his response. We all arrived a bit weary from the day’s adventures and sat cross-legged on the floor; then after a bit of a wait, Fran walked in.<sup>4</sup> He greeted various ones, then sat down on a quaint little red stool Edith had made from a barrel, and opened with, “Yes, then, who would like to begin?” He almost always began his discourses with “yes, then,” or “well, then,” followed by the subject at hand. That night, most of the discussion revolved around the subject of prayer.

I had never heard anything remotely like this. The only prayers I knew about were from the Episcopal liturgy said every day in my boarding-school chapel services. Most of us chapel attendees either did not listen or pretended not to listen. In point of fact, those prayers were actually embedded in my psyche somewhere, so that when I did come to faith, they came up to the surface and, I am sure, helped me progress more rapidly than if I had never heard them. Here at L’Abri, prayer was not a ritual. It was utterly real. Prayer was practiced as though, were there no God, this would have been the most absurd performance possible. Schaeffer continued for a good long time, explaining that when we prayed, God heard. Indeed, God perfected our “poor prayers” and made them acceptable to himself. Then God would answer. Sometimes the answer was affirmative, giving us what we had asked. Often, though, the answer was in a different direction from what we had intended, but always for our greater good.

Schaeffer gave some moving examples about the effectiveness of prayer. For instance, on an airplane trip he took to the States, two engines on the same wing failed. The plane descended rapidly until it was just about to crash into the waves, when suddenly the power came back on. Schaeffer had been praying, he explained. So had his family back home, having heard a newflash on the radio about a struggling plane. There was a sort of prayer triangle, he argued—plane-to-God, home-to-God, and then the answer, God-to-plane. On the way out, Schaeffer greeted the astonished pilot, who could find no reason for the sudden reigniting. “Prayer,” Fran affirmed confidently. Of course, I did not absorb or fully understand all of this. It was all too new and quite exotic for me. I would later understand

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<sup>4</sup>The gentle reader will forgive me if I occasionally call them Fran and Edith, as I did through the years. Though thirty years my elders, they became such close friends that I was comfortable with them on a first-name basis.

that the Holy Spirit was prompting me, moving me toward the Savior. But for now, it was simply something from another world.

After the long evening of discussion on prayer as well as a few other topics, someone was asked to close in prayer. A sleepy-eyed student came to and uttered some sort of parting words of thanksgiving. Then Schaeffer got up, headed straight my way, and said something a bit strange, but which made perfect sense in retrospect. He told me he was not preaching the next day, so he would not be completely exhausted after the morning worship. He could therefore spend some time with me before lunch. Please, could I think of a key question I needed to ask concerning the faith when I came for this visit? I went to bed cogitating on what my question might be. I am somewhat ashamed to say it was a sophisticated-sounding version of *so what?* I think my formulation was something like this: what is the relevance of this Christian faith, even if it could be proved to be true?

The next day we held a church service. Again, I had never experienced anything like this. Chairs were brought in to the Les Mélèzes living room, where we had enjoyed the discussion the night before. We sat there and, after some opening words, began to sing Bach chorales in four-part harmony. How good could it get? As a music student, I had spent two years at Harvard analyzing Bach. Indeed, a thorough knowledge of these chorales was a prerequisite for our theory courses. And here we were, not studying them but singing them, and believing them. Then came the message. Ranald Macaulay, today my dear friend, preached in his kilt, the Macaulay tartan. It was a stirring sermon about reconciling Paul and James on their apparent differences over the relation of justification and good works. Rather than withdrawing or cynically thinking, *so glad he's excited about this*, I tried to enter into the issue and the arguments. Over an hour later, Ranald appeared to have concluded, and he certainly convinced me, even though I did not know much about what was involved. Only later, in theological seminary, would I be introduced at the scholarly level to the conundrum about the book of James's rhetorical arguments concerning salvation by good works. My professors confirmed that Paul and James were on the same page. But I already knew this, through Ranald!

