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The Theological Method of Friedrich Schleiermacher

Abstract

What Friedrich Schleiermacher is most known for is his theological method of deriving doctrine from religious experience. He believed that religious piety is to be found in the “feeling of absolute dependence”, and all subsequent doctrines must be discovered through reflection upon religious experience. Understanding and critiquing Schleiermacher’s theological method requires examining his theological influences, his “feeling of absolute dependence,” and a few examples from his systematic theology. In the end, Schleiermacher’s theological method is ingenious but misguided because it is based on a faulty religious epistemology of human experience. What is needed instead is an objective standard of truth from outside of human nature—namely, God’s revelation found in the Bible.

Keywords

Schleiermacher, theological method, religious feeling

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Introduction

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is considered the most influential theologian of the nineteenth century, the father of modern theology (or liberal theology), and the father of religious experience.¹ He was a founding faculty member at the University of Berlin who lectured on theology, dialectics, ethics, psychology, aesthetics, education, politics, and the history of philosophy.² He also translated Plato into the German language and pioneered the discipline of modern hermeneutics.³ Schleiermacher was a political activist who sought to rebuild Germany after the Napoleonic war against Prussia in 1806,⁴ and he was the operative theologian behind the efforts of King Frederick Wilhelm III to unite the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Germany in 1817.⁵ Schleiermacher pastored for nearly forty years at Holy Trinity Church in Berlin, ministering to both the poor and uneducated as well as the upper class of society.⁶ So beloved was Schleiermacher by the Prussian people that an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people attended his funeral in 1834.⁷ During his lifetime, Schleiermacher wrote enough works to fill thirty volumes. His most widely read works are *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799 [rev. 1806, 1831]),⁸ which is considered to have inaugurated the modern period of religious thought, and *The Christian Faith* (1821-22 [rev. 1830-31]),⁹ which is considered to be as epochal as Calvin's *Institutes* in the history of theology.¹⁰

Friedrich Schleiermacher is most known for his theological method of deriving doctrine from religious experience. He believed that religious piety is to be found in the "feeling of absolute dependence," and all subsequent doctrines

¹ W. A. Hoffecker, "Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, second edition, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1064.

² Gerald R. McDermott, *The Great Theologians: A Brief Guide* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 134.

³ F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

⁴ Stephen Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Makers of Contemporary Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1971), 11.

⁵ John E. Wilson, *Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2007), 5-6.

⁶ A. H. Strong, *Miscellanies: Chiefly theological* (Philadelphia: The Griffith & Rowland Press, 1912), 2:2.

⁷ Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 14-15.

⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, third edition, trans. John Omam (1831, repr., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd: 1983).

⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, eds. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (1830, repr., London: T & T Clark, 1999).

¹⁰ B. A. Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 18.

must be discovered through reflection upon religious experience. In order to understand and critique Schleiermacher's theological method, this paper will examine Schleiermacher's theological influences, his "feeling of absolute dependence," and a few examples from his systematic theology. This paper will argue that Schleiermacher's theological method is ingenious but misguided because it is based on a faulty religious epistemology of human experience. Instead, an objective standard of truth is needed from outside of human nature—namely, God's revelation found in the Bible.

Theological Influences

There is no question that Schleiermacher's theology was closely linked to his upbringing, his education, and his social influences. In order to understand Schleiermacher's doctrinal formulations, one must understand something of his biography. This section will briefly sketch his thinking from his pietistic upbringing through his college years and into his early adulthood.¹¹

Moravian Pietism

Friedrich Schleiermacher was born on November 21, 1768, in Breslau, Prussia, which is in modern-day Poland. His father, Gottlieb, was a Reformed minister and had been a chaplain in the Royal Prussian Army. In 1777, when Friedrich was nine years old, his father had a spiritual awakening due to the influence of the Moravian Brethren. The next year Gottlieb Schleiermacher moved his family to a Moravian community at Niesky on the Herrnhut ("watch of the Lord") estate donated by the Moravian theologian and bishop Nikolas von Zinzendorf (1700-60). From ages twelve to fourteen, young Friedrich was enrolled at a boarding school at Pless. Still, out of concern for their children's religious education, his parents enrolled him and his brother in a United Brethren school at Niesky. It was here that Friedrich experienced something of a religious conversion at the age of fourteen among the Moravian Brethren.

