

## Spiritual Crisis

It is obvious from our previous lesson that we are reaching a point in Schaeffer's life in which he was approaching a crisis. The article we considered in the previous lesson was written in the period leading up to and in the middle of that crisis. In this lesson we will consider the year 1950 in Francis and Edith's life together and see it as a time of preparation. It was a time of preparation in the sense that in all kinds of ways God was preparing them for the work of L'Abri that was to come within a few years. They were not aware of that at the time. Yet the various things they did were all helping them get ready for that work that God had down the road for them. It was also a time of preparation in the way they were being prepared in their thinking in the area of spirituality.

In the beginning, I want to refer to one more article from this period, which was from *The Christian Beacon*, February 2, 1950. The first part of the article again considers the influence of neo-orthodoxy in the church and the way many evangelicals appeared to have compromised in that. Yet the end of the article is what is particularly interesting to me. That is the section with the heading, "The danger from without and the danger from within." In that section, Schaeffer at first summarizes the danger from without. What did he mean by that? He was speaking in the context of the battle over the nature of Scripture and Christian doctrine with neo-orthodoxy. He says that, first of all, that battle would continue to be fought. He is actually summarizing the whole article at that point. The battle was not going to go away. The way neo-orthodox theologians approached Scripture and undermined its authority was going to become a greater force within the church.

Second, he suggests that the ecumenical movement, particularly the World Council of Churches, was going to use its power ever more against evangelicals. This would be a growing problem. An example of that problem was described by a man who spoke in our chapel recently and has been a missionary in India since the late 1940s. He said that as a missionary in India, he received no support from the representative from the World Council of Churches there because he was an evangelical. That representative had been able to develop some kind of relationship with the Indian government, and the World Council of Churches actually made the missionary's life more difficult. We spoke earlier about an example like that when Schaeffer had to fly to London to speak to some representatives from Kenya because the same thing had been happening to evangelical missionaries in Kenya. Their lives had been made more difficult by people in the more liberal wing of the church. That is the second danger Schaeffer speaks about—the danger of the power of the World Council of Churches being used against Christians and particularly against missionaries.

The third point that Schaeffer makes in discussing the danger from without, which is spread throughout the whole article, is that the battle will be increasingly complicated by the fact that many fellow evangelicals will continue to work alongside people and in denominations that are dominated by the neo-orthodox approach to Scripture. They will downplay the importance of the theological issues involved. They will continue to say that now is not the time to come out. Now is not the time to fight about the issues. They will want to wait for a more opportune moment. Yet Schaeffer said that they will never fight. There will never be a more opportune moment to fight, to stand, to contend, or to leave. Consequently they will become increasingly compromised.

The article is quite heavy in the way he picks on particular organizations and names various individuals and institutions. He gives the particular example of Fuller Seminary. It is interesting, because this was written in 1950, and he suggests that Fuller Seminary was founded on compromise, and it had only recently been founded. He said that such compromise will lead it into many problems. I suggest that to some extent that has been fulfilled. Some of the disciplines there, such as philosophy, anthropology, and sociology, have become dominant in dealing with hermeneutics. Anthropology rules in how Scripture is read. You can think of what Charles Kraft has written in his book *Christianity in Culture*. He basically sees a great deal of the biblical text

as simply cultural. He says that our calling is to unearth the kernel of truth of revelation from the nut of Scripture and from the nut of culture and apply it in our own situation. One example he uses is that of baptism. He suggests that baptism was simply a cultural practice at the time of the New Testament and that is why Jesus and the apostles adopted it. Rather than thinking about baptism as a permanent sacrament, the task of the missionary is to choose some local initiation ritual and replace baptism with that when he preaches the Gospel in some other culture. There are many other aspects of biblical teaching—doctrinal, moral, and institutional—that he deals with in the same way. They are either Hebrew culture or Greco-Roman culture, and they can be set aside. We only have to keep the kernel of the truth of Scripture. Schaeffer was making the point, however, that if you find any organization or institution uncompromised but unwilling to take a strong stand against whatever the current way of destroying the authority of Scripture is, then eventually it will find you out, and you will become compromised as well.

There he had been speaking about the danger from without. There was the battle with neo-orthodoxy. There was the increasing power of the ecumenical movement, particularly with its tendency to describe evangelicals as those who are the real heretics. I thought that was interesting, too, because, for example, one of the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* says that the one position that is completely unacceptable is the evangelical position that says this is the truth, that Christ is the Son of God and is the only way of salvation. That is declared to be the only unchristian position. Anything else can be regarded as truth. It may be Hindu or something completely outside Christianity, but to say that this is the only truth is the one unacceptable position. That is the heresy of the twentieth century. So there was the warfare with neo-orthodoxy, the increasing power of the World Council of Churches, and the complication of the compromise of some evangelicals that makes the battle more difficult.

