

10. From Strength to Strength

Contributed by LG Parkhurst Jr
Thursday, 24 January 2008
Last Updated Thursday, 24 January 2008

Dr. C. Everett Koop and Francis Schaeffer began filming *Whatever Happened To The Human Race?* in August 1978. On September 18, 1978, they had filmed the scene on the shore of Galilee about the risen Christ. Of that fifth episode in the series, Dr. Schaeffer said, "It is the best presentation of the gospel I have ever been able to make."

On the final day of shooting the film in October, they discovered that Fran's coat no longer fit. He had lost more than twenty-five pounds, was exhausted, and breathed with difficulty. Edith started the preparations to get Dr. Schaeffer to the hospital.

On Tuesday, October 10, 1978, the Schaeffers met their friends, Dr. Victor Wahby and Dr. Carl Morlock, at the Rochester airport in Minnesota. Dr. Robert M. Pettitt began treatment for lymphoma on October 17th. The doctors had found a tumor the size of a football.

Dr. Schaeffer's cancer went into remission at least twice in answer to prayer and in response to the excellent medical treatment of Mayo Clinic and the nutritional foods provided by Edith. The Schaeffers saw no inconsistency between receiving medical attention, a gift from God as a part of the battle in this fallen world, and believing God could heal. Medicine and faithful prayer go together, and God empowered Dr. Schaeffer to live five more years instead of six weeks, because He had more work for Fran to do.

Dr. Schaeffer did amazing things for Christ and the world while he fought for his life. He continued to walk three miles each day, as often as he was able. The strong heart he had acquired from his many hikes in the Alps, from chopping wood for the wood stoves in the chalets, and from his gardening and landscaping work outdoors as he visited with L'Abri students, prepared him physically to withstand the damaging effect of chemotherapy as it attacked both the good and bad cells in his body. He looked upon his walks as quiet times to pray and be with the Lord in the beautiful world God had made.

By January 1979, in Rochester, Fran began to speak to various groups of doctors and hospital chaplains. He showed the complete series of *How Should We Then Live?* to a full auditorium at the John Marshall High School in Rochester. After having chemotherapy in the morning, he answered questions on almost every subject in the evening. Many listeners became convinced of the sufficiency of the Bible's answers to the questions life poses.

Even during the early months of his treatments, people continued to come into his home with questions as they sought to find the reality in Christian teachings. Some came seeking the faith that had been stolen from them by their liberal churches and pastors. Some came right after his chemotherapy treatment; he did not mention this inconvenience but put their needs first. He would not have been able to do this if he had not practiced this way of ministry throughout his life. Often, as he sat in a waiting room at Mayo Clinic, people recognized him and asked if he were Dr. Schaeffer. Then they expressed warm words of appreciation for his books and films, or asked deep and perplexing questions as he waited to see the doctors or take a chemotherapy treatment. He made himself accessible to people, and he never stopped praying every day, "Lord, send the people of your choice to me today." No matter what they themselves suffered, Fran and Edith looked upon every person who came to them as a person sent directly from God.

Fran helped many people in Rochester, and Edith often opened their home for crowds of people to come for questions and answers on various evenings, even after Fran had spent the day writing, visiting with individuals, or seeing doctors. One young girl he helped was struggling to free herself from a local cult. She wrote Dr. Schaeffer a letter, and he called her on the phone in response. His compassionate care and sound advice gave her the strength to make the final break from the cult and throw the cult's books and materials in the trash. She returned to her family and church, and then began to serve others on the basis of Fran's books and films.

Dr. and Mrs. Schaeffer were accessible to almost everyone at all times, but that does not mean that this was an easy choice for them to make. Fran suffered silently from his illness, and as he tried to help others he never complained to them or put his own needs before theirs. The Holy Spirit gave him the strength to make the needs of others his complete focus of attention for the time that was required. He called on patients in the Rochester hospitals, continuing the work of a simple pastor, never thinking he was better than anyone else or too great to give others his time. In a speech to the hospital chaplains he said that he was glad he had something to say in the midst of the absurdity of cancer and the other horrible diseases that people suffer. He said, "I can go talk to patients and tell them, 'God hates your cancer. God hates your cancer.' And I am encouraged when I remember that at the tomb of Lazarus 'Jesus wept,' and Jesus could weep

and be angry at death, even though He was God. He could be angry at death, and not be angry at himself as the Creator."