The Moravian Brethren traced their lineage back to Jan Huss (1369-1415) and had become a part of the Lutheran Church in Prussia after the Protestant Reformation. From the influence of his godfather, Philip Jacob Spener, Zinzendorf taught a "religion of the heart" over and against his day's rationalism and dry orthodoxy. Such an ethic was evident in three ways at the Moravian school where Friedrich was enrolled. First, the Moravians emphasized the

¹¹ Schleiermacher's biographical information is outlined in Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church*, 24-27; Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 4-15; Andrew C. Dole, "Friedrich Schleiermacher," in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, eds. Chad Meister and James Beilby (London: Routledge, 2013), 17-18.

emotional side of religion over and against intellectual rationalism. Second, they made religion a central part of one's personal and social life. Students were encouraged to share their religious experiences with their friends, and everything in life was to be seen through the lens of religion.¹² Third, the Moravians taught students to distinguish philosophy from religion. In other words, philosophy has no bearing on one's personal relationship with Christ.¹³ The piety of the Moravian Brethren deeply influenced Schleiermacher during his time at Herrnhut. He wrote in his *Speeches*, "Piety was the mother's womb, in whose sacred darkness my young life was nourished and was prepared for a world still sealed for it. In it my spirit breathed ere it had yet found its own place in knowledge and experience."¹⁴

Although Schleiermacher learned religious piety from the Moravian Brethren, he battled religious doubts during his teenage years (1785-87) while studying at the Moravian seminary in Barby.¹⁵ In addition to his intellectual doubts, he could not seem to ascertain the deep spiritual experiences of his classmates despite his best efforts. As a result, young Friedrich and a close friend secretly obtained and read copies of Goethe and other forbidden literature. Before long, they no longer shared the convictions of the Moravian Brethren.¹⁶ His religious skepticism had gotten the better of him: "In vain was every means of conversion employed; [but] I could no longer be drawn out of the path I had entered."¹⁷ In a letter to his father from 1786, Schleiermacher stated that his teachers at Barby were too narrow in that they did not address the objections to orthodox interpretations and doctrines. He suspected his teachers were holding out on him because the objections were powerful and true.¹⁸ His father initially dismissed the "refutations of infidelity" that Friedrich had encountered. Still, in a bombshell letter to his father on January 21, 1787, Friedrich admitted that the religious doubts he had previously articulated were, in fact, his own. He had lost his faith:

¹² Schleiermacher reflects this teaching when he later wrote that man "should do everything with religion. Uninterruptedly, like a sacred music, the religious feelings should accompany his active life" (Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 59). Again, "The pious man can detect the operation of the World-Spirit in all that belongs to human activity, in play and earnest, in smallest things and in greatest. Everywhere he perceives enough to move him by the presence of this Spirit and without this influence nothing is his own" (Ibid., 84).

¹³ Richard B. Brandt, *The Philosophy of Schleiermacher: The Development of His Theory of Scientific and Religious Knowledge* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 21.

¹⁴ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 9.

¹⁵ His doubts actually began as early as eleven years of age. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Friedrich Schleiermacher, as Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, trans. Frederica Rowan (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1860), 1:5-8.

¹⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Life of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 1:10-12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1:12.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1:43-44.