Most of the article is about the third point. He summarizes the danger of the problem from without by saying, “There are two dangers that we face from without. The one is that we will become discouraged by the battle. It will just overwhelm us. The other is that we ourselves will compromise because the battle is so intense.” Yet what I want to concentrate on is the way he finished the article, which was with the dangers from within. His introductory words to it are important. Throughout the article, it is evident that he was deeply convinced of the necessity of fighting in the battle against neo-orthodoxy, the new modernism, or whatever you call this new form of liberalism. He thought you had to stand for the truth, and if you did not then you were not being faithful to God and His Word.

He begins the section by saying, “However, the danger from within is equally as great as the danger from without.” In other words, there is one battle that has to be fought for the truth, but he says that internal danger is just as serious, just as great. He suggests that there are two parts to that danger from within. The first has to do with the real purpose of our work. What is the purpose of the work that we are doing? What is the immediate end or goal of our work? He points out that in contending for the faith, in battling against liberalism in its various forms, we are in danger of forgetting that standing over against others and contending for the truth is not all that Christianity is about. He said that what it is really about is that we ought to be like Luther, who wrote “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which we might call a battle hymn. We are standing for the truth against the whole world, even if it is filled with devils. Yet it is also essential that we should be writing things like “Away in a Manger.” We should be contending for truth and writing hymns and songs that move people’s hearts as well as their minds. He quoted David Brainerd, who said, “O that my soul might never offer any dead, cold service to my God.”

Schaeffer says that we are in danger of forgetting this inward devotion. He says, “We can become so overwhelmed with big meetings and our important contacts that we forget that those are only a means to an end, that they are not an end themselves.” Those are tremendously important words at any moment in the history of the church when we begin to concentrate on the means rather than what Christ is actually calling us to do. He says that is the danger we face from within. We may become so pleased with ourselves, because of the size of

our church, because of our meetings, because of the people we know, or because of the things that we are doing that we forget that the immediate end of our work is to win people to Christ and to build them in the faith. We should notice what he says about our councils. He says, “The work of our councils is the work of building a dam to hold of the oncoming flood, but behind that dam let us never forget that the job to be done is to be used of the Lord for soul-winning and soul-building to the glory of God. This will mean self-denying and sacrificial work for the growth and strengthening of the local church, our missions, and our activities, such as Children for Christ.” He was saying that if we forget that our real task is to win people to Christ and to build them in the faith, then the devil has won his battle. We have lost, no matter what we say against liberalism or anything else. We have completely lost the battle. The devil has defeated us.

Then Schaeffer says that the second danger from within is losing our love for each other. He points out that contending and fighting can become a habit, a habit that you cannot let go of and which you start using against one another as well as against those who are rejecting the truth of the Gospel. He says, “God means us to contend without stint, and God means us to separate whenever apostasy is involved, but contending should not become such a habit that we contend with equal zeal over minor points against those who stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the separated position.” Then he goes on to speak about people separating from each other whenever they encounter someone they do not like. Separation can become a thing that is merely a personal habit, a personality. He says that we are in danger of entering a situation like that of the time of the Judges when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. He says that if we have lost love for our brothers and we just contend with them, then we have lost the battle completely and the devil has won. He points out that being subject to one another is part of love. Being prepared to submit myself as a pastor, as a minister, as an individual Christian to other Christians is a part of loving one another and of obedience to God. That is how Schaeffer climaxes the article. He says, “The devil will destroy us from within or without as he finds the chink in our individual and collective armor. We have no alternative but prayer.” This matter had become increasingly urgent to him. He was still fighting just as strongly over the issues that were faced, in terms of unbelief and compromise. Yet he was ever more aware of the danger from within, as he called it.

That article was written in the early part of 1950. If we consider Francis and Edith’s life together during 1950, we see it as a time of being prepared. On the one hand, you see in the article that he is being prepared by becoming increasingly aware that there is a problem. It is a problem in the movement of which he is a part. And it is a problem in himself as well. One might even say that some aspects of this article are subject to the criticism that he makes of the movement at the end. Some of the people he wrote about in the article were fellow evangelicals. He was becoming uncomfortable with the whole battle and the way it could spread so easily into so many areas. The fighting can become a habit.