So then the moment arrived. I made my way upstairs to the little chamber outside the bedrooms where Francis Schaeffer liked to counsel people. With that same profound face, its warm grin, and the clear sense that he really cared about me as well as the issues we needed to discuss,

he asked whether I had thought of my question. I spouted out my question about relevance, and he came back with an extensive, thoughtful reply. His answer included the “free-will defense” for the problem of evil, and the importance of human significance, owing to our being made after God’s image. We went back and forth. After a couple of hours, I just knew this was all true. If it is possible to *feel* the Holy Spirit come into one’s heart, I could, and I did. I was a Christian!

Fran then directed me to pray, which I had never done, at least in any sort of personal manner. What should I say, I asked? Just “thank you” will do very nicely, he replied. So, my face bathed in tears, I thanked the good Lord for leading me into his family. Fran frequently accompanied my phrases with groans of agreement, which I would later learn is a standard evangelical way of praying together. He then prayed for me, and we prayed together for Joe and for many other things we seemed to care about mutually.

Less than twenty-four hours after my arrival at L’Abri my life was completely turned upside down. Or was it right side up? I went down to the marvelous Sunday lunch, complete with my fresh peas, served outside on a large table that could fit at least thirty people. A rather long grace was said. I would have to get used to smelling the excellent savors of the great cooking at L’Abri while the praying person went from Genesis to Revelation, then the cosmos, then the rich and the poor, and so on. During the meal, more wonderful conversation ensued. Most of us who frequented L’Abri in those days would likely affirm that we learned more around the table, or during the walks afterward, than in the official seminars, good as they were. I decided I desperately needed to stay here longer. I asked Fran if that were possible. Well, he said, they were unusually crowded: thirty-five students plus staff. But he would see what he could do. Little did any of us know that a few years later the Vaudois government would have to put a cap on the community at 130 people!

### **A Mentor and a Friend**

In the midst of all of this, I received a phone call from my dad, telling me some astonishing news. His company had moved him to Geneva. This meant I would be freer to come and go to L’Abri, a great personal encouragement. At any rate, after a brief trip apartment-hunting with Dad, I did return to L’Abri and stayed out the summer. Fran urged me to listen

to his Romans series, some verse-by-verse Bible studies on Romans 1–8, given in a Lausanne café, complete with the sounds of dishes served and customers ordering food.<sup>5</sup> He also wanted me to listen to some lectures entitled “The Intellectual Climate and the New Theology.” If there was time, I was to go on to cover the “Basic Christian Doctrines” series, a study of the Westminster Confession of Faith. I did all these and was thoroughly stirred by the extraordinary content, radically fresh to this new believer.

In later years I would return to L’Abri over and over, as often as my study and work schedule permitted me. I became so conversant with the message and the life there that I used to play a game with myself: could I predict the next words to come out of Fran’s mouth? Most of the time I could, but not always. He always stayed fresh!

These first impressions of Francis Schaeffer, I would discover, were from the fruit of the strange and wonderful history of L’Abri. Much of it flowed from the Schaeffers’ views on spirituality, which in turn fed into their apologetics. The Schaeffers were strongly driven by a sense of mission. The mission was hammered out on the anvil of experience. The historical background will be more fully explained in the next chapters. The purpose of L’Abri was to welcome people and introduce them to the gospel. What they set forth to anyone who would come and listen was not only the explanation of the way into heaven, though that was tantamount, but the application of the Christian worldview to all of life. The warm welcome was genuine. Indeed, it resulted from a prayer that was often said at L’Abri: “Lord, bring us the people of your choice.” While sounding like a tautology (who else would the Lord bring?), what this prayer signified in practice was that whoever showed up at L’Abri was meant to be there by divine providence. And thus every guest was treated as though he or she were a special envoy. The extraordinary combination of community life and intellectual challenge was essential to the fabric of life in Huémoz.

