

The Beginnings of L'Abri, I

Our Heavenly Father, we pray that You will be with us during this time. We ask that we may learn and be challenged for our own lives as we think about the life of one of Your servants. Help us as we seek to get a foundation for thinking about the later years of his ministry and to be clear in our understanding as we cover much ground rapidly. Father, be with us, we pray, and teach us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

In this section we will be covering many years quite rapidly. In the previous course, we covered up to the summer of 1947, including Schaeffer's three months in Europe, all the places he visited, what he got out of that time, and some of the things he learned. When he got back to Saint Louis after that time, in the fall of 1947, he immediately began receiving letters from the places he had visited in Europe. People were asking him to return and speak to them or to write or come to do work of one kind or another. That got the Schaeffers praying seriously about what God's call would be for them as a family.

Shortly afterward they felt called, and they indeed were sent by the mission board to go back to Europe to live there. They chose to live in Switzerland. They were sent with the broad purpose of strengthening the things that remained. One of the things that Schaeffer had seen was the weakness of much of the church in Western Europe. So he was sent with the task of strengthening the things that remained.

They went to live in Switzerland. They began by living for a little while in Lausanne. Then they moved to the tiny village of Champéry, a little town in the canton of Valais. The river Rhone runs through a valley with steep mountains of the Alps on both sides. The Schaeffers lived several thousand feet up in a tiny village called Champéry. Lausanne is further down in the valley. The valley has a train line that heads to Italy.

What did they do during those first years in Switzerland? Let me summarize the kind of work they spent their time doing. They went with nothing definite. The first thing they did was start a children's work. They started it in Switzerland and in many other countries as well. They often provided the written material for the illustrations to be used with the children. Edith created them, and they would be translated into different languages. They went around and spoke and encouraged people to do children's work. Second, they taught. They taught at churches, camps, and conferences. They taught on the truth of the Gospel, on the dangers of liberalism, on the Christian life, and on many other topics.

Third, they furthered the work of the International Council of Christian Churches. They brought together pastors and leaders of many different evangelical groups in the different countries of Western Europe. Schaeffer was actively involved in the beginning of the International Council in Europe.

Fourth, Schaeffer wrote articles. They showed the development of his thought. They were articles about apologetics, culture and art, separation, and spirituality. It was during this period that he wrote one of the most important articles that he ever wrote. That is how he regarded it. It is a short article called "The Secret of Power and the Enjoyment of the Lord." Until his death, Schaeffer believed it was one of the most important things he had written.

Fifthly, they cared for individuals who came to stay with them in their little chalet in the Swiss mountain village. There were a growing number of individuals who came as the years went by. Sixth, they started a church, called the International Presbyterian Church, in the little village of Champéry where they lived. It consisted of a few local people who became Christians through their ministry and various other people who were there for school or college or on skiing holidays. Many individuals were converted. They started this small congregation in a Roman Catholic part of Switzerland. On their side of the

Rhone Valley, the canton of Valais was a Roman Catholic canton. On the other side of the valley is the canton of Vaud, which was a Protestant canton. Switzerland is made up of a federation of cantons. Some are Catholic and some are Protestant. Some cantons are French speaking, and some are German, Italian, or Romansch speaking. There are four languages in Switzerland, but it has been a federation for hundreds of years.

Next I want to briefly cover two important events in the life of the Schaeffers. They laid a foundation for what was to come in the future. The first was a spiritual crisis that Francis Schaeffer went through. It began in the late 1940s and early 1950s. What caused this spiritual crisis? It was the ugliness, divisiveness, and narrowness of some of the Separatist Movement. As the years went by, Schaeffer saw an increasing amount of emphasis on personalities, sectarianism, character assassination and tearing other people down as well as building of power bases for other individuals. There was a great deal of personal criticism as people struggled for power within the Separatist Movement. He became increasingly bothered by a negative attitude within the Separatist Movement toward anybody who disagreed with them at any point. There was a negative attitude toward other evangelicals who did not join the Separatist Movement and toward those outside the church completely.