Faith is the regalia of the Godhead, you say. Alas! dearest father, if you believe that, without this faith, no one can attain to salvation in the next world, nor to tranquility in this—and such, I know, is your belief—oh! then, pray to God to grant it to me, for to me it is now lost. I cannot believe that He, who called Himself the Son of Man, was the true, eternal God: I cannot believe that His death was a vicarious atonement, because He never expressly said so Himself; and I cannot believe it to have been necessary, because God, who evidently did not create men for perfection, but for the pursuit of it, cannot possibly intend to punish them eternally, because they have not attained it.¹⁹

Schleiermacher obtained his father's permission to transfer to the University of Halle in the spring of 1787. Although he was on the road of religious doubt and skepticism, the Moravian teachings about religious piety and mysticism stayed with Schleiermacher his entire life. After revisiting Herrnhut in 1802, Schleiermacher wrote:

Here it was that for the first time I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world.... Here it was that that mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of scepticism [*sic*]. Then it was only germinating, now it has attained its full development, and I may say, that after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter [Moravian] again, only of a higher order.²⁰

Enlightenment Rationalism

The second major influence upon Schleiermacher's thinking was the Enlightenment rationalism of the late eighteenth century. The Enlightenment thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries elevated human reason to the highest position for knowledge, focused on nature and natural law, promoted human autonomy, and sought harmony and an age of utopia. All of these pursuits were possible through human reason and intuition. Many philosophers and theologians preferred deism to Christian theism.²¹ The Enlightenment also inaugurated the era of biblical criticism. Under the rationalistic assumptions, Benedict Spinoza (1632-77), the "father of historical criticism," believed that the world was a closed system, which did not allow for miracles, and he denied many

¹⁹ Ibid., 1:46-47.

²⁰ Ibid., 1:283-84.

²¹ Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 15-23.

traditional beliefs about biblical authorship and inspiration.²² Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) likewise denied the Bible's miracles and Jesus' claims to divinity and the resurrection. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) postulated an "ugly broad ditch" between the contingent truths of history and the necessary truths of reason and faith such that one could no longer ground Christian beliefs in history.²³ Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) limited pure reason to what can be known through sense experience (*phenomena*) and believed that what is beyond the senses (*noumena*) is unknowable (e.g., God). God and immortality were necessary postulates for morality (the *summum bonum*), but Kant's focus on "practical reason" within oneself (in place of "pure reason") resulted in an anthropocentric belief system.²⁴ These ideas of modern man elevated human intuition and denigrated biblical revelation, and formed the backdrop to Schleiermacher's college education.

When Schleiermacher transferred to the University of Halle in 1787, he came under the tutelage of his maternal uncle, Professor Ernst Stubenrauch. Stubenrauch himself was an "enlightened" theologian who had given up some of the traditional Christian beliefs, such as the substitutionary death of Christ, in keeping with the *Zeitgeist* of eighteenth-century Germany. Consequently, Stubenrauch understood the pressures facing young Schleiermacher and acted as a mentor to Schleiermacher during this difficult time in Schleiermacher's spiritual life.²⁵ During Schleiermacher's three years at Halle, he read some of the Greek classics, such as the works of Plato and Aristotle. He was also exposed to some of the more modern theologians and philosophers, but it was not until a few years later that he took an interest in modern thought. From 1790-96, he worked as a tutor for an upper-class family; he began preaching and writing, finished his theological examinations, and was ordained to the ministry as a Reformed pastor. During this period, Schleiermacher began to read modern thinkers—particularly Spinoza (through Jacobi) and Kant. Although Schleiermacher later denied being a pantheist²⁶ and he disagreed with Kant's moralism, both Spinoza and Kant made a

²² Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume One: Introduction, Bible* (Minneapolis, Bethany House, 2002), 317-19.

²³ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 343-48.

²⁴ Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 25-31.

²⁵ Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 6-7; Brandt, *The Philosophy of Schleiermacher*, 22-23.

²⁶ Schleiermacher esteemed Spinoza as a man "full of religion, full of the Holy Spirit (Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 40), but he vehemently denied charges of being a Spinozist (*ibid.*, 104-105). A recent study suggests that although Schleiermacher was not a pantheist, he was nonetheless influenced by Spinoza's theology and philosophy. See Julia A. Lamm, *The Living God: Schleiermacher's Theological Appropriation of Spinoza* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

lasting impression on Schleiermacher's thinking.²⁷ Schleiermacher became a *modern* theologian in that he took a critical view of the Scriptures and then turned to human reason and intuition for religion and theology.

