

“Francis Schaeffer was an amazing man—intellectually brilliant and set on truth, emotionally intense, devoted to God and compassionate; like Jeremiah, perplexed by the world, not because he didn’t understand it but because he did. As one of his editors, I came to know him well, but only after he emerged as a writer. For me Colin Duriez fills in the fascinating details of his early years. Yes, this was the man I knew—one who was surprised by God as his influence grew from his pastoring small churches to teaching thousands in auditoriums around the world, from conversations one on one or with a handful of students to intellectual sparring with elite secular scholars and pundits. Duriez knows his subject; Schaeffer, the Jeremiah of the twentieth century, walks and talks again in these pages.”

—JAMES W. SIRE, author of *The Universe Next Door* and
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FRANCIS
SCHAEFFER

an Authentic Life

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COLIN DURIEZ

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PREFACE

His preferred medium was talk—conversation, whether with an individual or with a large group of people. He had the uncanny knack of addressing an individual personally, even if one was sitting with several hundred other people. His tapes, books, and films are best seen as embodiments of his conversation or table talk. The overwhelming impression of those who met him briefly or more extensively, particularly in connection with his homely yet expansive community at L'Abri in Switzerland, was his kindness, a word that constantly occurs in people's memories of him, whether Dutch, English, American, Irish, or other nationality.

His attire was quirky and memorable, dapper in knee-breeches and colorful tops, a goatee beard he wore later in life adding to his artistic, cultured appearance, far from the stereotype of the evangelical pastor. He was cool, knew about Bob Dylan, Jackson Pollock, Merce Cunningham, the older Wittgenstein, the younger Heidegger, and neo-orthodoxy and spoke of postmodernism in the sixties before it was clearly *post*. He bluntly challenged evangelical and fundamentalist pietism and later superspirituality as “neo-platonic.” This challenge left at least one of his students, me, wondering at the time how it was “neo” as well as “platonic,” but it had the desired effect of leading to a spiritual pilgrimage that was often painful.

Francis Schaeffer was a small man whose giant passion for truth, for reality, for God, and for the needs of people made him a key shaper of modern Christianity, larger than any label put on him. This biography portrays his formation and achievement, illuminating the complex person and his vivid teaching.

Having studied under Francis Schaeffer when young, interviewed him about the course of his life near the end of it, and heard many friends and others acknowledge their debt to him, I waited in vain for

a comprehensive biography. I have therefore tried to meet this need. It is now nearly a quarter-century since his death, and it seems to me that his essential message is as topical and important as it was in his lifetime. He has some detractors, but for me, he always eludes their nets. I have attempted to give an affectionate, accurate, warts-and-all portrait of a fascinating and complex person whom people always remembered. To ensure a truthful and reasonably objective portrait, I have been guided by over 180,000 words of oral history concerning Francis Schaeffer. This oral history was gathered by the historian Christopher Catherwood, his wife (musicologist Paulette Catherwood), and myself. We carried out interviews in Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, Northern Ireland, and the USA, talking to a variety of people, including former L'Abri members, workers, helpers, students, as well as members of the immediate family.

I've also made use of PCA (Presbyterian Church of America) archive material, early writings of Francis Schaeffer, letters, biography and memoirs by Edith Schaeffer, writings of the novelist Frank Schaeffer, and assessments of the pastor-intellectual (including *Time* magazine and *De Spiegel*). I've put this into a continuous narrative so that the reader might get to know Francis Schaeffer, his vision and concerns, and the thrust of his teaching (the purpose of my book is, of course, biographical, not to give an analysis of Schaeffer's thought).

My hope is that my book may play a little part in drawing a new generation of readers to Schaeffer's crucial work and message—sadly, they can no longer have the benefit of the teacher in person. I emphasize *teacher*. Schaeffer was of the old school of teacher or master—charismatic, memorable, learned. Though he wasn't a scholar in the usually accepted sense, he pushed those who truly listened to explore more, to learn more, to be more prepared for living as a Christian and human being in today's post-Christian, media-rich, exciting, dangerous world. Like John Milton I believe the image of God is captured in a unique way in books, and though Schaeffer is dead, his mind and spirit are alive in his writings, even though they lack the elegance and style of a C. S. Lewis. His message can still leap from mind to mind, as it did at the time I remember as a student. Our world still cries out for his imagina-

tive L'Abri ("The Shelter"), which can and should take many forms for differing needs.

A biography of Francis Schaeffer must account for his remarkable impact on people of many types—the intellectual, the humble laborer, the scientist, the artist, the doubting Christian, the questioning nonbeliever; man, woman, youth, and child; white, black, hairy, and smooth. After Francis Schaeffer's first visit to Europe, still suffering from the effects of war in 1947, a wall of parochialism in his life began to collapse—a process quickened by his friendship with the Dutchman Hans Rookmaaker and his own long-standing interest in and love for art. A biography of him (or a critique, for that matter) cannot itself be parochial in any sense, intellectual or regional. He was larger than any denominational or political context.