He began to ask all sorts of basic questions. One was “What kind of teaching have I had about the Christian life?” Had it ever been adequate? He identified two problems there. One was that he believed there had never been in his background—in the churches that he had been a part of or the movement he had been a part of—any teaching on the finished work of Christ for today. What effect does Christ’s death have on how I am going to live today? This relates to a point I made in a chapel sermon. Where is our security as individuals? That is one aspect of this issue. Do we have to earn approval from other people by comparing ourselves to others? Do we have to think well about ourselves? Or are we rather accepted by God in Jesus Christ?

That was one important question that Schaeffer asked. What does the work of Christ mean for the way I live now? Is it only a matter of cleansing me from my sin and then waiting for heaven? Or does it have a present effect? The second issue he felt had been lacking was that there had been no emphasis in his background at all on dependence on the Holy Spirit. This led to a lack of prayer.

It was not only others he was criticizing. He was concerned about himself and his own spirituality. He was concerned about what he saw as some real gaps in his own life as a Christian. What this led him to was a serious questioning of whether Christianity is true at all. He asked the question, “If Christianity produces such ugliness, bitterness, and personality conflicts, then can it really be the truth?” He believed he had to question everything all over again.

If you read *The Tapestry*, there is a moving section in which Edith describes the months that it took Francis to work this through. He went for long walks by himself. When it was raining or snowing heavily, he would pace up and down in the attic of their little chalet in Champéry. He was thinking everything through again. He went back to the beginning, to the point at which he had become a Christian himself. He was asking if it was really the truth. Edith said quite honestly in the book that there were times when he said that he did not know what he was going to conclude. He really did ask everything all over again. Edith would hear him marching up and down upstairs, and she would pray desperately for him as he thought these things through.

This experience had a profound effect on his life and ministry. It transformed his understanding of the Christian life. If you read about their life, or if you read their letters, then you will see that there had already been much prayer in their lives and spirituality, as anybody would understand it. Yet Schaeffer

saw that it was inadequate. What came out of that was a strong emphasis on living now by the grace of God. It was an emphasis on living now on the basis of the finished work of Christ and on dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. Schaeffer said that eventually the sun came out again and a song came back to his heart and his lips.

This understanding of spirituality is essential for understanding anything at all about the work of L'Abri. I will return to that idea later, but the experience was important in another way as well. I cannot tell you exactly how long it was, but the period of crisis was several months. Yet I believe it had been growing over a period of two or three years before it reached a point at which he had to think everything through again. It is evident as you read through the articles he wrote, and as you read through Edith's letters to other people, that he was becoming increasingly concerned by the developments within the Separatist Movement. I do not want to discuss those, because it is so sad to rehearse some of the things that happened within the personality conflicts. Yet he became increasingly bothered by some of the things that were happening. I wish that some of the correspondence that we have in our library could be taken away and burned. I do not mean Schaeffer's correspondence, because I do not think there is anything he wrote that he is ashamed of, but some of the things that other people did and said about him and other people make a tragic history. It was causing many questions, reservations, and doubts in his mind for a period of two or three years before he reached the point of needing to start over. It was a matter of integrity for him. He saw such a disjunction between what we say and what the reality was that he needed to ask what the truth was.

As I said, this is tremendously important for understanding L'Abri. Let me give some reasons why this related to his ministry of answering people's questions. First, thinking everything through again provided a solid foundation for him. He had to think through all kinds of questions again and wrestle with them honestly. He found that there were adequate answers to these questions and that Christianity is indeed the truth.

Second, it gave him a tremendous sympathy for non-believers. He had a great compassion for people. That was the most evident thing that people noticed about him. If you ever saw him with people, with non-Christians asking their questions, the thing that struck you more than anything else was his compassion for the people, for where they were struggling, for where they were hurting. That came partly out of what he had been through himself. As the years went by and the work of L'Abri began, he was faced every day of his life with a blast of questions from people, every kind of question you can imagine. It helped enormously that he had struggled through some of these things himself.

