

Biographical Introduction

Our Father in Heaven, we want to praise You as the God of all creation. You are the One Who has made this marvelous universe in which we live and Who has made us, too, to be Your people and Your children. As we begin this course together, we thank You that You have created each one of us to walk before You, and You have called us to Your Son Jesus Christ and asked us to be obedient to You. We pray, Father, that as we study together the life and ministry of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, that You will encourage us. Encourage us to see what You are able to do when people are prepared to put themselves into Your hands. We thank You for them and for all You did in their lives. We pray that our time together may be something that is glorifying to You and upbuilding to all of us. We pray that it would challenge us in our own walk before You day by day. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

I want to start this lesson by looking at the very early years of the Schaeffers' lives. The first couple of lessons will be basically biographical, though I hope to draw some points out as we go along of what was really important to them from early on in their lives. Most of this information you would be able to find if you read the letters, if you read *The Tapestry*, and others of Edith's books.

Edith started her book, *The Tapestry*, by writing about the pattern that God weaves in our individual lives. If you ever met the Schaeffers, what would have struck you if you talked to Francis was the tremendous sense he had of wonder and awe at what God had done in his and Edith's lives together. He had a sense of awe at what God is able to do and does do in all of our lives as we seek to trust Him and serve Him. If you ever talked to Edith, this comes out immediately when you talk to her. She has a tremendous sense of wonder at what God is doing. It is a wonder at the pattern that God weaves in our lives. That is why she chose the title *The Tapestry*. You think of Paul's words in Ephesians 2:10 where he says, "We are God's workmanship, created for good works which God has prepared beforehand for us to do." This was a constant theme of both Francis and Edith's ministry. There are wonderful things that God is able to do in our lives. He has planned and created things for us to do.

Let me read a section from the beginning of *The Tapestry* where Edith speaks about this. This was not something they just thought out in their own lives; it was something they constantly tried to communicate to everyone they had contact with. They talked about how God is able to take the individual details and choices of our lives and weave something together in a way that is really beautiful and of significance in history. She says, "*The Tapestry* seemed a concise title for such a book, the idea being that each of our lives is a thread. You are a thread, and I am a thread. As we affect each other's ideas, physical beings, spiritual understanding, or material possessions, or as we influence each other's attitudes, creativity, courage, determination to keep on, moods, priorities, understanding spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, we are at the same time affecting history. History is different because you have lived and because I have lived. We have each caused ripples that will never end, and we continue to cause ripples." If you ever heard Schaeffer speak, this was the way he would speak all the time as well. Each action of our lives is like casting a stone into a pool, which causes ripples that will then go on forever. But whereas this is not just ripple in water, this is a ripple in the lives of other people. What we choose to do every day of our lives affects others. That is the wonderful way in which God has created us. Edith goes on to say, "In the picture brought to our minds by the tapestry, we are being woven together, threads that are important to a pattern, the pattern of the history of our lifetimes, but also the pattern we affect in the future of history." She goes on to speak about the wonder of how God has made us. "God has made us as human beings in His image, to have true valid choice, affecting creativity, love, communication, ideas which in turn have an impact or influence on each other and on history. As soon as we think we have a pat answer or can do away with the distance between the parallel lines of God being truly God and human beings having true choice, we have then done away with the distance between finiteness and infiniteness. There is a huge gap, a

gap that must always remain between being finite and being infinite. Only God is infinite. There is a mystery that remains. Our deep awe and worship continue.”

If we want to understand the Schaeffers and their emphasis on human significance, which might be questioned by some within the Reformed community, we have to recognize why they emphasized it. First, they were convinced that it was a biblical emphasis. I just heard a sermon from Kennedy Smart about Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul was so committed to having his life affect other people. He says, “...that by all means I might save some.” Paul was convinced that no one is saved without the gracious work of God, but he recognized and taught repeatedly that he had a responsible part to play as well in God’s pattern of working out the salvation of individual people. So first, the Schaeffers had a conviction that this was a fundamental and central part of biblical teaching. God has made us in His image to have significant choices. Our choices affect history.