Romantic Philosophy

The third major influence on Schleiermacher's thinking was Romanticism. One of the problems with religion in Germany at the time was that the fires of the Protestant Reformation had died out, and Christianity had fallen into formalism and unbelief.²⁸ As a reaction to the arid rationalism of Enlightenment deism, Romanticism appealed to human imagination by recognizing "the profound sense of mystery which arises from realizing that the human mind cannot comprehend even the finite world, let alone the infinity beyond this."²⁹ In Romanticism, man is neither opposed to the world nor fallen; he is intrinsically good and is "the highest production of spirit in a world of which mind is the essence, a world which will yield its secrets to its own kind—the human mind—if they are searched for."³⁰ Romanticism also taught the reconciliation of man with nature and God and the "divinity" of human nature.³¹

From 1796-1802, Schleiermacher worked as a chaplain at the Charité Hospital in Berlin. In Berlin, he came in contact with "The Athenaeum"—a group of Romantic thinkers and writers who were critical of the Enlightenment. Schleiermacher came under the influence of Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg [1772-1801]) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), two leaders in Germany Romanticism.³² Schlegel sought to unite science, art, poetry, and philosophy into one view of reality, and Schleiermacher was impressed with his breadth of interests.³³ The two men became good friends and greatly influenced one another. Novalis believed that "poetic insight and hypnotic and mystical ecstasy are avenues of acquaintance with the nature of the Absolute,"³⁴ a mystical view which no doubt reappeared in Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence."

²⁷ See Brandt, *The Philosophy of Schleiermacher*, 23-41.

²⁸ Strong, *Miscellanies*, 3.

²⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, fourth ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 70.

³⁰ Brandt, *The Philosophy of Schleiermacher*, 61.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³² See Jack Frostman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

³³ Sykes, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 8-9.

³⁴ Brandt, *The Philosophy of Schleiermacher*, 70.

Summary

In summary, Schleiermacher's theological journey began with Moravian pietism, continued with Enlightenment skepticism towards the Bible and orthodoxy, and ended with the philosophy of Romanticism. All three influences are evident in his first major work, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, and his systematic theology, *The Christian Faith*. Although Schleiermacher ultimately moved beyond Moravian conservatism, Enlightenment rationalism, and Romantic mysticism, his theology blended elements of pietism, biblical criticism, and mysticism into a new understanding of religion as a reflection upon religious experience.

The Feeling of Absolute Dependence

As a product of the Enlightenment, Schleiermacher could not embrace the Christian orthodoxy of the Lutheran church. The church's theology "from above," in which God speaks to man through the divinely revealed truth of the Bible, was unacceptable. Such an approach led to an authoritative theology, which did not mesh with the human autonomy of the Enlightenment, and it confused dogmas about God with God Himself. On the other hand, the deistic theology "from below" yielded little more than a generic, philosophic religion.³⁵ Kant critiqued this "pure reason" and replaced it with "practical reason" and morality, and Hegel sought an approach to God through a philosophical understanding of human history (*dialectic*), but both systems seemed to be missing something—namely, human *intuition*.³⁶ To Schleiermacher, religious piety must be more than just a way to think and act.³⁷ It must be "something different from a mixture of opinions about God and the world, and precepts for one life or two. Piety cannot be an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical [Hegel] and ethical [Kant] crumbs."³⁸

For Schleiermacher, religious piety begins with what he dubs "the feeling of absolute dependence" (*schlechthiniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).³⁹ This "feeling" is more than just emotions or reverence for God;⁴⁰ it results from personal reflection whereby one recognizes "the feeling of being utterly dependent on

³⁵ Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁷ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube: nach den Grundsätzen der evangelische Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, erster Band (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1830), §4.