Third, it gave him great sympathy for believers who had struggles. He was never going to be in the position of making people feel bad or unspiritual because they were having struggles, doubts, questions, and problems. He had been through the valley of despair himself.

Fourth, it underlined for both Francis and Edith in a dramatic way the urgency of prayer. Edith prayed for him as she had never prayed for anything before as he went through this. He too came to realize through this the importance of prayer in a new way.

That spiritual crisis was the first important event that helps us to understand something about L'Abri as it developed later on. The second event was when they were thrown out of Switzerland. Already as they lived in the village of Champéry they began to have the idea of L'Abri. The idea for the name came up during their last few months in Champéry. Let me read a few words from one of Edith's letters, which was written in March 1975. This recounts a time just before they were thrown out. She wrote, "L'Abri is what we feel the Lord would have us add to the work He had given us here in Switzerland. L'Abri

means ‘shelter’ in French. Our thought is to have a spiritual shelter to any who have spiritual need. There are a number of people who have been saved who want to come back again for short or longer periods of Bible study in an informal way. We want them to feel free to come. In addition to these, we want to open the doors for unsaved friends and for others who are Christians but who long for more reality and a deeper spiritual life and for Christian workers who desire to dig deep into spiritual study and have time for discussion and meditation.” So they got the idea for the name and the direction their work was going to go while they were still there in the village of Champéry. The development of this work of L’Abri began to be formed in their minds.

It was at this time, on February 14, 1955, that they received two slips of paper without any warning. They were called to pick up a piece of paper that they thought had to do with their permits to continue living in Switzerland. They had been living in the United States for a period of 17 months during 1953 and 1954 in which Schaeffer had done frequent speaking. When they came back, they had not yet had their passports and permits properly renewed. They had handed them in, but they were not yet returned to them. On February 14, they were given two pieces of paper. One told them they had to leave the canton of Valais by March 31. The other said they would have to leave the country of Switzerland by March 31. They were thrown out of the country.

What had happened revolved at its heart around the conversion of one man who lived in the village. His name is given in the books, but I referred to him in the last course as Mr. X. He ran the village store and was a ski instructor. He had been an atheist, but he was converted, and it transformed his life. The canton was Roman Catholic, and his family was appalled at his conversion to the Christian faith. They, together with some of the leaders of the village and the bishop of the local Catholic Church, worked behind the scenes to have the Schaeffers thrown out of both Valais and Switzerland.

This was brought to a head because, even though Mr. X was converted a few years earlier, just before this time he had been baptized and taken communion. He was appointed as an elder in this little Presbyterian church that they had begun. The reason that was given for the Schaeffers being thrown out was that they had had a religious influence in the village. That was the formal reason given. Some nuns teaching at the local school were distressed because several of the students had become Christians. People were happier for this man to remain an atheist than to be an evangelical Christian. So the Schaeffers were thrown out of the country.

I will not go into detail about what happened over the next few weeks. If you read *The Tapestry* or Edith’s letters or the L’Abri story, there was a series of dramatic and wonderful answers to prayer. The outcome of it was that they found a chalet on a mountain on the opposite side of the valley they had been in. It was in the canton of Vaud, which was a Protestant canton, in the village of Huemoz. The chalet they found was named Chalet les Melezes. The order to leave Switzerland was revoked, and they were able to stay. They settled there and put a down payment on the house with a wonderful provision of money. I will not go through the details of the striking way the money was provided, but it is worth reading about. They moved at the end of March with only a few hours left before the deadline. They moved across the border from the canton of Valais to the canton of Vaud. Then they set up their home there. One might say that L’Abri began immediately as they settled into that new home.