Dr. Schaeffer knew this is a fallen world, and he had something to say because his faith was firmly grounded on the content of the Bible. He could help people act in faith upon the total unified Christian teaching of God's Word. He could remind people that we live in a supernatural universe--that ever since the rebellion of man we face a battle. This battle is in the seen and the unseen world. And so he encouraged people to be contented before God and yet fight the battle against their diseases and other afflictions.

Throughout his own long suffering, Fran maintained contentment before the Lord. He maintained a quiet disposition and gave thanks to God for His love to him. His trust in his heavenly Father had been built up over more than fifty years of serving Him, so when times were their darkest for him personally his trust in God never faltered. He talked to God as people talk to their own earthly fathers, and in times of trouble asked God, "What do you want me to learn from this?" The special hospital ministry that Fran began in Rochester is still carried on by Rochester L'Abri.

In the summer of 1979, L'Abri held the first of two Rochester Conferences. Satan's attacks upon the Schaeffers only increased the usefulness of their ministry and demonstrated more effectively than otherwise possible the character and power of the God who is there. Almost two thousand people attended their first conference, coming from forty-seven of the fifty states. Dr. Schaeffer insisted during the conference planning meetings that the motivation for all advertising must be compassion, compassion for those who really needed to hear about the conference so they could be helped. For many Rochester residents, and for others attending a L'Abri conference for the first time, the various members of L'Abri who spoke showed the depth of knowledge and understanding that the leaders in every branch of L'Abri possess. God had truly led the people of His choice into the work over the years. The work would be ably carried on, even if Fran died. In between the workers' lectures, they gave themselves totally to answering the questions of many troubled people. They didn't even have time to hear one another speak.

Dr. Schaeffer wanted to help as many hurting people as he could, with the short time he had left. He was not making up for lost time, because he had always served the Lord completely. He did not seek glory for himself: he had already died to seeking personal glory when he buried himself in the Swiss Alps and began L'Abri. He remained humble before the Lord, authentic through and through, and the Lord raised him up and honored him. When someone praised him, he simply said, "Well, I am grateful," for he was grateful that God had used him to help someone else. He lived to honor God and lead people to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, making Him the Lord of all life. He strived to help all people be of help to others on the basis of the truth of Scripture and the finished work of Christ.

In September 1979, the seminars for *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* began in Philadelphia and moved from East to West. Later, Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life and other such groups bought the film series and made it available for pro-life causes around the country. On January 22, 1981, Minnesota Governor Al Quie honored Dr. Schaeffer at a special dinner at the governor's mansion in St. Paul and thanked him for his work in the pro-life movement.

Dr. Schaeffer did more than just write against abortion. On a Wednesday afternoon, October 26, 1983, he led a silent, dignified march of six people in front of the Methodist Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota, to protest against the hospital and some of the Mayo Clinic doctors who performed abortions there. He wanted to show that we cannot always wait until we can get hundreds together to do something important. He proved that a small group with carefully worded placards can make a quiet and orderly statement for the lives of unborn children. Three men and three women dressed neatly in business suits carried six signs bearing a unified message: "This hospital is normally committed to saving human life; but abortion reverses this; abortion is the killing of a human life; abortion devaluates the unique value of all human life; it is the value of everyone's life which is involved; abortion is the killing of a human life." At the conclusion of the march, Dr. Schaeffer told reporters what he had said so often: "What they ought to realize is that they are schizophrenic. A policy of healing and the practice of abortion on demand are contradictory." 1. Some who passed the hospital that day said they had not known that Mayo Clinic doctors performed abortions there. Others in some stores nearby mocked and asked, "Who is that old man leading that march?"