⁴⁰ McDermott, *The Great Theologians*, 136; cf. John H. Smith, *Dialogues Between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 124; Geoff Dumbreck, *Schleiermacher and Religious Feeling* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 64.

something infinite that manifests itself in and through finite things."⁴¹ When a person realizes that he is finite and absolutely dependent upon something else for his existence, he will be struck with a sense of awe and wonder. Schleiermacher describes this feeling in various ways:

"the immediate feeling of the Infinite and Eternal"⁴²

"a feeling of being one with nature"⁴³

"religious self-consciousness" (*frommen Selbstbewußtseins*)⁴⁴

"to receive the life of the World-Spirit"⁴⁵

"being in relation with God"⁴⁶

"God-consciousness" (*Gottesbewußtsein*)⁴⁷

"co-existence of God in the self-consciousness"⁴⁸

"immediate consciousness of the Deity...found in ourselves and in the world"⁴⁹

In Schleiermacher's view, this God-consciousness is essential to human nature⁵⁰ and can be found "chiefly within our own minds."⁵¹ Instead of looking to religion or the Bible to find God,⁵² a person need only "turn from everything usually reckoned religion, and fix [his] regard on the inward emotions and dispositions, as all utterances and acts of inspired men direct."⁵³ Although it is often feeble and suppressed, the God-consciousness is present in every human being and is "immediate"⁵⁴ in the sense that anyone can awaken it through personal reflection.

⁴¹ Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 44.

⁴² Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 15-16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁴ Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, §29.

⁴⁵ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 72.

⁴⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 12.

⁴⁷ Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, 23.

⁴⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 126.

⁴⁹ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 101.

⁵⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 26; cf. 476.

⁵¹ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 71. Indeed, no true piety can come from any outside source: "If the ideas and principles are not from reflection on a man's own feeling, they must be learned by rote and utterly void. Make sure of this, that no man is pious, however perfectly he understands these principles and conceptions, however much he believes he possesses them in clearest consciousness, who cannot show that they have originated in himself and, being the outcome of his own feeling, are peculiar to himself. Do not present him to me as pious, for he is not" (*ibid.*, 47).

⁵² "I maintain that in all better souls piety springs necessarily by itself; that a province of its own in the mind belongs to it, in which it has unlimited sway; that it is worthy to animate most profoundly the noblest and best and to be fully accepted and known by them" (*ibid.*, 21).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 5.

Thus, Schleiermacher posits that "our relation to God is really an affair of the quiescent self-consciousness, looking at itself reflected in thought and finding a consciousness of God included there."⁵⁵

Theological Method

Schleiermacher's theology is what Karl Barth called "a theology of feeling, of awareness."⁵⁶ His theological method consists of viewing all of religion and theology through the lens of the feeling of absolute dependence, or God-consciousness. Christian piety (*Frömmigkeit*) is the basis for Christian theology, not the Bible or the church's creeds. In other words, the Christian faith is primarily experiential, not conceptual. The Bible has its place in Schleiermacher's theology (see below), and the creeds can be consulted as well. Still, without the realization of the inward experience of God, religions are "mere habitations and nurseries of the dead letter."⁵⁷ Theology, then, is "a positive science, the parts of which join into a cohesive whole only through their common relation to a distinct mode of faith, that is, a distinct formulation of God-consciousness."⁵⁸ Dogmatics is a "logically ordered reflection upon the immediate utterances of the religious self-consciousness"⁵⁹ such that "all doctrines properly so called must be extracted from the Christian religious self-consciousness, *i.e.*, the inward experience of Christian people."⁶⁰ Any traditional doctrine, such as the Trinity, which cannot be deduced from religious experience, is worthless.⁶¹ Schleiermacher's systematic theology, *The Christian Faith*, is true to his theological method of redefining all Christian theology in terms of the feeling of absolute dependence. This section will examine how Schleiermacher's theological method is born out in his bibliology, theology proper, Christology, and soteriology.