Francis Schaeffer was a brilliant man. His method of learning was less the careful study of textbooks with footnotes and more an informal collecting of insights from Scripture, people, articles, clippings, and his own hunches. He had a “nose” for generalizations. Occasionally they were oversimple or even mistaken. But mostly he had a sense of what was reasonable and what was not, and would explore his ideas accordingly. He

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<sup>5</sup>These studies were later transcribed, edited, and published as *The Finished Work of Christ: The Truth of Romans 1–8* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).

possessed a considerable knowledge of the arts and was able to converse about them or most any other subject with just about anybody who would come across his path.

I once sent him some material about John Cage, the radical American avant-garde composer. It came from one of the *New Yorker* "Profiles," and was a rather long article based on interviews.<sup>6</sup> Cage was an *enfant terrible*. He wrote such disturbing pieces as *4'33"*, the score of which calls for the musician "not to play the notes," resulting in four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. He composed *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, a performance in which twelve radios were played at once. He claimed he was a Zen Buddhist, believing the universe to be based on chance and "purposeless play." Schaeffer saw something in the profile that I had not. As was well known, Cage had a special avocation: mycology (the study of fungi, especially mushrooms). After exploring this field, the interviewer asked Cage how he could reconcile his orderly mushroom collections with a chance universe. Oh, said Cage, if I had to collect mushrooms on the basis of my Zen convictions I would surely die. Fran often used this as an example of the impossibility of a worldview that tried consistently to deny the inherent order of God's universe. It simply couldn't "fit" into reality.

In addition to my regular visits to L'Abri, among the many ways my friendship with Francis Schaeffer would develop over the years were several occasions when he came to America. While I was still at Harvard, Joe Brown led a few of us to invite Schaeffer to give some lectures at the university about the basics of Christian apologetics. They were to be called the CCTL, the Christian Contemporary Thought Lectures. The series would eventually include Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) and Georges Florovsky (1893–1979). Funded by a friend from Park Street Church in Boston, these lectures were given in Lowell Lecture Hall.

When Schaeffer came, the place was packed. Nothing quite like it had ever been heard at Harvard, I am fairly certain. He appeared in his typical Swiss hiking outfit.<sup>7</sup> He spoke in his high-pitched voice about the "line of despair," frequently drawing on the blackboard behind him. He threw out names: Hegel, Kierkegaard, Freud, Sartre, Camus, and many others. But what was most memorable was his passionate appeal for *consistency*.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin Tomkins, "Figure in an Imaginary Landscape," *The New Yorker*, November 28, 1964, 64–128.

<sup>7</sup> Schaeffer's dress code is a matter of some curiosity. In later years he wore a Nehru jacket and hiking shoes, grew his hair long, and sported a goatee. Cynics thought it was a way of getting attention. My own view is that it was part of an overall statement about the radical nature of the true biblical message. True Christianity for him was revolutionary and nonconformist—and he had the clothes to match!

These philosophers were unable to articulate a point of view that in the end could account for the world around them. A lack of such consistency was, again, for Schaeffer evidence of the impossibility of succeeding in God's world without a biblical view of life.

He told us of a man he once met on shipboard. The fellow found out Fran was a pastor and immediately decided to have some fun (as a classmate sitting next to me in the lecture whispered into my ear: not a great idea!). The man had claimed that there was no real meaning in life and no way to access truth. Pastors were naïve people living in an idealistic world. For the man, life had no meaning and nothing was real. Schaeffer asked him bluntly whether when he would go below and embrace his wife, he would have any assurance that she was really there! The man was furious and left with a short riposte, "Of course I know she is there," but he was clearly caught off guard and embarrassed. The riveted audience began to have a sense that a real, meaningful life without acknowledging the God of the universe was neither possible nor desirable.<sup>8</sup>

Most of my friends at Harvard were skeptics or even atheists. I had become a Christian rather dramatically, to their astonishment. These friends remained cordial and even affectionate, but they clearly thought I had gone a bit wacky, whereas I used to be so normal. They wondered about this "guru" I had met. So on the occasion of one of the CCTL lectures I invited a dozen of them to meet Fran in the private dining room in Kirkland House, my place of residence. As the time approached, I grew rather nervous. My friends were brilliant, budding leaders in their fields. I began to worry that my guru would be out of his depth. He arrived a bit late because he had been engaged in a conversation. I rather awkwardly introduced him as someone who believed in truth and that the Bible had basic answers for all of life. As the discussion moved forward I felt somewhat better.