In this book I write about Francis Schaeffer's strengths and flaws, placing him in the context of his times, portraying the formation of his ideas and the genesis of his lectures, writings, seminars, and movies, as well as the complex person and his relationships. I portray the establishment and impact of the L'Abri community, and the deeper idea of a "shelter," as Schaeffer's most representative and abiding achievement, showing the development of this unique phenomenon and revealing its importance in the context of church and recent cultural history. The man himself is pictured as in essence undivided, rather than consisting of two or even three Schaeffers, though he went through sometimes anguished change and growth. Even his late and very emphatic association with the American church in the Reagan years was for him a development from the L'Abri work, not a capitulation to what he called the "middle-class church."

Though Francis Schaeffer is undivided, the distinct phases of his life are all portrayed here, each illuminating the other phases: his working-class childhood in Germantown, Pennsylvania; his intellectual and cultural awakening and student and seminary years; the ten years as a "separated" pastor in eastern and midwestern America; his early years in Europe working with his wife Edith for Children for Christ and speaking widely on the dangers of a new, deceptive liberalism as regards the Bible; the crisis in his faith resulting in a deep experience of

the Holy Spirit; the birth and early struggles of L'Abri in Switzerland; the gradual opening up of a wider ministry through taped lectures, international speaking, books, and the formation of new L'Abri centers, first in England, then in other countries; and, at the end of his life, the dramatic, celebrity phase of the movies and large seminars, in which Schaeffer extended his cultural analysis to the sphere of politics, law, and government, putting his long-standing role as a compassionate controversialist into the spotlight, with all its distortions of view.

As I was completing this book, Frank Schaeffer's *Crazy for God* was published. This is a confessional memoir of his life. While it vividly and sometimes poignantly portrays Frank's own life and journey, it added little to what I had already documented about his father—as a biographer I knew his strengths and weaknesses. Many of those interviewed for this book spoke of them openly. What I must remark on is Frank's portrayal of his father as keeping up a façade of conviction about his faith, especially in his final years. This bears no relation to what was the case. Francis Schaeffer was always open about his personal struggles and failings—this was the secret of his strength as a pastor and as a counselor. He emphatically did not divorce his inner and public life. When I was a young student, on my first or second visit to his L'Abri community in Switzerland, I once joined him on the descent to the chalet-style chapel for his regular Saturday night discussion. Suddenly he confided, “Colin, I feel like I'm about to jump out of an airplane without a parachute.”

In an unpublished letter to his close friend and peer Hans Rookmaaker, perhaps that same year, he confided that he was low after working hard on the manuscript of *The God Who Is There* with an editor: “I am so very much behind in every aspect of the work that I feel in a rather depressed mood which means of course that it is a difficult time. However, the Lord continues to open doors and we are thankful. . . . I would be glad if you would continue to pray for me personally because . . . this is a bit of a low period for me. However, I suppose I will be dug out in a couple of weeks and then I will feel better.”¹

As my book reveals, Francis Schaeffer in the twilight of his life was

¹Unpublished letter to Hans Rookmaaker from Huémoz, February 1, 1967.

as convinced of the truth-claims of Christianity and the efficacy of what he called the finished work of Christ as he was after his struggles in the early 1950s and even immediately after his conversion in 1930. Indeed, his conviction continued to deepen into his closing years, allowing him no respite from his grief over the lost condition of human beings and still expanding his empathy for those whom he encountered. In his final film series, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* he included a powerful episode about the historical underpinnings of Christian conviction.

What is the essence of Francis Schaeffer? Is it his system of theology, his books, his political campaigning, the existence of L'Abri? Ironically, though he attacked first the "old" modernism, then the "new" modernism of existentialism, neo-orthodoxy, and even, in anticipation, postmodernism, he demonstrates what might be called an existential Christianity—living in the moment; embracing the reality of existence; seeing the underpinning certainty of Christian faith in the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and reckoning on the specific intervention of the Holy Spirit in conversion at a point in time in a person's life, after which he or she passes from death to life. Schaeffer might be dismissed as a scholar or even original thinker (though it can be argued he was both, but particularly the latter), but his realistic, existential Christianity is remarkable and perhaps unique for someone of his biblical orthodoxy in his generation and is the secret, perhaps, of his impact on many people of diverse backgrounds and nationalities.

A full list of acknowledgments appears toward the end of this book, but I must here especially express my thanks to Christopher and Paulette Catherwood, for their brilliant and enthusiastic help with the interviewing for this book; to Ted Griffin, for his wise and thorough editing; to others who added to this book in a very special way, including Lane Dennis, John and Prisca Sandri, Ranald and Susan Macaulay, and Udo and Deborah Middelman. Though not well enough to give me more than a warm smile and greeting, Edith Schaeffer's published records of the family and L'Abri history, and unpublished Family Letters must have a special mention. While Christopher, Paulette, and I interviewed,

we received kindness and hospitality of a Dutch, Swiss, English, Irish, and American variety. I particularly remember the kindness of Marleen and Albert Hengelaar and the inspiring memories of the late Anky Rookmaaker as she reached back in her mind to the war years; the events she recounted seemed as yesterday. It is a privilege even to share a little in others' lives.