Bibliology

Schleiermacher's bibliology reflects the spirit of the times in that he rejected the Bible as an absolute, authoritative source of divine revelation. First,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 478-79.

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 338.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸ The last phrase is: *eine bestimmte Gestaltung des Gottesbewusstseins* – "a distinct way of being conscious of God" (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, third edition, trans. Terrance N. Tice [1830, repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 1n1).

⁵⁹ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 81.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 265.

⁶¹ Ibid., 738-39.

he ignored most of the Old Testament because he believed it reflected the Jewish people's spirit, not the Christian Spirit. Therefore, he thought that Old Testament should be relegated to the back of the New Testament as an appendix.⁶² While Jesus and the apostles considered the Old Testament to be divinely authoritative, "we have actual experience" and "immediate certainty through [our] own perception."⁶³ Second, he considered the New Testament to be the "divine revelation" of Christ to the apostles in that it records their reflections about their own experiences of God-consciousness.⁶⁴ The New Testament is the "norm for all succeeding presentations" of the Christian faith,⁶⁵ but one's own experience of God takes priority over the recorded experiences of the apostles. Third, Schleiermacher rejected many of the orthodox teachings of the Bible. For example, he denied the historicity of the Genesis creation account.⁶⁶ He considered the belief in angels to be "childish" and "primitive."⁶⁷ He also stated that "The idea of the Devil...is so unstable that we cannot expect anyone to be convinced of its truth..."⁶⁸ Schleiermacher denied the resurrection and ascension of Christ,⁶⁹ and he preferred universalism to the idea of eternal punishment for the lost.⁷⁰

Despite his critical view of Scripture, Schleiermacher was still a "Christian" theologian in that he was working from within the Christian tradition to reform it. He still believed that the Bible has a place of "special holiness and worth," but he flatly states that "[t]he authority of Holy Scripture cannot be the foundation of faith in Christ; rather must the latter be presupposed before a peculiar authority can be granted to Holy Scripture."⁷¹ In other words, only after a person awakens God-consciousness can he recognize the authority of Scripture. For Schleiermacher, revelation is redefined as "[e]very original and new communication from the Universe to man..." and "[e]very intuition and every original feeling."⁷² In other words, a person can experience God inwardly and immediately, regardless of whether or not he recognizes the Bible as authoritative.⁷³ Sacred writings can reveal the "higher nature" of both knowledge

⁶² Ibid., 609-11.

⁶³ Ibid., 611.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 597-603.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 594.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 159-60.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 417-19.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 722.

⁷¹ Ibid., 591.

⁷² Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 89.

⁷³ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 592.

and "deeper feelings,"⁷⁴ but they are "for children in belief, for novices, for those who are standing at the entrance and would be invited in...."⁷⁵ Those who are most religious can most easily do without such sacred writings.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Schleiermacher employs much of the language of the New Testament in *The Christian Faith*, though the meaning of the texts and concepts is interpreted in terms of God-consciousness.

Theology Proper

In Schleiermacher's view, God is the "expression of the feeling of absolute dependence...to which we trace our being in such a state."⁷⁷ All statements about God describe the human experiences of God, not God Himself. According to Schleiermacher, "All attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him."⁷⁸ This is not the personal God of the Bible who created mankind in His image and who loves each person individually. Instead, God is somewhat identifiable with the world:

The Absolute Causality to which the feeling of absolute dependence points back can only be described in such a way that, on the one hand, it is distinguished from the content of the natural order and thus contrasted with it, and, on the other hand, equated with it in comprehension.⁷⁹

Such statements about God have opened Schleiermacher to the charge of being a pantheist,⁸⁰ but it is probably better to describe Schleiermacher's conception of

⁷⁴ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 89.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁷ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 17.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 194. One senses Kant's distinction between the *phenomena* and the *noumena* in the background here.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 200; cf. 174. A similar statement about God comes from *On Religion*: "The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and to know life in the immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal.... Wherefore it is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God, and God in all. Yet religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being knowledge, it recognizes knowledge and science. In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God" (Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 36).