Second, for the Schaeffers, that was not something to be proud about or to boast about. It is not as if we can stand over against God and say, “Look at what I have done. Is it not wonderful?” Rather it was a cause for worshipping God. The fact that the infinite God has made us, as finite significant persons, able to have real choice that actually affects others and history is something that we will never understand fully. Mrs. Schaeffer uses the image of parallel lines throughout history. It is an image that Spurgeon used repeatedly in his ministry as well. He spoke of lines which, as far as we can see, run parallel, but they meet at the throne of God. Her point here is that we may not be able to understand this, but it should cause us to worship God. The sovereign God is able to take our real choices and weave His patterns in history.

There are two convictions here. One is the conviction of our significance, which Scripture so clearly teaches and which our experience teaches us every moment of every day. At the same time and overarching that, they had a powerful conviction of God’s hand at work in history. Schaeffer used to use an image repeatedly, which Mrs. Schaeffer mentions in this book. We come to moments in our lives when we have to make a choice that we know is really important. We may take time over it, we may pray over it, we may struggle over it, but we have to make a choice. We know it has tremendous importance in our life and in the lives of others. When we can stand back and look at it, we see that we have been on an escalator that has been moving all the time. That was an image that he liked use. We are significant, yet God’s overarching hand is above and working through our lives to bring about His purposes in history. The Schaeffers never tried to work that out to say how these two things worked together. They saw it as a reason for worshipping God and having awe and wonder before God that we are His workmanship created to walk before Him and to do the good works that He planned for us to do. We are significant, and He is sovereign.

I do not think it is possible to understand anything about their ministry unless one understands this. Incidentally, I would say it is not possible to understand our own lives unless one understands this, either. God has made us significant; that is what it means to be made in His image. Though that image is damaged and touched so badly by the Fall, it is not destroyed. We are still God’s image bearers, and that image is made new in Jesus Christ. God calls us to walk before Him now with choices that honor Him so that we may learn, as Paul says in Romans 12, to choose to do His good, acceptable, and perfect will. It does not come automatically. That is something we have to grow in as we walk before Him. Yet at the same time, we may have a wondering sense of awe at how God is able to be sovereign overall. He weaves His patterns in our lives through the choices that we make. This is a marvelous thing to see. We see it all the way through Scripture. It seems to me it is something that is central, both in our understanding of our own lives, but also in our attempts to communicate the Gospel to other people. One of the problems that our generation faces is not being able to give any meaning to the life of the individual or to the whole of history. Christianity gives us an answer, because it puts these two together. God is the one who gives meaning to all of history, yet He has created us as significant persons whose choices affect history as it goes along.

Let us turn to the Schaeffers' origins. Francis Schaeffer's ancestors came to the United States from Germany. His father's name was Frank Schaeffer. At one point early in his life, he went away to sea to join the Navy. He was in the Navy, including a spell in the Spanish American War. When he returned from his time at sea, he became a rigger in some steel works in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Frank Schaeffer was a working man and a practical man. He had no academic, cultural, or philosophical interests in his life. He was not a Christian. He passed on nothing to his son in the area of an interest in culture, human thought, philosophy, or Christianity. Instead he passed on pride in good and hard work, the ability to make things with his hands and design things, and a tremendous sense of the dignity of the working man.

Francis Schaeffer's mother was Bessie Williamson. Her father had died when she was eight years old. She had a very hard childhood. She was part of a family of four children with her mother and an elderly grandfather, making six of them. Without a man in the household, they had a tremendously hard life through her childhood and teenage years. She worked with her mother taking in the laundry of neighbors. Her life was very hard, and it made her very bitter in some ways. It also gave her a very strong sense, perhaps because of the hardness of her life, that you have to look out for number one. You have to look out for yourself if you are going to get anywhere in life at all. She made a tremendous insistence on her own rights. Toward the end of her life, she became a Christian and became a greatly softened person. I knew her as Grandmother Schaeffer when I first went to work in the Swiss L'Abri in 1967. These two, Frank Schaeffer and Bessie Williamson, were married.

On January 30, 1912, Francis August Schaeffer was born. He was an only child. His mother did not want to have more than one child. She felt to have more than one child would mean she would be a slave to her children, so one was quite enough. There is a rather funny incident that Edith relates that he was born at night. They had to fetch a doctor to come to their home for the birth. The doctor was drunk but managed to do the job of delivering Francis Schaeffer fine. But he was drunk enough to forget to register the birth. It was not until 1947, when Francis applied for his first passport, that they discovered that his birth had never been registered.