Colin Duriez

B E G I N N I N G S

(1912–1935)



Francis Schaeffer was the child of working-class parents of German ancestry. He was born on January 30, 1912, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in the United States of America. On his mother's side his ancestry was English. In fact his great-grandfather, William Joyce of Nottingham, England, was the first of his immediate forebears to cross the Atlantic, in 1846. Joyce, a weaver by trade, made his way to the small town near Philadelphia where his descendant Francis Schaeffer would be born and settled there, taking up shoemaking. At this time Germantown was little more than its main avenue. Its name derives from the establishment of the town in 1683 by about two hundred immigrants from Germany's Rhine Valley. Later other nationalities were established there, such as a Polish community. When work declined because of mass industry, William changed his employment to mailman, walking twenty-five miles a day delivering the mail. He was a familiar figure in the neighborhood, known as "Uncle Billy," and was memorable for his forthright opinions on the state of the world and politics. His wife died at thirty-five, leaving him to care for their children.

One of his daughters, Mary, married Wallace Williamson in 1877. She was twenty-five, and he was twenty-six. Wallace died in the eleventh year of their marriage, leaving Mary with four daughters to bring up, including Bessie, Francis Schaeffer's future mother, who was eight when her father died. Mary survived by taking in washing and ironing, a process that necessitated her making her own soap. She also took her father into her home, where he lived until his death in his nineties. The hardship of Bessie's early life taught her to expect existence to be tough. She vowed she would "never be a slave to bringing up children" as

Mary had been. At the age of seventeen, in 1897, she achieved a diploma from the local grammar school. She had enough qualification with that diploma to teach in primary (elementary) school but instead remained at home helping her mother, even after her brothers and sisters left. The last years of the long life of this Germantown woman would be spent in a little village high in the Swiss Alps and would inspire a novel by her grandson, Frank Schaeffer, *Saving Grandma*.

Francis Schaeffer's paternal grandfather, "Franz" (Francis August Schaeffer II, named according to family tradition), and his wife, Carolina Wilhelmina Mueller, emigrated from Germany to America in 1869 to escape European wars with their attendant tribulations. Carolina was from the Black Forest area, and Franz possibly from the east, perhaps Berlin. Franz had fought in the Franco-Prussian war, being honored with an Iron Cross. As part of deliberately turning to a fresh life in the new world, Franz burned all his personal papers. Ten years after settling in Germantown, Franz was killed in an accident at work on the railroad in nearby Philadelphia. He left a three-year-old son, Francis August Schaeffer III. Carolina eventually remarried, to Franz's brother. The child, known as Frank, had only a basic education and, before he was eleven, joined many other children sorting coal to bolster the inadequate family income. Eventually he found work in one of the nearby mills. Still in his young teens, Frank slipped away from home to join the Navy. Each time he received his wages, most of it was mailed home to his mother. He learned to ride the rigging in all weathers before moving on to steam-powered ships. His experience at sea included serving during the Spanish-American War in 1898. His experience on the wild rigging taught him to brave heights and dangerous situations in the workplace.

Frank had had a Lutheran upbringing, and when he met Bessie Williamson she was a regular church attendee at a local Evangelical Free Church. Churchgoing was normal at that time, part of the social and community glue. Their courtship and engagement was dominated by a necessity both felt to prepare for a home together, acquiring furnishings, linens, and so on. They both wished to transcend the impoverishment and discomforts of their brief childhoods. They were both thorough and

conscientious, and continued to be so in their marriage as their house on Pastoria Street was honed to their ways. Bessie was determined to have only one child, and that child turned out to be Francis August Schaeffer IV, the subject of this book. She was thirty-two years of age when she gave birth on Tuesday, January 30, 1912.

At the appropriate moment Bessie told her husband, “It’s time to call the doctor.” Frank disappeared into the night and quickly returned, riding in the doctor’s buggy. In his excitement to get help, Frank had not noticed that the doctor was drunk. The physician was not too far gone, however, to tie a sheet to a foot post of Bessie’s bed and tell her to pull on it with all her might while pushing. Bessie in later years told Edith Schaeffer, Francis’s wife, “It was easy. I just pulled on the sheet and pushed, and the baby was there on the bed.”¹ The inebriated doctor finished his tasks and managed to find his way back, but the following morning he entirely forgot the need to register the birth. Francis Schaeffer was not to realize until thirty-five years later that he had no birth certificate, when he prepared to go abroad for the first time.

As a child Fran, as he tended to be known to family and friends,² helped his father in his duties as a caretaker, which included carpentry. His home on Pastoria Street lacked the stimulation of books and intellectual interest in the conversations of his parents. There were no pets or picnics, and visits from play friends were rare. The young child would watch the horse-drawn delivery wagons and see the lamplighter kindling each gas lamp in the street at twilight. In winter there was the Mummers Parade, and in the summer a trip to Atlantic City. An old photograph shows a young boy dressed in a long, two-piece beach suit of wool, standing obediently on the edge of the surf as his picture is taken. A large obstacle to his development, which went unnoticed, was severe dyslexia. In later years many of his students at L’Abri noticed what seemed to them amusing mispronunciations: he spoke of Mary Quaint (instead of Quant), the film *Dr. Strange Glove* (instead of *Dr. Strangelove*), and Chairman Mayo (instead of Mao). His youngest daughter Deborah Middelman remembers him frequently calling

¹Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry* (Nashville: Word, 1981), 37.