⁸⁰ E.g., Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (1937, repr., Edinburg, UK: 2009), 193.

God as *panentheistic*.⁸¹ God is "personal" in the sense that man's feeling of absolute dependence must have an object, but God is not personal in a human-like way. God cannot be treated like an object or separated from the world because that would limit God. According to Schleiermacher, ascribing different attributes to God would make God a composite instead of a unity and result in contradictions.⁸² Therefore, God is immanent in the world yet beyond all human descriptions.⁸³ Since God is immanent with the world, God is also the ultimate cause of all things, including redemption and sin.⁸⁴ Because God ordains all things, then God does not supernaturally intervene in the world to perform miracles or answer prayers.⁸⁵ A miracle is simply an event when viewed in a religious manner: "To me all is miracle.... The more religious you are, the more miracle would you see everywhere."⁸⁶ Therefore, Schleiermacher's God is radically different from the Triune God⁸⁷ of the Bible, who is the personal, knowable Creator and sustainer of the world and works miracles and answers prayers.

Christology

Schleiermacher's Christology also differs from the traditional statements about Jesus in the Bible and in the creeds of the church. In his view, Jesus is not the eternal Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. The Enlightenment had dispelled this myth. But neither was Jesus, the moral ideal of the rationalists. Instead, Jesus "is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him."⁸⁸ In other words, Jesus is the ideality (*Urbildlichkeit*)⁸⁹ of one who subordinated His personal consciousness to

⁸¹ Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 48; cf. John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 113.

⁸² Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 196-97.

⁸³ Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 48-49.

⁸⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 326. Schleiermacher even states that God ordains sin in order to make redemption necessary (*ibid.*, 335).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 178-80. Schleiermacher writes, "On the whole, therefore, as regards the miraculous, the general interests of science, more particularly of natural science, and the interests of religion seem to meet at the same point; *i.e.* that we should abandon the idea of the absolutely supernatural because no single instance of it can be known by us, and we are nowhere required to recognize it" (*ibid.*, 183).

⁸⁶ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 8.

⁸⁷ See note 63.

⁸⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 385.

⁸⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube: nach den Grundsätzen der evangelische Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, zweiter Band (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1861), §93.

the God-consciousness. Jesus is not divine, though. The New Testament descriptions of Jesus that describe His deity really "express [His] exalted humanity, so that it is easy to explain them as nothing but very permissible hyperbolic expressions."⁹⁰ Jesus was a sinner who had to grow in His God-consciousness like the rest of humanity,⁹¹ but once he attained the "absolute ideality in His inner being,"⁹² He never experienced any "break in the supremacy of the God-consciousness."⁹³ In this way, "Jesus would be Redeemer (*Erlöser*) and redeemed (*Erlöster*) in one person...."⁹⁴

The idea of redemption is central to Schleiermacher's Christology. He states that "everything is related to redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth"⁹⁵ and that "nothing concerning Him can be set up as real doctrine unless it is connected with His redeeming causality and can be traced to the original impression made by His existence."⁹⁶ Jesus is not only the ideal (*Urbild*) of God-consciousness but also the exemplar (*Vorbild*)⁹⁷ of God-consciousness. He is the Redeemer in that He can instill God-consciousness in others: "The Redeemer assumes believers into the power of His God-consciousness, and this is His redemptive activity."⁹⁸ Again, Schleiermacher states, "Christ awakens a wholly perfect regret just in so far as his self-imparting perfection meets us in all its truth, which is what happens at the dawn of faith."⁹⁹ Yet Jesus is not the only mediator between God and man. "All who attach themselves to Him and form His Church should also be mediators with Him and through Him."¹⁰⁰ Thus, Jesus is the ideal human who sparks God-consciousness in other humans, and the ministry of those who are God-conscious is to join Him in His work of redemption.