With How Should We Then Live? Dr. Schaeffer demonstrated the necessity of the Biblical Christian answers as the foundation for living. He showed the intellectual substance of Biblical Christian faith when compared to other ideas and philosophies. In *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* he emphasized the necessity of moral absolutes based upon the Bible. He carried the application of personal faith to the next logical step: to social action based upon the moral absolutes and principles that could be derived from the Bible.

God kept Dr. Schaeffer alive during twenty strenuous seminars for *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* By February 1980 the cancer was back in full force again, but he did not stop. He went to the White House to talk with Christian leaders, and while in Washington he conducted another seminar of *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* with other government leaders. This seminar, along with much other work by many people, gave intellectual vigor and moral strength to those in Congress and in the White House who are in favor of protecting human beings of all ages.

After speaking in America, Dr. Schaeffer crossed the Atlantic for more seminars in England. Dr. Koop and an English

doctor held discussions with him. These efforts almost single-handedly caused a radical change of opinion in much of England regarding the sanctity of human life. Later, Malcolm Muggeridge, Mother Teresa, and others joined Dr. Schaeffer at Hyde Park, where fifty thousand people rallied to promote the sanctity of human life and then marched to Trafalgar Square. In this case, thousands made a difference and Parliament worked to make changes.

L'Abri had moved its American headquarters to Rochester in 1979, so Dr. Schaeffer would also have work when he came for his medical treatments. They held discussions on Monday nights in their home, and the crowds grew so large that they needed to meet in the Plummer House, a mansion built by the late Dr. Henry Plummer of Mayo Clinic and then donated to the City of Rochester. People from a great variety of intellectual backgrounds and interests, Christians as well as non-Christians, profited from these discussions. Many who came did not realize Dr. Schaeffer was often in the midst of chemotherapy treatments. Over and over again the doctors told him, "Now everyone gets really sick from this type of chemical," but over and over again his heavenly Father surprised them at how well he did. He did have times of great tiredness, depression, intense pain, and other complications, but through it all God showed His gentle and compassionate character.

On some occasions church groups from various denominations traveled to see him at his home in Rochester, to ask advice on how they could fight the battle for truth within their denomination. At other times he spoke at large denominational meetings and warned of the theological dangers they faced. Because Dr. Schaeffer was a Presbyterian minister, he had his own distinctive, reformation view of the sacraments and other matters. But Baptists, Lutherans, and others knew that he would not get off into denominational distinctives and push his views in a public debate at their meetings. They trusted Dr. Schaeffer to help them fight for the truth in the essential places where the battles needed to take place. For this reason, most Bible-believing churches welcomed him gladly as a speaker, and he had more requests to speak than he could possibly fulfill.

Dr. Schaeffer had the gift of fighting where the battle should take place and of keeping peace where there should be peace among Bible-believing Christians and their churches. When he edited his Complete Works, he made certain that it included biblical views that all Bible-believing Christians should agree upon, and for this reason his books have been used by a broad spectrum of Bible-believing Christians and different denominations.

Dr. Schaeffer could have quit after his seminars for *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, but the seminars only reinforced for him the necessity of continued fighting in other crucial areas. He would say, "How can I think of retiring at a time like this!" Fran began to fight harder for freedom of religion and freedom of speech in governments that suppressed the truth. But the battle also needed to be fought in America, as some have tried to systematically shut out Christianity and religious ideas in the schools and other institutions. It seemed as though the United States and the Soviet Union had something in common: in neither country could a person acknowledge the existence of God in the classroom! Thankfully, as of today, people can acknowledge God publicly in Russia, and Dr. Schaeffer's son-in-law, Udo Middelman, can preach and teach there. But only a little headway has been made in allowing Americans to practice their faith in the ways of the nation's founders. Dr. Schaeffer faced the fact that Christians were being denied their first amendment rights of free speech and assembly, simply because they were Christians! He encouraged the founding of Christian schools. Along with other members of his family, he encouraged Christians who wanted to home school. We can thank God that Dr. Schaeffer's battle cry was heard by many Christian leaders and churches, and Congress has acted to restore to children some of the rights that the Supreme Court has denied them. However, the battle still remains.