What is L’Abri? This brings us to the point that we concluded in the earlier course, Francis A. Schaeffer: *The Early Years*. What was L’Abri at the beginning, and what is it now? One could look at Schaeffer’s ministry and notice that he frequently spoke around the world. He wrote many books that have been influential to people. He did other things, but one of the major things that he did, that he and Edith did together, was begin the work of L’Abri.

There were a number of extraordinary answers to prayer that allowed them to begin the work of L'Abri. I cannot go into detail about them because it would take too long. One example, however, was when they went to the American embassy and the first official they saw said there was nothing he could do for them. He said that the United States had no official agreement with Switzerland about this kind of situation. He could not make any kind of official appeal on their behalf. The official was completely uninterested. They then met a more senior official who, as soon as he saw Schaeffer, recognized that they had been classmates in high school. That was one of the Lord's little provisions for them. This official put himself to work immediately, doing everything he could on their behalf, even though there was nothing official that could be done. He introduced them to the American ambassador, a lady who was there, and she also became interested in their case. So God provided them with people who could speak on their behalf from the American side.

There were also several people in Switzerland, including quite a few people who lived in their village, who were appalled at what was happening. They did everything they could to appeal to the authorities to have the Schaeffers' eviction revoked. There were several people who had become Christians through the Schaeffers. Yet there were people who had not become Christians who were also concerned by what was happening. They said that Switzerland was a free country and that their constitution guaranteed freedom of religion. The Schaeffers had done nothing bad. They were not sectarian. So the situation upset a number of Swiss people as well who also made appeals on their behalf.

What they had to do to make any kind of appeal was to have a place to live elsewhere in Switzerland by the time of the deadline. That was another of the remarkable circumstances as you read through the story of how the details for that worked out. There was a couple in the United States who had already gotten ready for bed for the night. They had been talking about what they were going to do with some money they had saved. The wife said to the husband that she believed they should send the money to Francis and Edith Schaeffer for some need that they might have. They talked about it, and the husband agreed it was a good idea. They decided they needed to send it right away that night. Even though they were in their pajamas, she made her husband go out to send the letter with the check in it right away. It arrived just in time for them to be able to make the down payment on the house. It is a remarkable story, and there are many small details like that. This couple did not know the situation of the Schaeffers, regarding their exact need and the time constraints they had. It was clearly something that the Lord put on their hearts to meet the needs of the Schaeffers in that moment. I encourage you to read the full story.

What is L'Abri and what was L'Abri at that time? There are several ways to talk about it. One way is to tell you what happened then in L'Abri. I will tell you about that later. For now, let me say some things about the philosophy of the ministry. First, L'Abri is a ministry based on prayer. That is the heart of the work of L'Abri. There is prayer for finances. There is prayer for people to come, the people of God's choice. The workers have never written letters asking people for money. They rather bring their requests before the Lord and ask Him to provide their needs. They do not advertise in Christian magazines or anywhere else for people to come to stay at L'Abri in Switzerland or any of the other branches. They pray that God will bring people to them, the people of His choice.

In the beginning, they prayed about the development of the work, that God would give them His work to do. They prayed that they would not have to go out to create it, but that He would give the work into their hands. They prayed about whether the work should grow. They had no commitment to the work growing. They had no sense that they needed more people staying there by the end of the year or the next year or that they would ever open other branches. They rather prayed that if God desired the work should grow that He would make it clear to them. They prayed that God would bring people to work

with them as the work did grow later on. They began to pray that God would bring people of His choice to join them in the work, rather than going out to recruit staff.

There was prayer for all the little things each day. Let me read a little section from one of Edith's letters. This is from the book *With Love, Edith*. She was writing to the praying family, which I will explain more about in a moment, and she said, "There are a few things that you should know concerning L'Abri fellowship." This was in 1955 when the work had just been formed in their new home in Huemoz. She continued, "The material needs of the work and of ourselves will be met as the Lord sends in gifts in answer to prayer. We believe that if He sends the people to us who need to be here for study and are asking questions in prayer, He will also send in the means to feed them. A big crop of vegetables will make a big difference in feeding the summer guests of L'Abri. The Lord who controls the weather also can send in the needed support for workers and open the way to repair the furnace, put in electrical installations, etc." When they moved into the house there were no electrical installations at all. There was no stove, refrigerator, or anything like that. She goes on, "Each need will be prayed about. We will wait for guidance to proceed according to His specific answers in sending the means."