Again, just looking at this early part of his life, Francis Schaeffer had no Christian upbringing. His family went to church, but it was not a Bible-believing church in any way. He had no Christian upbringing either from the church they attended or from his home. And there was no interest in ideas in the home, the arts, or anything like that. His childhood at home was spent helping his father with painting, carpentry, and so on. At school, in his early years, he did very well. Many years later, long after he was married, when they prepared the bits of paper that were put together into *The Tapestry*, he discovered that he had tested out in his first school as the second most intelligent child in 20 years. His parents never told him that. They were not interested in encouraging him to study, to be interested in ideas in any way. Their design for him was to go into some kind of practical work like engineering. When he went to junior high school, the courses he took were practical courses. They did not prepare him for college at all. He took mechanical engineering, woodworking, metalworking, and other classes like that. He carried on helping his father all the way through high school. He laid floors, built garages, laid brick, and did plumbing.

He was not very happy during all of this, though he did not know quite why. He said of that time that he inwardly dropped out. In those days people did not externally drop out of high school in the way that they do now. But he dropped out inwardly and carried on mechanically with his schoolwork. During the vacations and weekends, he had various jobs working at a fishmonger's hauling ice and working in a meat market. Francis Schaeffer remembered very clearly his first exposure to classical music. He went to an electrical display, and they had put the display on to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. That created in him the beginning of his love for classical music. Later on it developed into something much fuller. That was his first exposure to classical music.

His first exposure to philosophy was accidental. This brings us to the conversion point in his life. He kept on going to church, though the church was not teaching the Bible. His Sunday school teacher put him in contact

with a white Russian man. It was Francis Schaeffer's job to teach this man English. He did not have any books that were helpful at all, so the Sunday school teacher suggested that he go to one of the big book stores in downtown Philadelphia to get a beginner's English reading book. The bookstore gave him the wrong book, and he came home with a book of Greek philosophy. He saw that as one of the little points where God has His hand very much in our history though we may be completely unaware of it at the time. It was a book most unsuitable for teaching someone beginning English, but that was what the bookstore gave him. He had never seen anything like it before, but he started to read it, and he loved it. He began to read more and more widely. He had no classes on anything like it at school. As he began to read philosophy, he began to see that philosophy dealt with all sorts of basic questions about human life. He could see, too, that the philosophy he read had no answers to those questions at all.

At the same time, when he was 16 or 17, he realized that his church did not give any answers either to the kinds of questions that he and other people had about life. He decided at that point that Christianity should be discarded. He had not really even been exposed to it, but he did not know that. He felt that to be honest he ought to start reading the Bible. He decided when he was 17 to read the Bible from beginning to end, just like he read the other books that he had. He started reading a bit of the Bible every night, and then he read a bit of *Ovitt*, which was one of the books he was also reading.

Mrs. Schaeffer says something fascinating about this. She was asked how he read the Bible, and she said, "How did he read it? Who helped him to understand? No one gave him any suggestions. He would not have known who to ask. In any case, he had no idea there was any way to read it other than to read it in the same way as any other book. He started at the beginning of Genesis and read to the end. If you want to know why Fran had such a high regard for the Bible and feels it is adequate in answering the questions of life, the answer is right here. As a 17-year-old boy with a thirst for the answer to life's questions, he began to discover for himself the existence of adequate and complete answers right in the Bible." This was something that became abiding throughout his ministry in terms of the way he approached Scripture. He became a Christian simply by reading the Bible himself, without any help from anyone else. He read the Bible as it seemed to demand to be read, as it is set down. At that time as a 17-year-old boy, he saw that Genesis answered questions about the very basic issues of life. It talked about who we are as human persons, the origin of evil, and the origin of life. Genesis answered basic questions that we have as human beings about life, which he did not find were answered in the philosophy that he read. He was not a trained philosopher, and he had no one to help him read Scripture. But he saw the Bible answer those basic questions that he had.

He became a Christian by reading Scripture by himself. He then began to grow as a Christian as he read the Bible more and more. As he saw how exciting the answers that the Bible gave were, he read his philosophy less and less. He read the Bible more and more. At first he did not know that there were other Christians. He did not know there was anyone else who thought that the Bible was true in this way. He did not hear it at church. He did not know that there were evangelical churches around that took the Bible seriously. It was not until some later point that he discovered that there were other Christians. He simply read the Bible by himself, began to pray, and tried to be obedient to the Lord.