Then came two questions from two of my best friends. The first was about whether Theravada or Mahayana Buddhists were the authentic successors of Siddhartha's thought. Oh dear, I thought, he doesn't know the first thing about these finer points of world religions. To my surprise and delight he replied that three thousand years before the Christian era,

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), Schaeffer's professor at Westminster Seminary, used to refer to the "pre-suppositional" method of validating the Christian faith as the "impossibility of the contrary." See his *Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 100–101. I shall make further comments on this idea below.

tradesmen had crossed paths in the Indus valley and as a result of their exchanging ideas about the gods, they had produced a synthesis resulting in the impersonal, pantheistic worldview of Eastern religion. Therefore, in the Asian perspective, we cannot deal with evil as a reality. I was bowled over. I later found out someone had sent him an article about this, and he had stored up the information in a mental file somewhere!

A second question came that I was sure would undo him. One of my close friends was on the cutting edge of urban planning. The computer was in its very early stages, and he thought that we could solve many problems in our cities through the computer and other calculating machines. Again, I thought, Dr. Schaeffer has no idea what is going on in this field. And again, he came right back: but what about the place of the human being in all this? My friend, along with the rest in the room, was stunned. It's all about anthropology, Schaeffer explained. At the end of the time, they all flocked to him for follow up. One of my dearest friends in the room was an African American in premedical studies.<sup>9</sup> The two of us had many interests in common, including jazz music and theology. He had written a fascinating paper on philosophy and handed it to Schaeffer hoping for an evaluation. Others followed. Schaeffer once told me he loved receiving these papers but found it nearly impossible to read them carefully and give thoughtful answers to them. But he usually did so anyway!

By this time the Schaeffers had become my friends, as well as my mentors. I learned a great deal, being with them and watching them. During one of Fran's visits to Boston he was to preach at Park Street Congregational Church. He had much earlier taken strong exception to the position of its pastor, Harold John Ockenga (1905–1985), criticizing his decision not to separate from his denomination. I rode in the car to the church with Fran. He was wrapped in a blanket, trying to get over a bad cold. He leaned over, clearly agitated, and told me, "Bill, I have fire in my bones." I was not sure what this was about. That night he preached an incredibly stirring message about holiness and fidelity. Most of the time he was shouting. It got louder and louder, and at the end, he said "and this stinks in the nostrils of God," then sat down, without the customary concluding prayer.

I would later learn that this was connected with a very deep-rooted anger over differences he held with Dr. Ockenga about ecclesiology. As we

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<sup>9</sup>There were not many black people at Harvard at the time, although such luminaries as W. E. B. Du Bois had graduated from there. Later Harvard would boast one of the best "Afro-Am" departments in the country.

shall see, Fran held a strong separatist position and considered those who refused to separate over various issues to be compromisers. While he later would deeply regret some of the harshness with which he could treat those with whom he disagreed, he would never abandon his conviction about the purity of the visible church.

Another memorable encounter was a bit later, during a subsequent visit of Fran's to the States. I had decided to attend seminary after college, mostly to go deeper into the basics of my new-found faith. For various reasons, including the Schaeffers' encouragement, I chose to attend Westminster Theological Seminary, near Philadelphia. During my years as a student there in the late 1960s, President Edmund Clowney (1917–2005) determined to invite Schaeffer to our campus. Dr. Clowney had become quite taken with Schaeffer and the work of L'Abri. He was trying to move the seminary in a direction that would build more bridges with the outside world, and even, where feasible without compromise, reach out to evangelicals not necessarily from the strictly Reformed persuasion of the seminary. On this occasion he wanted to see if he could help mend some fences between two great men, Francis Schaeffer and Cornelius Van Til. Although Schaeffer had studied under Van Til at Westminster, he had come to express certain reservations about some of Van Til's emphases, which he deemed insufficiently cognizant of the need for evidences in arguments for the Christian faith. Van Til, on the other hand, worried that Schaeffer had slouched toward rationalism.