This meant that they prayed for all the little details of life. Edith wrote something interesting about herself. She was mentioning doing the washing after the people had left who had been there for the weekend. She said, "Please do pray that it may not be too long before the Lord will open up the way to install the washing machine and other electrical helps, as at present the ordinary tasks of washing and ironing with no equipment consumes such quantities of precious time. That is the Martha-ish side of things. I have been impressed lately that I must not just shoulder this burden as something that is up to me to do or die, but that the Lord can take care of this need, too. It is so easy to save out some worrying to do on the side, while one is rejoicing in big victories. At least, that is my weakness." I am sure we can all identify with that. We like to see how God answers our prayers in the big things, but we all like to have certain parts of our lives that we can control the worry about so we can carry on worrying about it. I am certain that some of you do that. I am sorry to say that I do it. We all do. We have things we like to dig our own teeth into, rather than really committing them to the Lord. That is what Edith was talking about.

There was prayer for all the details of their life. The other thing that was an important part of this was the existence of the praying family. Edith wrote about that as well. She said, "Finally and most important, L'Abri fellowship may seem very small, but we know that there are many who have a daily part in the work here through their faithful prayers. The ones who are working here through prayer we wish to speak of as the praying family of L'Abri. You yourselves know whether you are one whom the Lord has called to join us in this way or not." For the Schaeffers, from the beginning, they saw the people in America, England, other parts of Switzerland, and around the world who prayed for them as just as important a part of their work as those who were there, meeting the needs of the people whom God brought to them. This was not merely a slogan that Edith was writing. This was the mentality that they had. The praying family was just as important a part of the work as those who were there answering people's questions. When people accuse Schaeffer of being a rationalist, they have no understanding at all of how much prayer went into their own ministry and how much they depended on the prayer of other people for the work of God in the hearts of people who came and even in bringing them there in the first place. The praying family was and still is today a most important part of the ministry of L'Abri.

Another thing that they discovered, a year or so after they moved into the village of Huemoz, was that many years before there had been a couple who had owned a chalet only 50 or 100 meters up the road who had been Christians. The husband was a pastor who would come on vacation and speak from time to time in the village church. A generation before this couple had been praying that one day God would

raise up an evangelical work in that village. The village church was not evangelical. It is sad to say that it was not a live church at all. The Schaeffers, when they discovered this, saw themselves as an answer to that prayer. The very chalet that the couple had lived in and owned was later bought and given to the work of L'Abri. It was Chalet le Suppan, which means "the pines."

Interestingly, we had the same experience in England at the British branch of L'Abri many years later. Our branch was in the village of Greatham in the south of England in Hampshire. After we had been working there for about 16 years, and the Lord had used us there to start an evangelical church in the area that had a couple hundred people from the villages around by that time, we discovered that an old lady, who had lived there many years before and had left it about three years before we started the work there in 1971, had been praying her whole life that God would raise up some workers in that village. We did not know anything about that until 1986. She had left the village in 1968, and we had started the work in 1971. Yet she said to somebody whom she met later on who knew our work there, "Have you heard anything about what is happening in the village of Greatham? I know you live near there. Every day since I left I have been praying that God would raise up a work in that area." Of course, He had taken our branch there many years before, but He was answering her prayers. So L'Abri is first and essentially a ministry that is based on prayer.

L'Abri was also a ministry that was dedicated to being a demonstration that God would transform our lives now, that God would make a difference in how we live today. First L'Abri was based on the reality that God would demonstrate His existence through answering prayer. Second, it was based on the reality that He would demonstrate His existence by the way we were living day by day. Schaeffer had written into the foundational document of L'Abri the desire for what he called "supernaturally restored relationships" among those Christians who were working and living together in L'Abri.