As part of his battle for religious freedom in America, Fran wrote the best-seller *A Christian Manifesto*. He wept for his Christian brothers and sisters in the Eastern bloc, people who had to pay a real price for their convictions. He prayed that some radicals would not take his ideas and twist them and use them in wrong ways in the name of Christ. Because of his work in this area, in 1983 he received the honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from Simon Greenleaf School of Law.

In his last years, Fran also wept when he had to fight for the truth and authority of the Bible in the churches that claimed to be evangelical or conservative. Having lived through the liberal takeover of the churches in the early '30's, he understood far too well that many of the younger evangelicals were selling out in their eagerness to accommodate new liberal forces. He knew how easily false ideas could infiltrate minds and churches. He had warned and saved many evangelical churches from Barthianism in the 1950's, and now he had to warn a new generation of pastors and theologians. So, shortly before his death, he wrote *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, much of which he proofread from his hospital bed. One month before Dr. Schaeffer died, God gave him strength to complete a thirteen-seminar tour on his book. Those who knew him saw God give him supernatural strength to do His will the last six months of his life, as he had to get the message of *The Great Evangelical Disaster* into the churches and college campuses. He prayed that Christians, and especially pastors, would uphold the truth of God's Word in their churches--no matter what the personal cost--for the sake of the truth and the next generation.

Dr. Schaeffer saw all these efforts as the practice of "true spirituality," and that is why he was particularly pleased after he reworked *True Spirituality* in his Complete Works. This book effectively opens the door to understanding him and the practical application of Christian faith. It laid out the foundation for all of his subsequent work. It explained the centrality of personal Christian experience based upon the objective truth of the Bible and the finished work of Christ on the cross. It insisted that believers need to love others and be involved in the whole of life on the basis of love and truth.

By April 1984, Dr. Schaeffer was so exhausted he could hardly move. He spent Easter Sunday in the cancer ward at St. Mary's Hospital while doctors thought about possible treatments and fought for his life, trying to find just the right formula that might turn the tide once again. But Dr. Schaeffer could not remember when he had ever been so tired. He looked forward to living his final days with Edith in their home not far from the hospital and near the other L'Abri homes. He was intrigued about what work God would have him do now, but at the same time he wanted to go be with Jesus. On one occasion he said, "One of these days I am going to go to sleep and not wake up." He showed no fear. At other times, he reminded those nearby about the importance of spreading the Word of God, of upholding the truth of the Bible, of loving one another, of fighting for human life. He knew that Jesus had prepared a place for him, and sometimes he prayed for Jesus to take him home; yet he, like the Apostle Paul, wanted to stay for the sake of others.

Fran never gave up. As he neared death, he remarked, "I have felt the power and the authority of God in my life over these past five years. By God's grace, I have been able to do more in these last five years than in all the years before I had cancer." Dr. Schaeffer was needed as a Christian public figure in America to demonstrate that no matter what the battle, we can "keep on, keeping on," and never give up. He insisted that in fighting an illness we are not fighting God or God's will for our lives. There is no inconsistency between taking medicine and praying for healing. Taking medicine is not a sign of a lack of faith, and being sick is not a sign of lack of faith either.

The Word of God sustained his faith, and one of the Scriptures that encouraged him most was Psalm 84, verses 5-7:

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca [Valley of Weeping], they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion.

Dr. Schaeffer went "from strength to strength" several times during his battle against cancer, and when he went to meet the Lord at the end of his faithful pilgrimage, he went on "from strength to strength." After his faithful pilgrimage on this earth, through his books and Edith's accounts of their lives, he has kept on giving people springs of "living water" to drink.

The doctors finally said there was nothing else they could do. One option was to put him into an intensive care unit, where his family could visit only briefly every few hours. Another option was simply to let him stay in his hospital room. The option they chose was to let him go home to be with his family among the familiar surroundings of the furnishings Edith had hurriedly brought from their old home in Switzerland in order to provide a place of continuity in the midst of change. Edith told him gently, "We are traveling on different roads together, roads that neither of us has ever traveled before." He went to their new home knowing he had but a short time left with his wife and family. But he went home still fighting for his life. A few days before he died, Mayo Clinic doctors went to his home with one more dose of chemotherapy. He told them quietly, "Thank you for fighting."