²His mother, however, invariably called him Francis.

down to her for the spelling of simple words like *who* and *which*, even when she was as young as five or six.

Knowing him as a young adult, many would have predicted an ordinary working-class life for Francis Schaeffer: hard-working, conscientious, and orderly but nevertheless defined in its compass by his upbringing. Fran was never told that the school reported to his parents that in an intelligence test he had been found to have the second highest score recorded in twenty years. The parents, however, did at one time briefly consider sending him to a private school, Germantown Academy. Not surprisingly, Fran chose woodwork, technical drawing, electrical construction, and metalwork as his main subjects when he started high school. By the age of seventeen, young Schaeffer was working part-time on a fish wagon. He later admitted to having “barely made it” in high school.³

But this is to anticipate. A significant moment in Fran’s education took place when he changed schools at the age of eleven. At Roosevelt Junior High School he had a teacher named Mrs. Lidie C. Bell, who was the first to “open doors” for him. Near the end of his life, Francis Schaeffer revealed in an interview: “Certain key people made a real difference in my thinking. It goes all the way back to my junior high school days when I had just one art teacher. I came from a family which was not interested in art at all. She opened the door for me to an interest in art.”⁴ From that point on, a fascination with art was a central thread running through his life. His annual visits to Atlantic City were also deeply significant to him. He had become a strong swimmer and remembered long after: “When I was a boy I went swimming from the old concrete ship which was beached off Cape May Point following the first World War. The ship’s hull was tilted at a sharp angle. After I was inside for some time and then looked out through a door, the sea seemed to be at an angle and for a moment all the accepted facts of the external world seemed to go ‘crazy.’”⁵ As so often with his experiences, the event provided an analogy for human thinking about the world, shaped as this is by worldview and presupposition.

³Philip Yancey, *Open Windows* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 115.

⁴*Ibid.*, 116.

⁵From a pamphlet written in the 1940s by Francis A. Schaeffer, *Sin Is Normal* (Walker, IA: Bible Presbyterian Press, n. d.).

At the time he entered junior high school Fran joined the Boy Scouts. As representative of his troop he took part in a speech contest. He kept the cup for the rest of his life: “Pyramid Club Four Minute Speech Contest Won by Francis A. Schaeffer, Troop 38, 1923.” At this time he chose to attend the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown because of its link with the Scout troop. Belonging to the Scouts enriched his life at that time as he worked for merit badges and learned about woodland, camping, and trails. His father provided a membership for the YMCA, which was where he learned to swim and was able to do some gymnastics. Helping his father, Fran mastered many skills, such as building, laying floors, mending gutters, and plumbing. Some of the skills were employed renovating the new house at 6341 Ross Street, into which the family moved while Fran was in Germantown High School.

Fran made a significant discovery when he went to an electrical show at the City Auditorium. During the show there was a dramatic playing of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, complete with special effects. Hearing this piece of classical music was a new experience for Fran. Some days after this, he happened to turn on the radio just as this same overture was played. As he recognized it and listened intently, he fell in love with such music, a love that was to deepen, grow, and become a permanent part of his life.

According to his daughter Deborah, the core of Francis Schaeffer’s life was there from the beginning: he was “a thinking person who was very honest about life.” His inherent seriousness did not mean dullness. He enjoyed humor, for instance. From early days he was, in Deborah’s words, “very serious about life, art, and music. . . . As a boy he loved hiking and going about the woods in Philadelphia.” This intense demeanor was not out of keeping with his working-class background. Her father always reckoned, later in life, that there was a deep affinity between the working-class person and the intellectual. They shared an honesty in looking at life, whereas the middle classes often lived in a way that was divorced from reality. Fran remembered his own father as a deeply thinking person who asked what were in fact philosophical questions, even though he was not able to get past third grade because of family hardship.

The Saturday job on the fish wagon came to an end when Fran became disgusted at his boss's treatment of his horse. He found another job working for a meat market, then one descaling a steam boiler. Others followed, at which he always worked assiduously. A breakthrough came, with far-reaching consequences, when a Sunday school teacher got Fran a job helping a White Russian count, an émigré, to learn to read English. The count favored learning from a biography of the colorful Catherine the Great, who took many lovers. After a few weeks Fran informed him, "You are never going to learn English this way." With the count's agreement, Fran traveled into nearby Philadelphia and headed for its well-known bookstore, Leary's. He requested a reading book for a beginner in English. By mistake (a mistake he later took to be providential) he came away with the wrong book. This was one on Greek philosophy.

