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Apologetics of Francis Schaeffer (ST 540)  
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## Notes for Book Report on *The Church Before the Watching World* by Francis Schaeffer

### I. Background

A. *The Church Before the Watching World* was published in 1971.

B. This book was part of a series of books that laid the foundation for Schaeffer's views on Christian life and the church.

1. In 1984, Schaeffer described his books in three groups: philosophy, Christian life and the church, and needs of law and government.

2. *The Church Before the Watching World* was intended to expand on *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* and complement *The Mark of the Christian* (both published in 1970).

### II. Overview of *The Church Before the Watching World*

#### A. Introduction

1. The basic principles driving Schaeffer's views on Christian life and the church were doctrinal purity and mutual love within the church.

- These principles could appear to be opposed to each other.
- Schaeffer portrays these principles as a reflection of God's attributes of holiness and love.

2. Schaeffer wrote two complementary books to address the need for doctrinal purity and Christian love.

- Christian love is the theme of *The Mark of the Christian*.
- Christians claim to have the truth, but there is much untruth in the visible church. *The Church Before the Watching World* addresses doctrinal purity in the church.

#### B. Chapter 1: A Historical Critique of Theological Liberalism

##### 1. Origin of Theological Liberalism

- Naturalism gained influence over universities, especially in Germany.
- This resulted in rationalism that starts with the self and uses reason to draw conclusions.
- Schaeffer supported scholarship to develop an accurate understanding of the biblical text.
- The problem is higher criticism that determines which sections of the text should be accepted or rejected.
- Liberal theologians sought to develop a Bible that does not rest on the supernatural.

##### 2. Emergence of a "New" Theological Liberalism

- The effort to develop a non-supernatural Bible was a failure.
- Theologians turned to modern mysticism that keeps spiritual truths isolated from reason and rationality.
- Karl Barth developed an approach to spiritual knowledge and experience that is not dependent on historical analysis.

##### 3. An Example of the Shift to "New" Liberalism

- The "old" liberalism rationalized that man is not really sinful.
- The "new" liberalism speaks of man as "flawed," but treats the historical origin of these "flaws" as insignificant.
- "New" liberalism shows a general lack of clarity, except on the point that the Bible is not the Word of God.
- The Bible "contains" the Word of God and is a means of conveying subjective truth to individuals.

##### 4. The Result of the "New" Theological Liberalism

- "Jesus" becomes no more than a banner to put over any philosophical system.

- Liberal theology now uses more of traditional Christian terminology, but it denies the concepts of truth and antithesis.
- C. Chapter 2: Adultery and Apostacy – The Bride and Bridegroom Theme
1. Theological Significance of Marriage
    - Ephesians 5 reveals marriage as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church.
    - The same language was also used by John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul.
    - The O.T. frequently uses the image of Israel in a marriage relationship with God.
  2. Biblical Imagery of Adultery
    - Adultery is often used to describe lack of faithfulness to God.
    - Just as physical adultery is repeatedly used as an example of wickedness, spiritual adultery is also repeatedly condemned.
    - Those who are unfaithful to God are called prostitutes, harlots, etc.
  3. The Adultery of the Apostate Church
    - Very serious to claim to be God’s people (His bride), yet turn aside from God’s Word.
    - Aberrant theology should not be taken lightly. It is a stain on Christ’s bride, as seen by the world.
    - Schaeffer compares liberal churches’ acceptance of abortion with Israel’s sacrifice of children to Molech.
    - It is not enough to seek doctrinal faithfulness. The church must also act accordingly.
    - The church is to not only be a faithful bride, but also a bride in love.
- D. Chapter 3: Practicing Purity in the Visible Church
1. All churches ought to simultaneously exhibit the holiness of God and the love of God.
    - This applies to all churches, regardless of denominational distinctives.
    - The church’s ability to accomplish this demonstrates the unity of believers, without removing denominational distinctives.
  2. Schaeffer uses the divisions in the Presbyterian churches as an illustration.
    - When theological liberalism invaded at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, stricter adherence to doctrinal purity may have prevented division.
    - When division occurred, the divide widened due to a lack of love between those who left and those who stayed.
    - Those who left became absolutists in even minor points of doctrine.
    - Those who did not leave displayed a growing latitudinarianism.
- E. Appendix: Some Absolute Limits
1. Schaeffer’s Concept of Doctrinal Purity
    - The answer is not adherence to the exact wording of creeds or confessions.
    - Schaeffer envisioned a circle of doctrines within which there is freedom to move.
    - The edge of the circle is an absolute limit, like a cliff. The challenge is to avoid the cliff on either side of the circle.
    - Schaeffer described two areas of doctrine: doctrines intrinsic to the “Christian system” and doctrines that result from the Fall.
  2. Examples of “Intrinsic Doctrines”
    - God exists in freedom (independence) ↔ man has significance (can glorify God)
    - Events not determined by chance ↔ history of events has significance (causality)
    - Various kinds of unity ↔ significant distinctions due to diversity
  3. Examples of Results of Fall
    - Justification once-for-all ↔ continued battle with sin and need for holiness
    - Existence of absolute truth ↔ all fall short of the truth, to degrees

### III. Assessment of *The Church Before the Watching World*

#### A. Helpful Elements

1. Importance of Sound Doctrine to Faith and Practice
  - If the Word of God is not taken seriously, then there is no faithfulness to the truth of Christianity.
  - If the Word of God is taken seriously, then it affects not only belief, but also daily living.
  - Many Christians and churches have problems in this area today.
2. A proper approach to striving for doctrinal purity should also promote unity.
  - An approach to doctrine that quickly produces divisions is likely missing something.
3. A balanced way of avoiding doctrinal errors is important.
  - Rather than the imagery of “staying away from two cliffs,” I would prefer the imagery of trying to firmly grasp two truths that are each vital to maintaining balance.

#### B. Areas of Concern

1. Emphasis on Holiness vs. Love
  - Schaeffer’s contrast between holiness and love in the church can create an impression of two separate areas of effort, rather than an understanding that God’s nature always displays a perfect embodiment of both holiness and love.
  - Knowledge of God’s other attributes is also vital to the Christian life and community.
  - It is possible to maintain doctrinal purity out of love and express love with doctrinal soundness (while also being wise, just, etc.).
2. Method of Engaging Apostates / Unbelievers
  - Schaeffer seems to expect the apostates and/or unbelievers in liberal churches to heed warnings about spiritual adultery.
  - If a person has intentionally turned away from the Word of God, then the problem is likely much deeper than a lack of exhortation.
  - 1 Corinthians 2:14 – The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.
  - Schaeffer was aware that some believers had knowingly compromised the truth by remaining in liberal churches, and he expected them to be welcomed into faithful churches. A degree of repentance and humility is necessary for such a person.
3. Concept of Doctrinal “Circles”
  - Although a range of doctrines can co-exist within the church, it must be maintained that believers strive for one distinct truth that is found in Christ.
  - Schaeffer defines Christianity too much in terms of affirming correct doctrine and behaving in certain ways. (This has long been a rampant problem within the church.)
  - James 2:19 – You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder!
  - No one guessed which disciple would betray Jesus.
  - The fundamental characteristic of a Christian is a new heart that is inclined toward and can produce genuine repentance and faith.
  - The doctrinal “cliffs” can vary depending on an individual’s weaknesses and inclinations. The “cliffs” are not the same for all peoples, places, or times.
4. Schaeffer overstates the “newness” of the challenges of the post-modern world.