In what other ways were they being prepared during this time? First they were doing more traveling all over Europe. They were making contacts all over the place. They were particularly traveling for their work for Children for Christ. Their trip in March of 1950 to Scandinavia is described in *The Tapestry*. They went to Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark for a period of seven weeks. They spent seven weeks there primarily doing work for Children for Christ. They were encouraging the starting of children’s classes in Scandinavia. They were also encouraging pastors to stand firm for the faith, to stand firm for the evangelical position.

They went back to Switzerland for a short time. Then they were off again to work in southern France in the middle of June. They were again starting works for Children for Christ as well as speaking. Later that year they were in Dachau, in one of the extermination camps of Hitler where there was now a United States forces base. They went there for a couple of weeks, both to run a children’s class and to give 15 lectures to various adults who came in the evening. In *The Tapestry*, Edith describes the end of that time and the tremendous encouragement it was to the people who had come. They were invited to return there and work among United States forces people in Germany. That was something they considered very seriously for a while.

That was one part of their work. They were traveling around Europe and getting to know more people in Europe. More people in Europe were beginning to become aware of what they were doing. That was important, because years later these different groups all over Europe would send young people who were facing problems, questions, crises in their own faith, or other struggles and needs to the work of L'Abri when it began. They were making an increasing number of contacts, and their children's work was growing all over Europe.

A second part of their life there was what Edith calls "normal life." That included writing the lessons for Luke that later became the book *Everybody Can Know*. Those lessons were written for the children's classes and sent all over Europe for people who were starting children's classes. They were running regular Sunday services in the chapel at Champéry for everyone who would come, both morning and evening services. They were also beginning to have a weekly evening meeting with girls from a local finishing school. Edith writes about this in *The Tapestry* and says that on each of these evenings they had a huge variety of girls come with questions about life. They had Zoroastrians from India, South American Roman Catholics, Swedish, American, Canadian, and English girls of various backgrounds, agnostics from Germany, and others. On those evenings they would have discussions. This was a kind of preparation for the work at L'Abri that was to come. They had no idea it was coming, but they had the chance to present the Christian faith to people from all sorts of different backgrounds in order to answer their questions. That was the second part of their work. People from various localities would come to them with questions, and they would have the chance to present the Christian message to them.

Third, they had an increasing number of people coming to stay with them, both Christians and non-Christians. As you read through *The Tapestry*, it appears that they must have had half a dozen people living with them for most of the summer that year during the times they were there in Switzerland. Some people were those who had come for the International Council of Christian Churches conference in Geneva that summer, 1950. Others were non-Christians. Edith wrote about a Senegalese man, for example, who came to stay with them and caused a tremendous stir in the village because most people there had never seen a black person before. That was very unusual for them up in that little Swiss mountain village. There were all sorts of people coming to live with them. Again, they had no idea this was what their work was going to become, taking care of people who were just coming by.

A fourth part of their preparation for the future was an increasing interest of Francis Schaeffer in current events. As you read through *The Tapestry*, you can see him becoming tremendously aware of the problems being created by the closing off of the whole of Eastern Europe. That was still taking place at that time. The Iron Curtain was coming down in one country after another across Eastern Europe. Schaeffer became increasingly aware of the importance of that. He regarded it as a betrayal by America and Britain of the people of Eastern Europe at the end of the war. Edith also wrote about Francis' trip to Rome. He went to Rome and wrote a long account back from the Feast of the Declaration of the Assumption of Mary. So that was another area of preparation—the increasing awareness of current events. As a Christian, it was important to understand what was happening in the world in order to communicate to people in the world.

A fifth aspect of their preparation, of a rather different sort, was their experience of all kinds of difficulties, of trouble, during that year. It was an exhausting year. Edith was sick and had a miscarriage. That caused the family, and her, a tremendous amount of distress. One of their children, Debbie, became very ill. Edith herself had to go to the hospital for a while after the loss of the baby. They had a very difficult time. God always teaches us things through those periods of tribulation. All of this was a time of being prepared.

It was right after the year, at the end of 1950 and the beginning of 1951, that Schaeffer went through the huge crisis that was in many ways the most important event in his life after his conversion. At the beginning of 1951, they moved from Chalet Lefren to Chalet Bijou, which means "jewel." What was this crisis? It appears to have

been set off by the things I described in the previous lesson. It was the growing sense of unreality, the growing sense of a lack of power, within the Separatist Movement. It was a lack of fruitfulness, an increasingly contentious spirit, and an increasing search for power of the wrong kind. We considered some of these things in the previous lesson. These things seem to be what set off the crisis.