As he began reading the book out of curiosity, the effect was the same as when he heard the *1812 Overture* for the first time. As with classical music, a deep love for philosophy began. In later years he told Edith Schaeffer that he felt as if he had come home. From this time on, ideas were an abiding passion. His heartfelt concern for ideas was soon to shape everything he did in life. From reading about the peccadilloes of Catherine the Great, the count found himself learning English from an introductory text on philosophy. The same book marked a dramatic change in Fran's intellectual development. He devoured it, reading long into the night after his parents had gone to bed. Finding out about the Greek philosophers also led him to read Ovid, perhaps the *Metamorphosis*, a first-century writing that had an enormous impact on Western culture.

As he read he had a growing sense that he was gaining more questions but no answers. This awareness was reinforced when he realized that he experienced a similar situation in his church, which he later realized was influenced by theological liberalism—a modernist reinterpretation of the Bible, going back historically to the Enlightenment, which saw human reason as self-sufficient, in the sense of being the ultimate starting point in knowledge and interpretation of reality. What he was getting in his church was a constant questioning, but no answers to the

answers—and without these there were no answers either in philosophies or in the religion I had heard preached.”¹⁰ Through reading the Bible on his own, however, he at first thought he had discovered something no one else knew about, based on his experience of churchgoing, which he believed represented Christianity.

In that period of isolation, Francis Schaeffer began to perceive the world in a new way, a discovery that started to be reflected in his high-school work. In English classes his writing improved substantially both in content and style. Probably at this time he started writing poems, not with great skill, but authentically responding to his changing perception of things. He was popular at school. His yearbook records:

F—friendly

R—restless

A—ambitious

N—nonchalant

Fran is the well-known, talkative secretary of our class, a straight shoot'n youngster and an enthusiastic member of the Engineering Club.

Secretary of Class; Vocal Ensemble; Debating Club; Rifle Club. Mechanic Arts.

After graduating in June 1930 he looked for summer jobs, not easy in the throes of the Great Depression. His father presented him with a new Model A Ford as a graduation gift, and he began driving lessons. His diary records his first trip to an art museum and many visits to a city library to feed his new zest for reading. He saw movies and read the poetry of Carl Sandburg. Then, in August, an event occurred that lifted him out of his isolation.

In the heat of that month Fran felt depressed as he walked down Germantown Avenue, the main street. He felt isolated and was also still concerned with finding a summer job and was thinking about the engineering course he intended to take after the summer. As he walked he heard the sound of a piano and hymn-singing. The sound was coming from a tent pitched on an empty lot. He felt drawn in and opened the

¹⁰Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 52.

flap. Inside a gospel meeting was in process, attended by a few people sitting on benches on either side of an aisle covered with sawdust. Fran sat down, and soon a lively sermon followed the enthusiastic gospel hymns. The man at the front spoke simply, telling of his freedom from a life of drugs and crime as a result of the gospel. As he outlined the gospel in his simple way, Fran suddenly realized that the speaker's belief coincided with his discoveries from reading the Bible. He was not alone. Fran moved quickly up what was dubbed at the time "the sawdust trail" in response to the invitation to the congregation to commit their lives. When the speaker asked, "Young man, what are you here for, salvation or reconsecration?" Fran was confused. As the evangelist turned away, Fran walked out of the tent in exultation. That night he jotted in his diary, "August 19, 1930—Tent Meeting, Anthony Zeoli—have decided to give my whole life to Christ unconditionally."¹¹

Francis Schaeffer's father was particularly sure that his son should work with his hands. Though he had grown to be a somewhat small man—his height was five feet six inches¹²—he was strong and wiry and skilled in many tasks. Both his parents believed that church ministers were somewhat like parasites on society, not doing real work. This prejudice would become more important as Fran began to think the unthinkable—going into ministry himself. He knew that his father's threat to disown him if he took such a course was no idle one. But as yet his hopes and aspirations were confused by his newfound faith. In September 1930, therefore, Fran dutifully enrolled at the Drexel Institute as an engineering student. He soon was to sink deep into a dilemma, however, for he increasingly felt a distinct calling from God to be a pastor. Though his parents wanted him to be a craftsman like his father, well before the end of the year he was trying to persuade them that his life should dramatically change course. On December 16 he recorded in his diary, "Talked to dad alone, he said to go ahead and that mother would get over it." His father was a strong, tough man; the strength of his son's resolution resonated with him.

Throughout the late months of 1930 Fran was working by day and

¹¹Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 55.