It reminds me of a story of someone who came to stay with us at the English L'Abri. This was years and years ago. This was a girl who is now a member of the church where I have been a pastor for the last few years. At that time she was into drugs and a wild life. She lived with her boyfriend on one of the small Channel Islands. They lived in a deserted house where they took drugs together and did nothing. This was in the late sixties. In this house, they discovered in a niche in the wall a copy of *Daily Light*. Just for fun, the two of them started reading it every morning and evening. It said it was to be read in the morning and evening. It was their first exposure to Christianity. They did not have a Bible; they just had *Daily Light*. They became Christians together by reading this. They did not have anyone to explain it to them; they just read it and believed it. They thought it

was true. They saw as they read along that Christians should be part of a church. One Sunday they went to try to find a little church on the island where they were. They found a tiny Pentecostal church, which was basically just a handful of older women. These older ladies had been praying for some time that God would bring someone to them whom they could help. The island was quite small without a large number of inhabitants. This young couple turned up, very wild and counter-culture in their appearance. These old ladies welcomed them with open arms and began to help them see that there were other people who were Christians as well.

In a way, their experience was similar to the kind of experience that Schaeffer had. He became a Christian by himself. I have met quite a few other people like this. I have a friend in California who I saw just recently. He became a Christian by himself also just after he finished high school. His parents were divorced, and there was a family Bible, which no one ever read. He started reading the New Testament, and by the time he got halfway through Acts, he became a Christian. He had no contact with anyone else. As he went along reading the New Testament, he saw that Christians ought to try to serve God. He thought he ought to do something useful, so he went to Africa with the Peace Corps. That seemed to be something useful to do. That is how I met him some years later. After his time in Africa in the Peace Corps, he came to stay at the English L'Abri in 1971.

These are illustrations of how God's Word is so powerful because it is true. If we read it honestly and seriously, the Holy Spirit is able to use it to touch people's hearts and lives and bring them to Himself.

The next turning point in Francis Schaeffer's life came a few months later, shortly after he graduated from high school. He graduated in 1930, and he was still expecting to carry on with his father's design, which was to study engineering at the Drexel Institute. That is what he registered to do and started doing that fall. On August 19, 1930, another major turning point in his life took place. He was walking down a street in Germantown, feeling lonely and depressed. He had not found anyone else up to this point who really cared about the Bible in the way that he did. He felt depressed, because he did not want to go into engineering. He began to feel the longing to do something different. He did not despise engineering or his father's background, but he began to feel a longing to do some other things. As he went along, he heard a piano playing and some hymns being sung. There on the corner of the street was a tent meeting, so he went in. There was an Italian-American evangelist preaching the Gospel very powerfully and simply. This had a tremendous effect on Schaeffer because he thought, "There are other people who believe the Bible like I do." Here was this man preaching the Gospel that he believed. The evangelist was Anthony Zeoli.

Many years later, his son, Billy, was involved with Schaeffer in making his first film. At the end of his message, Anthony Zeoli gave an invitation. Francis Schaeffer walked forward, and the evangelist said to him, "Are you becoming a Christian, or do you want to dedicate yourself more?" He did not understand what he was asking him because he had never heard the kind of language he used before. He was not sure what to say. He came home and wrote in his own diary, "I decided that I would give my life to Christ unconditionally. That is what I ought to do." He was overjoyed to know that there were other Christians out there. After the first evening, he went back to those tent meetings every day. He was so delighted to find someone who preached the same Gospel that he believed.

His next year was a year of tremendous struggle. He started studying engineering at the Drexel Institute, but he had a longing to study for the ministry. His problem was that his parents were totally opposed to this. His father thought that ministers were drones and parasites. He thought they were idle good-for-nothings. His parents did not want him to go to college. They wanted him to carry on doing the same kinds of things his father had done. In his heart, there was a growing and passionate desire to become a minister of the Gospel. Those next months were very difficult for him. Around Christmas he decided to become a minister. He felt that he had to start training for the Gospel ministry. That meant he would have to go to college. On January 30, 1931, he went back to high school. He went to evening school to start preparing to go to college. He had not taken the kinds of

classes in school to prepare him for college. He took evening classes in Latin and German to prepare himself to go to Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia. That was where he eventually went. His preparations were basically ignored and frowned on at home.