

# The Dissatisfaction of Francis Schaeffer (Part 4-Return to North America)

by Francis Schaeffer

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*Francis Schaeffer argues that Christianity is the only solution to the existential dilemma of modern thought, and that Christians must learn to speak the language of culture to persuade non-Christians to face the logical conclusions of their presuppositions.*

**Scripture:** Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 9:22, Galatians 6:2, James 1:22, 1 Peter 3:15

**Topics:** "Cultural Engagement", "Authentic Faith"

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## Description

Francis Schaeffer, a unique and influential preacher in the mid-20th century, challenged Christians to engage with modern culture and speak its language to effectively present the gospel. He emphasized the existential dilemma faced by humanity, arguing that Christianity alone provides a solution by aligning with the reality of human existence. Schaeffer's message electrified evangelical students, encouraging them to embrace intellectual pursuits and cultural expressions while staying true to their faith. He advocated for true community within churches, welcoming all individuals regardless of background, and urged Christians to live out their beliefs authentically, free from hypocrisy.

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## Transcript

In 1965 Edith at last relented, and Francis got the larger stage he longed for. Harold O. J. Brown, then working with college students in Boston, arranged for Francis to give several lectures in the area. These were followed by a series of talks at Wheaton College, which were later published as his first book, *The God Who Is There*.

Schaeffer ranged widely over the arts and sciences to argue that all of modern thought and culture was based on the presupposition that human beings were the chance product of an impersonal universe. But systems of thought based on this presupposition could not explain the origin of human personality, of "hope of purpose and significance, love, notions of morality and rationality, beauty and verbal communication."

Apart from Christianity, one is left with two choices -- escape into the unreality of mysticism, or descent into nihilistic barbarism that debases humans by reducing them to machines. Christianity alone, because it is true and therefore comports with the lived reality of human existence, has the power to solve this existential dilemma. But Christians cannot effectively present the gospel in this modern era until they first

learn to speak the language of twentieth-century culture and thereby persuade non-Christians to face the logical conclusions of their presuppositions.

This small, intense man from the Swiss mountains delivered a message unlike any heard in evangelical circles in the mid-1960s. At Wheaton College, students were fighting to show films like *Bambi*, while Francis was talking about the films of Bergman and Fellini. Administrators were censoring existential themes out of student publications, while Francis was discussing Camus, Sartre, and Heidegger. He quoted Dylan Thomas, knew the artwork of Salvador Dali, listened to the music of the Beatles and John Cage.

The effect of this tour de force on evangelical students was electrifying. Schaeffer's Boston lectures, Ronald Wells later wrote, commenced "my excitement about the task of Christian scholarship." Historian Mark Noll remembers the Wheaton talks as the most stimulating campus intellectual event of his student years. Francis Schaeffer tore down the gospel curtain that had separated evangelicals from contemporary cultural expression, giving Christians object lessons in how to interpret sculpture, music, painting, and literature as philosophical statements of the modern mind. Future historian Arlin Migliazzo was thrilled:

Schaeffer showed me that Christians  
didn't have to be dumb.

In the next ten years, the Schaeffers became well-known figures in American evangelicalism. Francis published 18 books and booklets, most of which came out of lectures and talks he had been giving since the 1950s. (Four more books were to follow after 1975; total U.S. sales alone exceeded 2.5 million copies.) Edith accompanied him on many of his speaking tours, developing her own messages and popular following. On college campuses, Edith liked to treat young women in the dorms to

an intimate, candid talk about marriage, sex,

and the career of being creative as a homemaker.

Edith also took up her typewriter, publishing *L'Abri* in 1969. In the mid-1970s, she wrote a regular column for *Christianity Today*, and by 1981 had completed a total of eight books on family life and devotional topics that had sold over 1 million copies. In her writing she often voiced opposition to "women's liberation" and the trend toward two-career families. This latter was curious, given that Francis's wider ministry commenced for her a new full-time career as a writer and lecturer. Meanwhile, 11-year-old Franky was trundled off to English boarding school.