¹²*Ibid.*, 122.

studying by night at the Institute. In September he had managed, after standing in a long line, to get a job at RCA Victor for thirty-two cents an hour. The job only lasted about four weeks and demonstrated the unexpected qualities of Francis Schaeffer that constantly emerged throughout his life. At RCA Victor the work was organized in assembly lines. The work on the lines was accomplished by women, each of whom was responsible for an aspect of the production. On the vast factory floor, five men worked special presses, which fed amplifier parts to the assembly lines. (Fran himself was merely a “bus boy,” involved in general maintenance.) Fran soon noticed the injustice of the system, relying as it did on the desperate shortage of work during the Depression. One of the “big bosses” would come onto the floor half an hour before work was due to end flourishing a handful of five-dollar bills. Fran remembered years afterward that the boss would yell, “If you guys at the presses will turn out more parts, double it in the next half hour, there’ll be a fiver for each of you.”¹³ The presses would spurt, doubling the work for the women on the lines, dog-weary at the end of the day. But there was no reward for them. One day in early October one woman snapped. She rose to her feet shouting, “Strike, strike.” Slowly others abandoned their frenzied work and joined in a chorus. Some encouraged reluctant women to rise by pulling them up by their hair. Suddenly Fran climbed onto a counter and yelled at the top of his voice (he had a piercing shout), “Strike, strike.” Then almost all the remaining women stood up, abandoning their work. Fran was so angry at what was going on that he later realized that he could have followed his sense of indignation and become a labor organizer.

Out of work after the strike, Fran looked around for another day-time job. To his amazement he was offered one working with the father of a school friend, Sam Chestnut, delivering groceries, which took him through the next months. In those depressed times offers were simply not made for jobs. He felt increasingly that God was quietly but definitely leading him. It was the prelude to his momentous decision to become a Christian pastor. Back in September he had talked to a couple of people about studying at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, which had a

¹³*Ibid.*, 58.

pre-ministerial course. One of those was Sam Osborne, Headmaster of Germantown Academy, who had studied there. Fran continued to seek advice and noted in his diary entry for December 10, 1930, “Prayed with Sam Chestnut today. Now my mind is fully made up, I shall give my life for God’s service.”¹⁴

In the new year, on his nineteenth birthday, January 30, he took an important step in implementing his decision. He switched from evening classes at Drexel Institute, with its emphasis on engineering, to evening study at Central High School, taking Latin and German and receiving extra instruction in the latter. Applying his considerable energy and ability to study hard after his day’s labor, he achieved marks in the nineties for Latin and German. (Later, in seminary, he would master Greek and Hebrew.) This was an extraordinary achievement, given his poor results through much of high school and his dyslexia. At home, his parents made no mention of his intention to leave for college. His diary at the time records that he dated a student from nearby Beaver College, a prestigious institution for women in Glenside and Jenkintown,¹⁵ but there evidently was no meeting of minds. By the summer of 1931 he was ready, academically at least, to enter pre-ministerial studies at Hampden-Sydney College. He had no idea, however, as to how he would pay his fees, which at the beginning of the 1930s were around six hundred dollars a year, a considerable amount in those days.

The long-anticipated day of leaving for Virginia dawned, and Francis Schaeffer got up before 5:30. When he had prepared for bed the night before, his father had instructed, “Get up in time to see me before I go to work. . . . 5.30.”¹⁶ He found his father beside the front door, waiting. Turning to look directly at his son he said, “I don’t want a son who is a minister, and—I don’t want you to go.”¹⁷ It was a decisive moment for both father and son. There was silence between the two in the early dawn light. Fran then said, “Pop, give me a few minutes to go down in the cellar and pray.”¹⁸ Descending, his thoughts in confusion, tears started. In the basement he prayed about the choice he must make. In

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵It was renamed Arcadia University in 2000. It is now coeducational.

¹⁶Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 60.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 62.

his deep emotion he resorted in desperation to a kind of prayer that, in future days, he would advise many people not to make. Asking God to show him, he tossed a coin, saying that if the result was heads he would go, despite his father's wishes. Heads. Not content, he tossed again, declaring that if it was tails, he would leave for Hampden-Sydney. Tails. Still crying with emotion, he asked God to be patient and said that if the third toss was heads, he would go. There was no mistaking it. The coin landed affirmatively. He returned to his silently waiting father and said, "Dad, I've *got* to go."¹⁹ After an intent glance at his son, his father walked through the doorway and pushed the door behind him hard to slam it. Just before the door banged, however, Fran heard his father say, "I'll pay for the first half year."²⁰ Years later, Fran's father came to share his faith, affirming his son's resolve.

Fran had carefully packed the day before, making use of a wooden crate his father had once brought home, coating it gray with some leftover paint. After packing clothes, books, Bible, and toiletries, he fastened the box's top down with four long screws. His clothes included his gray tweed knickers from high-school days, breeches he always found comfortable to wear. Years later he would take to wearing his hallmark Swiss breeches for the same reason, inspired by the example of his Swiss son-in-law, John Sandri.²¹

A few hours later Fran found himself at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, about sixty miles south-southwest of Richmond, near the small town of Farmville. A friend, Charlie Hoffman, had driven him down in his own Model A Ford and then took the car back to Germantown to await his return. The trip south took them through Maryland and into Virginia, the road taking them through Wilmington, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Richmond—a trip of around three hundred miles.

Hampden-Sydney is one of the oldest colleges in the United States, founded in 1775. It was in Francis Schaeffer's time, and remains, an all-men's liberal arts college. The Union Theological Seminary was established at the college, eventually relocating to Richmond. Its out-

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Interview with John and Prisca Sandri.

standing Federal-style architecture delighted the freshman, with its white columns, red bricks, and campus lawns fringed by extensive woods. He was not enthralled, however, at being allocated a room in Fourth Passage, Cushing Hall, notorious for the hard time given to pre-ministerial students in that dormitory.