In 1968 President Clowney decided to put Schaeffer and Van Til in the same room and attempt a meeting of the minds. Although this ultimately was not really successful, at least the two of them were together and beginning to hash-out significant differences. They seemed to talk past each other. Apparently, at one point Van Til gave a bird's-eye view of the Reformed faith and presuppositional apologetics. After this speech Fran exclaimed that he wished he had recorded this and that he would have required every L'Abri worker to listen to it. There were certainly substantive disagreements between the two men, but as is often the case, innuendos and caricatures were as much in the mix as the questions themselves.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>For an analysis of the similarities and contrasts between Van Til and Schaeffer, see my essay "Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 57–80. Van Til was sharply critical of Schaeffer, though with obvious sympathies for him and his ministry. Van Til himself was plagued by criticisms of his views throughout his life. None were so serious or hurtful, perhaps, as those coming from Calvin Seminary, where, even after he was offered a position there, several potential colleagues strongly reproached him for his putative

Not only during the Schaeffers' trips to the States, but also in my frequent visits to L'Abri, I was able to learn a great deal. Such visits were made easy for me because our family lived in Geneva, right down the lake. For example, I continued to learn about prayer. Prayer was not only discussed but also practiced throughout the day, and in many varieties. L'Abri featured a number of special times of prayer. Once a year a day of prayer and fasting was held. A whole day! Then too, every week, we would all pause and go to a designated room for prayer. An extraordinary discipline, and a life-changing habit to nurture, prayer has become a precious way to deepen my primary relationship with God. I am still trying to do better at it, but it all began at L'Abri.

One initiative that many of us found very profitable was a day when we could take lunches and walk to a secluded place with a book. Though life was a bit less frenetic than it has become today, such a chance to get away, to be quiet, and to read more than a few pages at one sitting was precious.

Also at L'Abri, I learned that Sundays were very special. The church service and Schaeffer's sermons were astounding. His messages often lasted well over an hour, but we did not notice the time go by, and even wished they could last longer (a wish probably not shared by mothers with their young babies!). I was present for a number of memorable series. One was on the book of Job. After those powerful messages on Job I felt I knew the poor man personally. Such studies were far more compelling than many textbooks about the "problem of evil." I was also present when Schaeffer preached the series that would become the book *True Spirituality*, which will be central to the present volume.

Then, on a typical Sunday afternoon, after lunch (or "high tea") a group of us would go next door to Chalet Bellevue, at the time a home for victims of cerebral palsy. These beautiful people in wheelchairs, flailing their arms about, loved to sing the hymns led by Jane Stuart Smith, a retired opera singer who gave her life to the work of L'Abri. Treating everyone, disabled or not, as fully human, was one of the most remarkable testimonies from this place. Although it may sound insensitive to say this today, Schaeffer kept reminding us that we were all palsied, although some of us could hide our condition better than others.

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lack of grace. See *Christian Apologetics Past and Present: A Primary Source Reader (Volume 2, from 1500)*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 455.

**Further Involvements**

Barbara, my wife to be, went to L'Abri in the spring of 1966. She lived first in the Swiss L'Abri, then in the English branch for an entire year. She was a new believer, and this community was instrumental in solidifying her faith. Her first assignment was to help take care of Fran's mother, Bessie, whom the Schaeffers had moved to Switzerland after the death of her husband, Frank. Barbara vividly remembers playing checkers with her, often losing, as well as engaging in long, intense conversations. Her next assignment was to move to the British branch of L'Abri, which was begun in 1958 and was now directed by Randal and Susan Macaulay. Barbara helped with their small children and generally assisted the family in various areas. She also was tasked with sending out the reel-to-reel tapes to those around the world who requested them.