This was never perfect, but without any question, one can say that L'Abri, since its beginning in 1955 and until today, has continued to show a measure of this reality. It is in the practice of hospitality to those who came to stay. Already within the first year of the work beginning, there were sometimes 20 people or more, including their family, staying there on weekends. There were people most weekends and often throughout the week as well. They needed to be fed, looked after, and served in one way or another. They lived in very close quarters. The chalet is not very big, and it had many people living in it.

Let me describe what it was like when I went there in 1967. I was a new Christian at the time, and I worked for a year as Mrs. Schaeffer's cook and gardener. My wife, whom I met that year, was Francis Schaeffer's secretary. This tiny house still had several people visiting and living in it. It housed the Schaeffers and Frankie, their son who was still living at home at that time. It had Francis Schaeffer's mother. When her husband died, and as she got older, Francis went to the United States and brought her back to live with them. She was not an easy person to live with. She was an extraordinarily difficult person. She lived up on the top floor in a little room right next to their bedroom. On the middle floor, next to the kitchen, they had an older woman living there who had been in some kind of accident. She had been brought back to the age of a nine-year-old or ten-year-old. She lived there, and they cared for her and she helped Edith in the kitchen and in other ways. She was simply somebody they had taken in who was in great need.

Schaeffer's office was his bedroom. He did not have an office. He sat at a little chair at the end of his bed. He did not even have a desk. He did his work sitting in a little chair at the end of his bed. When my wife used to go take dictation, she had to go into the office bedroom. There was not anywhere else to go. Meanwhile, Edith would be cooking food downstairs for 20, 30, or 40 people. People were constantly

coming and going. There was an extraordinary lack of privacy. It was an extraordinarily difficult circumstance in which to demonstrate supernaturally restored relationships.

Let me give you an illustration from our own experience in England. We moved into a small apartment when we went to join the work as it began there in 1971. We had an apartment in a rambling old manor house. I remember a relative of my wife's who visited us from California. She walked in and simply said, "Oh, dear." It was dingy, dirty, and there was hardly any light in half the rooms. It was bare, and there were terrible drafts coming in everywhere. It was not a pleasant situation to be living in. It was small and, in addition, we had a couple living in a room in the apartment who shared our bathroom, as well as a dozen people or more coming in every day for meals. The couple who lived in that room in the apartment was on drugs, and they would go in the bathroom and smoke pot and leave the smell in there. It was an extremely difficult situation. I remember during a worker's meeting when Schaeffer was visiting us one time. He came into our apartment, where we had the meeting, and he said, "What we are trying to do is not difficult. It is impossible." What led him to say that was that he knew of our situation with this couple who was in terrible shape and living in our apartment with us. At the same time, they were doing work on our kitchen. So, all of our food and dishes were in the bedroom and living room. The kitchen walls were being ripped out, but Vicki was still trying to cook meals in the place. There were dishes and food piled around our bed and everywhere. It was into that situation that Schaeffer came and made that statement that "what we are trying to do is not difficult. It is impossible."

There was that element in the work much of the time. I can remember many days during the 19 years we worked at L'Abri when I woke up and said, "I cannot do this for another day. What we are trying to do is impossible. I am not prepared to see another new person. I do not see how we can serve a meal to another 30 people today." How could I get up when I was trying to get my children off to school and serve breakfast and be pleasant to 30 people at eight o'clock in the morning? There was an element to the work of L'Abri that must be recognized as a sacrificial work. There is an element of what one might call dying daily in the work. It is in the reality of that that the power of God is demonstrated. It is demonstrated in that He enables you to pick up that work and do it day after day. He enables you to love and genuinely care for and serve the people who come, even though you may have just said that you cannot greet another person nicely again. God enables you to do it.

That is the second fundamental aspect of the work. It is dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is seeking to be a demonstration that God can really transform us in our daily lives.