Freshmen were soon initiated into what is now called hazing, being spanked with a stick or paddle for breaking petty and sometimes arbitrary rules made by older students, which might include sitting on a fence or not fetching something quickly enough according to the caprice of an upperclassman. Fran was beaten frequently by his roommate for the first few weeks until he snapped. Flouting the unofficial rules he turned on his tormentor, fighting him and finally pinning him down. Another student, the acknowledged leader of the pack in the Fourth Passage, observed the combat from the doorway. In his southern drawl he announced, “You’re the biggest little man I’ve ever seen, Philly.” That was the end of his hazing. The mainly southern students had dubbed Fran “Philly” since he was from Philadelphia. The divide was deepened by a contrast between Fran’s working-class values of hard work and diligence and the lordly aristocratic attitudes of most of the students.

As he studied, preparing for later ministerial training, there were various indications of the unusual quality of Fran’s character—the way in which he faced bullying, his service as president of the Student Christian Association, and his participation in a Sunday school for African-Americans in the vicinity.

The Student Christian Association had established prayer meetings in various dormitories, but the Fourth Passage was a notable exception. With great determination Fran set one up, persisting in asking fellow students along. The meeting was simple: Fran would read a section from the Bible, make one or two comments, and ask if anyone wished to pray. Two or three might pray, with Fran concluding in prayer. One student, exasperated at Fran’s persistence in asking him to attend, threw a can of talcum powder at him, causing him to bleed above the eye. Undeterred by his bloody face, Fran asked him again to come. All right, said the student, if Fran would carry him. (He was six feet two inches to Fran’s five foot six.) Fran took him in a fireman’s hold and carried him, rather

unsteadily, down a flight of unlighted stairs to the meeting on the floor below. (The bulbs had long ago been shot out by .22 rifles used by the students to shoot mice.) This was only one example of Fran's recruitment methods.

Another effective method was to broker a deal with students lumbering back after Saturday night's drinking, achieved with some brilliance despite Prohibition. The unlit halls and stairways in Cushing Hall made it difficult for them to navigate to their rooms. In return for Fran's coming to their assistance at the yell of "Philly," they agreed to be roused and taken to church on Sunday mornings. Assistance included undressing them, pushing them under a cold shower, and steering them to their beds. Fran would use the quiet Saturday evenings to study, determined to keep at it until the last of the lads was back. His motivation back then, as it was later in life, was an anguished sense of the lostness of people without God, coupled with meeting them in their particular need. Describing his application to his studies, Edith Schaeffer commented nearly fifty years later, "All through life Fran's best quality has also been his worst feature: such severe concentration on what he is doing, come wind or come weather, that nothing stops him."²²

A few months after starting at Hampden-Sydney Fran became aware of the existence of a Sunday school for black children in a plain and cramped wooden building. The church was called Mercy Seat. It was deep in the countryside surrounding the college, and Fran began making his way through fields of corn and woods to help out. Through the remainder of his four years at Hampden-Sydney he barely missed a Sunday. He befriended an elderly black man named Johnny Morton who cleaned the college rooms, went to his shack to see him when he was ill, and visited his grave when he died. There were normally between eight to twelve in the Sunday school classes that he taught, their ages ranging from eight to thirteen. One of the girls corresponded with him for years as she grew up and became a nurse.

Fran was a straight-A student who eventually achieved a BA. As well as active involvement in the Ministerial Association, the League of Evangelical Students, and the Literary Society, Fran continued to jot

²²Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 127.

down poems in his notebooks, struggling with his spelling. His basic outlook in theology was developed in those college years, before he went to seminary.²³ At that time there was no chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. Had there been, his college acknowledged late in Francis Schaeffer's life, he would have become a member on the basis of his academic record. As it was he was made an honorary member in 1980 for his contributions to human knowledge. Fran deeply appreciated his teachers, including David Wilson (Greek), J. B. Massey (Bible), and Dennison Maurice Allen (Philosophy).

The philosophy professor made a particular and lifelong impact on the young Schaeffer. Fran recalled in an interview toward the end of his life, "I had a philosophy professor in college, Dr. Allen, who was brilliant. I was his favorite student, because I think I was the only student in the class who understood him and stimulated him. He used to invite me down at night to sit around his potbellied stove and discuss. He and I ended up in two very different camps: he became committed to neo-orthodox thinking, but he was very important in stimulating my intellectual processes."²⁴

A year after starting at Hampden-Sydney, Francis Schaeffer met Edith Seville, while he was home on summer vacation. Edith was one of three daughters of missionaries who had spent many years in China. Her mother had lived through and narrowly escaped death in the bloody Boxer Rebellion, in which many missionaries and their children were massacred. They had served with the China Inland Mission (now known as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship), founded by Hudson Taylor. Its ethos included "living by faith" without advertising for funds and attempting to adapt to Chinese culture not only by learning the language but by adopting Chinese dress. Some of this ethos, via Edith, would carry over into the work of L'Abri many years later and into Francis Schaeffer's emphasis upon listening to and "speaking" the culture of modern people in the twentieth century.