Resources were always precarious. An incident stands out in Barbara's mind. One day Randal announced that there was virtually no money. So for the next few days no one could have the helpings of food they desired. If you wanted a banana, you were asked to kindly eat only half of it. Coming from an affluent background, Barbara had thought nothing of eating a part of a banana and throwing the rest away. She learned a great deal from L'Abri as a faith mission, and such frugality had a lasting influence on her and the many who lived there. She was also deeply moved by the many dramatic answers to prayer she experienced in that place.

Fran wrote us the most meaningful letter when he received the news of our marriage, which the Schaeffers were unable to attend. He was a pastor through and through. He was quite sure our family would be the beautiful reflection of the love of Christ for his church (Eph. 5:22–33). As newlyweds, following the L'Abri style, we became very careful with our resources. We prayed for just about everything and tried to wait on the Lord for all our needs. After seminary, we became home missionaries for a Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania. This endeavor, too, was a faith mission, but thanks to L'Abri we had learned how to face the risks. Several months into this assignment we came to a crossroads. Although the L'Abri policy was not to ask anyone to come work there, it was clear Fran wanted us to come and help them out. After much prayer we decided against it. Our very dear friends Dick and Mardi Keyes, to whom I have dedicated this book, did go over, and have been involved in L'Abri ever since.

Instead of moving to Switzerland, our family felt called to Greenwich,

Connecticut, where we lived for nearly a decade, to teach at a day school. I taught French, philosophy, and music at the high school level and came to love that age very greatly. We were able to lead a Christian fellowship and to connect to an independent school ministry called FOCUS. David Bragdon, Jonathan's brother, was the math teacher there. The head of the school was kind enough to encourage me all along the way. He appointed me chair of the music department and sent me to the Dalcroze School in Geneva in the summer of 1974 for further training in music education. So we lived with my parents, and of course had several chances to visit the Schaeffers during those months.

As it happened, Fran was busily preparing an address he was to give at the very first Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization (July 16–25). He spoke on "Form and Freedom in the Church." The paper stressed the need for sound doctrine, the need to "answer honest questions with honest answers," but also the need for true spirituality, and for "the beauty of human relationships."<sup>11</sup> His thinking on true spirituality was by now fully crystallized. One aspect of the paper was the remark that the Protestant Reformation, marvelous as it was, had overlooked two major problems: race and money (or "affluency," as he termed it). He read his paper to a riveted audience. This entire congress was dedicated to getting the balance right between evangelism and doing justice. It would produce the Lausanne Covenant, which notably sought to redress an imbalance in the evangelical approach to the social dimension of the gospel. Schaeffer was a key part of it. Justice was never incidental to him, but an integral part of the gospel.

Also memorable for me was my involvement in the film *How Should We Then Live?* The title is a quote from Ezekiel 33:10. The film (1977) came with a companion volume (1976). The two are parallel, though not at all points. The overall concern of the series is to examine the flow of Western history in order to determine where we are today and then to suggest changes that need to be made so that the world could be a better place for the next generations. A sweeping journey from the Greeks and Romans through the present, it is a summary statement of much of what Francis Schaeffer had taught over the years. It has a distinctly Cold War feeling, with warnings against tyrannical government and descriptions of the menace of communism in the later portions. It also has hints of the

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.lausanne.org/documents/lau1docs/0368.pdf>.

view that understands the Founding Fathers of America to have held to a “Christian consensus,” a view that has several forms, centering on the degree to which the Founding Fathers were self-consciously Christian. Fran had previously engaged in a vigorous debate with historian Mark Noll over the proper interpretation of this period. George Marsden, a specialist in American colonial history, also weighed in.<sup>12</sup>

Though at first reluctant, Fran was eventually convinced to make this film by his son, Franky, together with Billy Zeoli of Gospel Films, Inc. Billy is the son of Anthony Zeoli, into whose tent ministry Fran wandered as a young man, an experience that would help define his fledgling Christian faith, as we shall see. Franky and Billy appealed to Fran’s desire to get the message out to a larger audience. They persuaded him that the film could be a corrective to certain series sponsored by public television. Fran had become concerned that many of the most influential PBS and BBC series, such as Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation*, were prejudiced against the historic Christian position.