Her depiction of *L'Abri*'s early years was perfectly pitched to the countercultural sentiments of young people, with its homey images of young people with backpacks, shared labor, fresh whole-grain bread, and intellectual conversations by the fireside, all under the umbrella of God's supernatural provision through prayer. The book brought in hundreds of new visitors, mostly American evangelicals. Nevertheless, *L'Abri* still attracted a fair number of non-Christians -- even Timothy Leary, the guru of LSD, managed to find his way there. Francis and Edith now spent but three months per year in residence, the work being carried on by their daughters' families and by volunteers.

The Schaeffers showed an extraordinary ability to identify with the issues that concerned the student generation of the 1960s and early 1970s. Francis scorned postwar materialism, insisting that most Americans had no higher philosophy of life than "personal peace and affluence." Though strongly opposed

to communism, he refused to condone the arms race:

In the race of fission versus fusion, missile versus missile, what reason is there to think that those conceiving and engineering these things on 'our side' believe anything basically different . . . from those on the 'other side,' the Communists?

He urged respect for nature in a society that had fouled its own nest. He preached against racism, and at L'Abri he practiced what he preached. He sympathized with dropouts and drug users

because they are smart enough to know

that they have been given no answers,

and they are opting out. . . .

The older generation hasn't given them

anything to care about.

Francis also thundered against the middle-class sins of the evangelical churches. He challenged evangelicals to adopt a "revolutionary" mind set, to think about getting rid of the American flags in their sanctuaries:

Patriotic loyalty must not be identified with Christianity.

He insisted that American evangelicalism was too individualistic:

Christianity is an individual thing, but it is not only an individual thing. There is to be true community, offering true spiritual and material help to each other.

He therefore urged Christians to welcome intellectuals, hippies, drug addicts -- whomever God should send:

I dare you.

I dare you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Do what I am going to suggest.

Begin by opening your home for community.

But he warned that real community would require that the churches "buck the evangelical establishment" and kick their habit of hypocrisy:

Don't talk about being against the affluent society unless you put that share of the affluent society which is your hoard on the line.

And don't dare respond that these things I'm saying are not a part of the teaching of the Word of God.

Schaeffer's message was like fresh air to the emerging evangelical youth culture. Jack Sparks, founder of Berkeley's Christian World Liberation Front, visited L'Abri and hoped that his organization could have the same kind of intellectual impact. Schaeffer had a profound influence on Larry Norman, "poet laureate of

the Jesus Revolution."

(One Norman lyric places L'Abri on a par with Holy Land pilgrimage sites: "We'll honeymoon at Haifa and have lunch in Galilee / Then we'll hitchhike up to Switzerland and drop in at L'Abri.")

In the late 1970s, Norman formed his own record company and performing arts society, which he intended as a "musical L'Abri." One of its musicians was Mark Heard, who studied at L'Abri himself because it was a place where people could honestly ask hard questions about Christianity.

Despite the countercultural rhetoric, in the early 1970s the Schaeffers began forming ties with Christians who were national political figures in the conservative wing of the Republican party. They were introduced to then-Congressman Jack Kemp in 1971, who in turn introduced the Schaeffers to a wider circle of Washington officials. For ten years Kemp's wife, Joanne, led a class for other congressional wives in which they read all the Schaeffers' books. One L'Abri student was Gerald Ford's son Michael, which led to a private dinner in the Ford White House.

Francis also remained unfailingly suspicious of any theology that strayed from the propositional inerrancy that he learned at Westminster and Faith seminaries. He steered students away from Fuller Theological Seminary and from most Christian colleges. He addressed Billy Graham's international congresses on evangelism in 1966 and 1974, but he disliked Graham's style of evangelism. By Schaeffer's lights, it was too centered in experience and not vocal enough about inerrancy. However, at the time he refrained from publicly criticizing evangelical individuals and institutions by name.

Thus Schaeffer created for himself a highly independent place in the public world of evangelicalism. He had wide appeal to students with countercultural leanings, but also to conservative politicians. He remained in touch with but aloof from the other leading figures of American evangelicalism. And though he had wide international connections, he soon left behind the European context -- so crucial to the formation of his thought -- in exchange for increased involvement in the internal affairs of America and its evangelical subculture.

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Source:

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