Beyond that, however, there was an increasing dissatisfaction with himself, with his own spirituality, with where he was as a Christian. He recognized that he did not have the same devotion to the Lord that he had when he was first converted. He recognized a lack of reality, a lack of prayer in his own life. He recognized that he had been influenced by this contentious spirit. He had sometimes written and said things about other evangelicals that ought not to have been written or said.

How deep was this crisis? In *The Tapestry*, Edith tells us how deep it was. Francis said to her as they moved from one chalet to another, “Edith, I really feel torn to pieces by the lack of reality, the lack of seeing the results the Bible talks about, which ought to be seen in the Lord’s people. I am not talking only about the people I am working with in the movement [that is, the Separatist Movement]. I am not satisfied with myself. It seems that the only honest thing to do is to rethink, to reexamine, the whole matter of Christianity.” It was a very deep crisis he was facing. He felt that if he was going to be at all honest about his dissatisfaction with the movement and with himself, then he had to go back to the beginning and ask the question, “Is it true?” He said that he needed to go back to his agnosticism and start at the beginning. He needed to go back to a position of saying, “I do not know if Christianity is true.” For a period of time, and it was a long period of time, he was going to suspend his belief and commitment, and he was going to ask again all of the most basic questions that can be asked in order to really consider once again whether Christianity is indeed true.

He went for many long walks in the mountains as he worked this through. When it was raining, he marched up and down stairs on the balcony and in the attic of Chalet Bijou. Edith refers to this as a period rather like the Slough of Despond and Doubting Castle from *Pilgrim’s Progress*. She points out that she herself did not know how it was going to come out. It was such a serious time of crisis, doubting, and questioning that he was going through that she did not know whether he was going to come out on the other side of it as someone who was a committed believer or not. So it was a serious crisis that he faced.

He went back to his agnosticism. He went back to asking all the basic questions. He considered whether the Bible does indeed answer the basic questions that we can ask it. He gradually came through it. Yet when he found that there are adequate, or in his expression, completely or totally sufficient, answers in the Scripture to the questions that any agnostic can bring, he realized that there is another problem involved. The underlying problem was not simply, “Is this true,” but rather the question was, “What is the Christian life about?” That was the fundamental problem he was struggling with and that led him back to the feeling that he had to start again from the position of agnosticism.

In the preface to *True Spirituality*, he describes this. He says, “I rethought my reasons for being a Christian and saw there were totally sufficient reasons to know the infinite, personal God does exist and that Christianity is true. Then in going further I saw something which made a profound difference in my life. I searched through what the Bible said concerning reality as a Christian. Gradually I saw that the problem [and this was the problem that had led to the crisis in the first place] was that with all the teaching that I had received after I was a Christian, little had been taught me about what the Bible said about the meaning of the finished work of Christ for our present lives.”

When Edith wrote about this in *The Tapestry*, she said, “He said to me one day, ‘Edith, I wonder what would happen to most of our churches and Christian work if we woke up tomorrow morning and everything concerning the reality and work of the Holy Spirit and everything concerning prayer were removed from the

Bible. I do not mean just ignored, but actually cut out, disappeared. I wonder how much difference it would make.” That is an enormous question to ask. As he looked out at many other Christians and himself, he said there was a fundamental problem of understanding what the Christian life actually means. He asked if he had been taught anything about how to live as a Christian. Had he been taught anything about the finished work of Christ, that Christ’s life should be the source of his life today and not just when he became a Christian? It was not just there to justify him, but now, as Paul said, “To live is Christ.” We are to live out of Christ and by faith in Christ today and not just on the day we are converted.

In the introduction to *True Spirituality*, Schaeffer spells that out at length. For many Christians, the Christian life is simply a list of “do not’s” and often very superficial “do not’s.” It is simply a list of rules about being a Christian. For others who go deeper, the Christian life is about obeying the Ten Commandments, which are outward. That is better, but there is a deeper step to go still. Yet he says there is a deeper step still to go, which is that those commandments must be obeyed inwardly, and even then we have not begun to understand what the New Testament teaches about the Christian life, which is living out of the grace of God today by dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. So in many of our circles, Schaeffer is suggesting that there is a complete misunderstanding about what spirituality actually is, what living as a Christian is. To many people, Christ’s work means nothing for daily life.

Let me again quote the words he spoke to Edith about the Holy Spirit. I think these are words that ought to be inscribed in every church and in every Christian institution. He said, “Would it make any difference to us if all the passages about prayer and the Holy Spirit were removed from the Bible? Would it make any difference to the way we conduct our meetings?” His point, of course, is that often churches and Christian organizations can run just on the basis of human effort. They can run simply by rules and organization. They can completely miss the element of dependence on the Spirit and prayer, that ongoing living relationship with Christ.