My own involvement was with the music featured in the series. I am not sure of the internal politics that led to their employing me, since the name Jane Stuart Smith appears on the list of credits, not mine. In retrospect, I am just as glad. All in all, it was a learning experience. The final version of the film was reduced from thirteen to eleven episodes because of various problems.

To be honest, it is not the best documentary ever produced. Various portions of it lack professionalism. In one episode Thomas Aquinas, a bald monk, is copying a text from Aristotle, and Fran bursts into the room with some weighty words about Thomas’s dependence on the Greek philosopher and his nature/grace scheme. Perhaps for good reason, the series never made it to public television. At the same time, nothing quite like it had ever been done by an evangelical Christian. It was shown all over America and beyond, thanks to willing friends and supporters. A number of us hosted these events, and they became excellent discussion points.

### **L’Abri Today**

Today, L’Abri lives on. There are ten residential L’Abris around the world, as well as a number of nonresidential ones. Barbara and I have been involved,

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<sup>12</sup> An account of this debate can be found in Barry Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 211–27.

off and on, in several of them. Each of them has a different character, owing to its particular history and leadership. In the nonresidential L'Abri, events and discussions are held, but no overnight facilities are provided.

The official website describes L'Abri as having four emphases and a final goal.<sup>13</sup> (1) Christianity is objectively true and the Bible is God's written word to mankind; which means that biblical Christianity can be rationally defended and honest questions are welcome. (2) Because Christianity is true, it speaks to all of life and not to some narrowly religious sphere; therefore, much of the material produced by L'Abri is aimed at helping develop a Christian perspective on the arts, politics, and the social sciences, and so forth. (3) In our relationship with God, true spirituality is seen in lives that by grace are free to be fully human rather than in trying to live "on some higher spiritual plane" or in "some grey negative way." (4) L'Abri takes the reality of the fall seriously, and declares that until Christ returns, we and our world are disfigured by sin. Finally, the statement adds, while L'Abri takes the mind seriously, it is not a place for intellectuals only. L'Abri is as much concerned for living as for thinking. Within these overall emphases, each of these branches has a distinctive character, often shaped by the leadership.

A number of L'Abri centers were run by the Schaeffer children or by associates close to the heart of the work. Indeed, each of the Schaeffer children has taken their parents' life and heritage in a particular direction. Prisca and her husband, John, stayed in Huémoz and continue to help with the ongoing work. John has had some apparent doctrinal differences with official L'Abri teaching, yet he stays on and is tremendously helpful. Susan and Ranald Macaulay are living in Cambridge, England, and after years of working at L'Abri, now pour their lives into a work called Christian Heritage, which consists of courses, tours, seminars, and debates around the subject of the truth of the gospel. Ranald loves to take visitors around the university and show them mementos of the Christian past of that great center for learning: John Newton's rooms, Faraday's laboratory, the White Horse Inn, and so on. Debbie and Udo Middelman left L'Abri to establish a work called the Francis Schaeffer Foundation, in Gryon, across the valley from Huémoz.

The Schaeffer's son, Franky (now called Frank), married to Genie, is the most controversial of the Schaeffer children. He is a filmmaker, an author, a painter, and a social critic. He left the Protestant communion and

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.labri.org/>.

has embraced Eastern Orthodoxy in its Antiochian expression. Also, he has developed rather a cottage industry of books that combine sensitive, personal insights into life with his parents with rather caustic critiques of many people, including his mother and father. In an odd historiography, Frank today accepts the blame for guiding his dad into collaboration with the evangelical right, which he now largely repudiates. While many of us believe there are serious problems with his reading of L'Abri and his parents' work, it is hard not to sympathize with a young man brought up in such a pressure cooker. He says, in *Crazy for God*: "I was in the work, but not of it. The intrusion of the students, the hurly-burly of the comings and goings, the growing crowds of people who came on Sunday to church in the summer, the constant noise around the house, everything made me hate where I lived—and love it."<sup>14</sup>