Nurses who later attended him at home continually marveled at how much support his own family gave him in his illness. Some had never seen such support from a family before: they saw Christian faith make a real difference. Even in their most difficult hours, the Schaeffers testified to the substantial reality we can have with our heavenly Father through faith in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Schaeffer died early in the morning of May 15, 1984. He left quietly to be with the Lord, and the Lord encouraged his family with an appropriate message that He knew they would read from Daily Light, the reading for that very day. Debby brought it to the attention of the family, and it was read at his funeral in Rochester and again at a simple graveside service one year later to encourage his family and close friends to "keep on."

On a bright and beautiful day, May 20, 1984, as more than eight hundred people crowded the auditorium of the John Marshall High School, the site of his two L'Abri Conferences and other meetings, Dr. Schaeffer's fifth episode of *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* was shown. Here, at his funeral service, he could speak through a film on the value, meaning, and power for us of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. People turned their eyes with faith toward God as they watched Dr. Schaeffer speak before the empty tomb of Jesus Christ or by a simple fishing boat on the shore of Lake Galilee. They also heard these words from Daily Light that Debbie had read to the family on the very day he died:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

He will swallow up death forever...The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken....No one living in Zion will say, "I am ill"; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven....The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more....Sorrow and sighing will fly away.

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?-The last enemy to be destroyed is death....Then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

What is unseen is eternal.

God raised us up with Christ.

"Do not be afraid....I am the living One." "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am."

For we are members of his body. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead....You have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 2.

Is the Bible just words? Are these particular words "only a positive statement in the midst of an absurd situation?" No! A thousand times, no! God is there! God has not been and is not silent! God has spoken! When a Christian dies, there is an eternal difference; he knows that through Christ his sins are forgiven, and that he goes to a place Jesus has prepared for him. When Christians who are left behind say "good-Bye" to a loved one who they know will go to be with the Lord, the fact that God has spoken truly makes all the difference.

Regarding Francis Schaeffer's journey to be face to face with his great Friend, Jesus Christ, Edith wrote about the day of his death on May 15th:

It was 4 AM precisely that a soft last breath was taken....and he was absent. That absence was so sharp and precise! Absent. Now I only observed the absence. I can vouch for the absence being precisely at 4 AM...as can Debby and Sue, and Shirley, the nurse (a L'Abri person from Canada). As for his presence with the Lord...I had to turn to my BIBLE to know that. I only know that a person is present with the Lord because the Bible tells us so. I did not have a mystical experience. I want to tell you here and now that the inerrant Bible became more important to me than ever before. I want to tell you very seriously and solemnly...the Bible is more precious than ever to me. My husband fought for truth and fought for the truth of the inspiration of the Bible--the inerrancy of the Bible--all the days that I knew him....through my 52 years of knowing him. But--never have I been more impressed with the wonder of having a trustworthy message from God, an unshakable word from God--than right then! I did not have to have, nor pretend to have, some mystical experience to prove that Fran had left to go somewhere...that he had gone TO the prepared place for him, and that he was indeed OK. I could know that by turning to my precious Bible, and to his precious Bible (and we each have had several), and read again that absent from the body is present with the Lord...and that is far better. It is far better for the one who is thus present--but not for those left behind. God knows all about the pain of separation...and is preparing that separation will be over forever one future day. I also know that because the Bible tells me so. I feel very sorry for the people who have to be "hoping without any assurance"...because they don't know what portion of the Bible is myth and what portion might possibly be trusted. What fear must clutch their hearts as the face of their loved one suddenly turns to wax after the last breath announces the absence!! 3.

Following Schaeffer's death, President Ronald Reagan wrote these words to comfort his family: "He will long be remembered as one of the great Christian thinkers of our century." And Dr. Billy Graham commended Fran as "truly one of the great evangelical statesmen of our generation."

© Copyright L. G. Parkhurst, Jr. Revised Edition 2008
Write For Permission To Reprint Any Parts Or Chapters
Use the Contact Us address or e-mail address on this website.