

The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer (Part 3-Hospitality at L'abri)

by Francis Schaeffer

Francis Schaeffer's sermon explores the transformative power of hospitality and the challenges faced in establishing L'Abri as a sanctuary for philosophical inquiry and Christian dialogue.

Scripture: Proverbs 27:17, Matthew 5:16, 1 Corinthians 3:6, Colossians 4:5, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Christian Hospitality", "Evangelism Ministry"

Description

Francis Schaeffer and his wife Edith established L'Abri ('The Shelter') in Switzerland, offering a welcoming environment for students to engage in conversations about philosophical and religious ideas. Through their open home, the Schaeffers provided honest answers to honest questions, leading to conversions and volunteers joining their ministry. Despite facing challenges and financial struggles, L'Abri grew into a renowned place of learning and discussion, attracting individuals from around the world seeking meaning and truth in a post-Christian society.

Transcript

In 1954 Schaeffer took his new message of observational love back to the Bible Presbyterians in the U.S., where it was not universally received as a word from the Lord. Moreover, the Schaeffers reported that the simple receiving of guests was an increasingly important part of their work, prompting the mission board to cut their pay. So in 1955 they resigned and set up their own independent ministry organization called L'Abri ("The Shelter") in the mountain village of Huemoz.

Immediately, the oldest of their three daughters began bringing home fellow students from the University of Lausanne. In short order, students were coming to L'Abri every weekend. The Schaeffers developed a pattern of meals, walks, and a Sunday church service all geared toward providing an atmosphere that would stimulate conversation about philosophical and religious ideas.

In this the Schaeffers were brilliant. For Edith, homemaking was high art, and she created an atmosphere that drew people in and invited them to relax. Francis was a superb and caring interlocutor who listened attentively, made guests feel important, and spoke with earnest confidence of Christianity's ability to solve the human dilemma. Wrote Francis,

This was and is the real basis of L'Abri.

Teaching the historic Christian answers

and giving honest answers to honest questions.

A number of students converted to Christianity as a result of these weekends, and a few volunteered to stay on to help with the growing workload.

Word about this unique open home in the mountains quickly spread, and by 1957 they were hosting up to 25 people every weekend. Francis spent weekdays teaching classes for students in several locations in Switzerland and Italy. Though the Schaeffers never appealed directly for funds, Edith kept a growing list of supporters abreast of L'Abri's activities through her "Family Letter."

The Schaeffers learned firsthand that keeping their door open was very costly. Francis later remembered,

In about the first three years of L'Abri all our wedding presents were wiped out. Our sheets were torn. Holes were burned in our rugs. Indeed once a whole curtain almost burned up from somebody smoking in our living room. . . . Drugs came to our place. People vomited in our rooms.

At this time, many of the students who came to L'Abri were Europeans, well-schooled in the philosophies of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger and in the existentialist literature of Sartre and Camus. These students tutored Francis in the details of modern post-Christian thought, while he observed its impact on their lives. They had been taught that human beings were the mere product of time and chance in a materialistic world. This left many of them unable to find any basis for distinctions between right and wrong nor meaning in the normal activities of human life. The young people's self-destructive moral confusion, alienation from society, and sincere search for something better stirred the Schaeffers' compassion. It made the cost of an open home worth bearing, and it compelled Francis into ever-deeper reflection on the trajectory of modern culture.

By 1960, L'Abri had become such a phenomenon that it attracted the notice Time magazine. Facilities had expanded to three chalets, Edith's "Family Letter" had a circulation of 1,300, and her Sunday evening "High Tea" was hosting upwards of 50 people from around the world every week. Sheer numbers made it necessary to replace the informal weekends with a full-time program of lectures, discussions, study, work, and worship. L'Abri workers taped Francis's lectures on the philosophical meaning of modern theology and culture, and these tapes quickly developed an international circulation. "Study" at L'Abri consisted of listening to and discussing Francis's recorded lectures.

These may have been the hardest years of marriage for the Schaeffers, both of whom were extraordinarily intense, work-centered personalities. Edith was by nature proud and competitive, and Francis had for a long time struggled with a plant-throwing, pot-smashing temper. Stormy sessions between them were not infrequent. The most demanding years of L'Abri's ministry had coincided with their son Franky's early childhood, made twice difficult because he had contracted polio at age three. L'Abri's financial situation was always precarious and sometimes desperate -- more than once they faced a table full of guests with only a few basic staples in the pantry. Edith, who from the start bore much of the practical burden, began to resent her role. She remembers the early 1960s as

a time that could only be described as one of self-pity. I had begun to look away from 'willingness for anything' to a desire for 'something for myself,' and this filled far too much of my thoughts and prayer times.

Francis was receiving an increasing number of invitations to speak to groups in Europe and North America, but Edith resisted his going on extended lecture tours. Giving up this opportunity was terribly frustrating for him. By this time he was the veteran of hundreds of conversations with well-educated doubters, agnostics, and scoffers. He had developed great confidence in his by now standard replies, and he was ambitious for larger audiences. Edith remembers many nights after small-group discussions at L'Abri when he would come upstairs to their bedroom and pound the wall with his fist until it turned red, saying,

Oh, Edith, I'm sure I have true answers. . . .

I know they can help people. . . .

But no one is ever going to hear . . .

except a handful. . . .

What are we doing?

What am I doing?

Source:

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