Nonfamily members too have excelled in their development of L'Abri into the next generations. Dick and Mardi Keyes, at the L'Abri in Southborough, Massachusetts, just outside Boston, have developed extraordinary material on numerous subjects related to Christian apologetics, from studies on identity, to issues such as heroism, cynicism, and gender. Larry and Nancy Snyder, working in the Rochester, Minnesota, branch, have contributed greatly, including their sponsorship of an annual L'Abri conference in February, which attracts hundreds of people. The original L'Abri, in Huémoz, has seven chalets, each with a staff member, welcoming scores of visitors each year. In addition, branches exist in Holland, England, Sweden, Korea, Canada, Germany, and Brazil.<sup>15</sup>

Francis Schaeffer's legacy is still being felt. His impact is still being evaluated as well, and probably will be for years to come. In my teaching and writing I find myself constantly referring back to what I learned from L'Abri and the work of Fran and Edith Schaeffer, as well as that of Hans Rookmaaker (1922–1977), Fran's close collaborator, and the founder of the Dutch L'Abri. Each of us who came of age spiritually within the L'Abri ethos have moved on and developed our own specific emphases. But the ties are deep and the culture of L'Abri, as well as the ideas generated, have stayed with us, and defined us.

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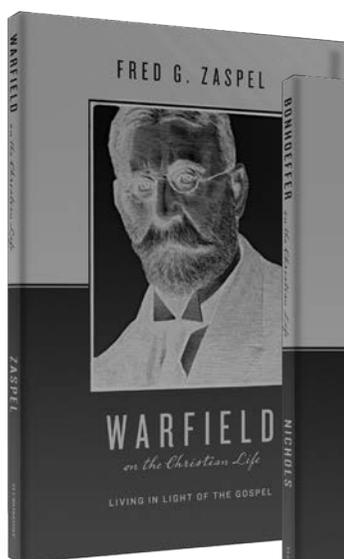
<sup>14</sup> Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007), 218. See also Frank Schaeffer, *Portofino: A Novel* (New York: Da Capo, 1974); *Saving Grandma: A Novel* (New York: Da Capo, 2004); *Zermatt: A Novel* (New York: Da Capo, 2004); *Sex, Mom, and God: How the Bible's Strange Take on Sex Led to Crazy Politics—and How I Learned to Love Women (and Jesus) Anyway* (New York: Da Capo, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.labri.org/today.html>.

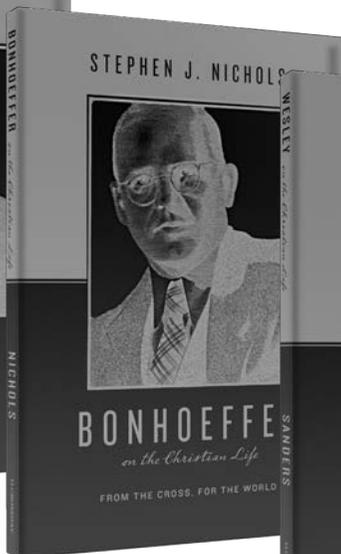


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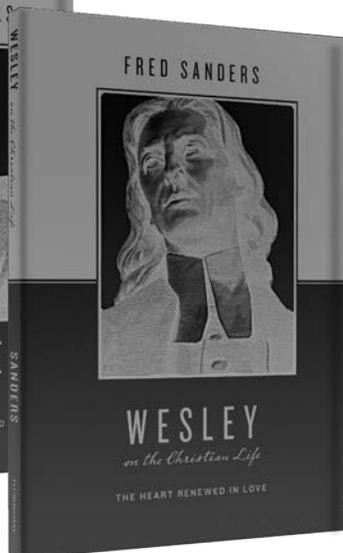
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