The missionary family had recently located to Germantown, where George Seville, Edith's father, worked at the CIM headquarters. His

²³Yancey, *Open Windows*, 116.

²⁴*Ibid.*

job was editing *China's Millions*, the mission's magazine. Edith began attending Germantown High School in her senior year, from which Fran had graduated. Her mother's first marriage had been to Walter Greene, and they had planned to go to China together. At his untimely death and that of their baby son one year into the marriage, she had vowed never to remarry but rather to devote herself single-mindedly to mission work with the China Inland Mission. Four years later, after training in Toronto, she had sailed for Shanghai. George, however, won her heart after several years in China. Edith Rachel Merritt Seville was born on November 3, 1914 in Wenchow, joining a family of two older sisters and learning Chinese as an infant. As a child she had resolved, "I may be a missionary when I grow up, but I'm not going to look like one."²⁵ She grew to love beauty in all forms, whether in textiles and clothes, the creation of a home, or movement and dance.

Edith graduated from high school in June 1932, and on Sunday, the 26th of the month, untypically she attended the Young People's meeting at the liberal First Presbyterian Church in Germantown. Francis had just returned from his first year at Hampden-Sydney College and headed for the same meeting, prepared for a fight. The speaker was Ed Bloom, a former member who had joined the Unitarian Church. His chosen title was, "How I know that Jesus is not the Son of God, and how I know that the Bible is *not* the Word of God." As Edith listened, she recalled:

. . . my reaction was to jot down things in my head to use in a rebuttal—things I had gathered from lectures about the original manuscripts that I felt might help people who were listening, even if they did nothing to convince Ed Bloom. As soon as he had finished I jumped up to my feet and started to open my mouth . . . when I heard another voice, a boy's voice, quietly begin to talk. I slid back into my seat and listened, startled.²⁶

She heard him say that although those there might think his belief that the Bible is the Word of God was influenced by a Bible teacher at college whom they would term "old-fashioned," he himself knew Jesus is the Son of God and his Savior who had changed his life. Although he

²⁵Edith Schaeffer, *The Tapestry*, 130–131.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 131.

could not answer all the things Ed Bloom had said, he wanted them to know where he stood.

Edith hastily asked her friend beside her, “Who’s that boy?” and Ellie Fell replied by briefly telling her of Fran’s parents’ resistance to his becoming a pastor. After mentally resolving to comfort the poor boy somehow, Edith then rose to make her points. She did this by quoting from Dr. Gresham Machen and Dr. Robert D. Wilson, both on the faculty of Westminster Seminary nearby, known to Edith through her father. The quotes encapsulated, in Edith’s words, “that type of apologetic for the truth of the Bible which I had heard in lectures and read.”²⁷ Fran was astonished to hear her speech and asked the lad sitting next to him, “Dick, who is that girl?” He had not known anyone in that church was familiar with Old Princeton apologetics. Dick knew Edith and briefly filled him in.

As was the custom, the young people went to someone’s home after the meeting, which they considered the real event. As they prepared to go, Fran and his friend pushed their way through the chattering group to Edith, where Dick introduced the two. Fran did not waste the opportunity and immediately asked Edith if he could walk her home. She said she already had a date (meaning she had promised to go to Ellie’s house afterward). Fran said, “Break it.” Edith’s curiosity had been so aroused by this boy who had the courage to declare his belief that she uncharacteristically agreed. They both saw it later as meeting “on the battlefield.”²⁸ Typically, Edith encouraged Fran to read J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*. In her Fran had discovered an essential ally against liberal attacks upon the integrity of Scripture. Throughout the summer vacation Fran worked selling silk hosiery door-to-door and seeing much of Edith. Their shared activities included visiting the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

During his remaining three years at Hampden-Sydney Fran and Edith were soon writing to each other almost daily, their newfound love deepening into plans for marriage. In the letters it is clear that each had met an intellectual equal, someone with whom each could share

²⁷Ibid., 132.

²⁸Ibid.

deepest aspirations and who would give encouragement in the Christian life. In the fall of 1932 Edith entered nearby Beaver College, enrolling for a degree in home economics, which was cross-disciplinary and stimulating. It was a science degree as it included chemistry, microbiology, psychology, and philosophy of education. It also involved English, philosophy, and ethics. Unlike arts degrees of sixteen hours per week, the course required thirty-two hours. Those hours were crammed not only with the basic scientific elements but classes on foods, dietetics, dressmaking, interior decorating, art appreciation, and other subjects. Edith was in heaven. She was not discouraged by the fact that her family could only afford for her to be a day student, which meant commuting to college by bus and train.

Fran graduated in June 1935, BA *magna cum laude*, a fact that pleased his father when Edith explained its significance—for him it meant that his son had worked harder than most of the other students. Edith had decided to forgo her fourth year of studies at Beaver College so she could fully give her support to Fran, who was poised to enter Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia to complete his ministerial training.