How did Schaeffer come out of this? He came out wonderfully. Let me give another quote of his from the preface of *True Spirituality*. He says, “Gradually the sun came out again and the song came. Interestingly enough, I had written no poetry for many years, but in that time of joy and song I found poetry beginning to flow again—poetry of certainty, affirmation of life, thanksgiving, and praise. Admittedly, as poetry it is very poor, but it expressed a song in my heart which was wonderful to me.”

He concludes by saying that it was this struggle and what came out of it, his understanding of prayer and living in the present on the basis of the work of Christ, that was the basis for the whole work of L’Abri. I think that is important, because often people think of L’Abri as simply an intellectual work, answering people’s questions. L’Abri was always that, but the heart of L’Abri and of Schaeffer’s whole ministry was this understanding. He says, “This was and is the real basis of L’Abri. Teaching the historic Christian answers and giving honest answers to honest questions was crucial. But it was out of these struggles that the reality came, without which an incisive work like L’Abri would not have been possible. I and we can only be thankful.”

Let me summarize the importance of this time, this crisis, that Schaeffer went through. He was absolutely right. Without it, the work of L’Abri would never have come into being in terms of its daily operation, what it was doing with the people coming there, and the provision for its practical needs. It is a work that is entirely based on prayer and living in the present on the basis of the work of Christ. There are four points that came out of this time that were so important for the work of L’Abri.

First, it gave him a solid foundation for himself. He came to a position of real certainty about his own faith that stood him in tremendous stead as he faced the questions and the problems of unbelievers in the years to come when the work of L’Abri began. Edith writes about this in *The Tapestry*. She says, “If he had not had the asbestos protection of the honest answers to his own questions, he could not have coped with the blast of

questions coming at him like the surge of heat from a steel furnace. He was not giving answers to other people that were just theoretical questions. As they came to him with the deepest struggles of their life, he was giving the answers to questions that he had struggled with himself and almost given up being a Christian himself on the basis of those questions.” God provided for him during this period a tremendously solid foundation that enabled him to stand when God started bringing to their house people of every persuasion and belief and every possible criticism that could be raised against Christianity.

Second, his experience gave him a tremendous compassion for unbelievers. He could sympathize with where they were, because he had both come from that originally himself, and then again he had to work it through. He knew where they were. He knew the pit that opens up before you if you really do not have any answers to the questions that are before you. He had stared into that pit during those months when he worked through those questions. It gave him a tremendous sympathy and compassion for unbelievers.

Third, it gave him sympathy for believers who came with their struggles and questions. He could quite honestly say, “I have had them, too.” Often he would meet people, as we all did who worked at L’Abri through the years, who come to branches of L’Abri, saying, “We have been told not to ask our questions and that it is unspiritual to have doubts and we are supposed to pray harder and all the questions and doubts will go away.” It is what Schaeffer used to refer to as “putting the questions and doubts on the donkey of devotion.” Eventually the donkey lies down and dies because it has to carry too much. Many thousands of people came through L’Abri over the following years whose faith was being destroyed by the questions they could not answer and that their churches were not helping them to answer. This period he went through gave him a tremendous sympathy for those people, because he had been through it himself. He had to find the answers.

The fourth thing that came out of this time was a sense of the tremendous urgency of prayer, of the need for a daily living relationship with God and dependence on Him and the power of His Spirit and the need for the grace of Christ every day of our lives. This had an effect on both of them. That question about whether it would make any difference if all the passages on prayer and the Holy Spirit were removed from the Bible was significant to them. Edith said, “I made a private resolution that each day, whenever the time occurred, I would not read a newspaper, book, or magazine until I had first read whatever chapters I was planning to read in the Bible and interspersed that reading with prayer. I read and prayed as a two-way conversation. Also, I began to write to the Lord, simply as one would write a note to emphasize something to another person in a more concrete way than speaking. For me, it was a more vivid way of communicating. Although I had struggled in prayer during Fran’s time of search, now with thanksgiving for his conclusions, my resolve was to have more reality in my life in behaving privately, alone with the Lord, as if it mattered, as if it would make a difference in history if I acted upon the admonitions to pray on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” It was the same for him as well. For both of them, it changed their whole mentality toward the importance of prayer and an ongoing relationship with the Lord day by day, moment by moment. We could summarize it another way, which is the way that Paul Kooistra speaks in his sermons, which is “We live by grace.” As Christians we live out of the grace of God day by day in all that we do.

So this was an important time. Without these things, God would never have brought the work of L’Abri about, because it was dependent on all four of those things.