Soteriology

Salvation in Schleiermacher's theology is related to man's God-consciousness, not to man's sin, as is born out in Schleiermacher's definition of key soteriological terms. 1) The essence of sin for Schleiermacher is "God-forgetfulness" (*Gottvergessenheit*).¹⁰¹ This is a state of alienation from God in

⁹⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 424.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 379.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 334; cf. *idem Der christliche Glaube*, 2:35.

⁹⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 382.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁹⁷ Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, §93.

⁹⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 425.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 484.

¹⁰⁰ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 248.

¹⁰¹ Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, 77.

persons who are not living with a self-conscious feeling of absolute dependence: "We are conscious of sin as the power and work of a time when the disposition to the God-consciousness had not yet actively emerged in us."¹⁰² Sin, therefore, has nothing to do with the guilt of transgressing the law of a holy God. 2) The conscience is "an inward demand for harmony with the God-consciousness."¹⁰³ 3) The grace of God is the "interchange between the entrance of the world into man, through intuition and feeling, and the outgoing of man into the world, through action and culture.... so that the whole life of the pious simply forms a series of operations of divine grace."¹⁰⁴ Grace is experienced when the Redeemer moves us to a state of God-consciousness and helps us to live life in that state.¹⁰⁵ 4) Conversion is the combination of faith and repentance that marks "the beginning of the new life in fellowship with Christ."¹⁰⁶ 5) Repentance is "the combination of regret and change of heart."¹⁰⁷ 6) Faith is "the appropriation of the perfection and blessedness of Christ"¹⁰⁸ as well as "the certainty concerning the feeling of absolute dependence"¹⁰⁹ 7) Justification is "the consciousness of an alteration in the relation to God"¹¹⁰ and the "[a]ssumption into living fellowship with Christ."¹¹¹ 8) Regeneration and sanctification are terms describing "[t]he self-consciousness characterizing those assumed into living fellowship with Christ."¹¹² Thus, Schleiermacher reinterprets every component of soteriology to man's inner experience of God-consciousness.

Summary: The Gospel

What is the Gospel produced by Schleiermacher's theological method? There are five parts. 1) Man is living in a state of God-forgetfulness (sin) whereby he is neither self-conscious nor God-conscious. 2) Jesus, the Redeemer, imparts the feeling of absolute dependence to man (grace) whereby he experiences conversion, justification, regeneration, faith, and repentance in the sense that he goes from the state of God-forgetfulness to the state of God-consciousness. 3) The man continues to grow in his ability to live in the state of God-consciousness (sanctification), and he acts as a mediator of God-consciousness to others who are

¹⁰² Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 273.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁰⁴ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 90.

¹⁰⁵ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 262-ff.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 480.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 481.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 501.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 478.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 476.

in a state of God-forgetfulness. 4) Upon death, the man enters the blessed state of the resurrection, which is an unmediated, "most living God-consciousness."¹¹³ 5) All people will be saved in the end,¹¹⁴ for all religions are at bottom expressions of God-consciousness in varying degrees of accuracy.¹¹⁵

Evaluation

Positive Remarks

There is no doubt that Schleiermacher's reworking of Christianity in terms of the feeling of absolute dependence was rather ingenious considering the *Zeitgeist* of nineteenth-century Europe. In positioning himself "above Christianity,"¹¹⁶ Schleiermacher solved three different problems facing the church. First, Schleiermacher created a theology that could unite the Lutheran and Reformed churches into the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* by focusing on what was common to both denominations (and all religions) – the feeling of absolute dependence. Second, Schleiermacher offered a new Christianity that was impervious to biblical criticism. His new brand of Christianity was self-authenticating and was thus unaffected by modern science and Kantian ethics. Third, in opposition to the dry orthodoxy and sterile rationalism, Schleiermacher's religion "seemed the living utterance of a true man. To many a soul inclined to formalism or to rationalism it was a veritable voice of God, rousing from irreligious slumber and prompting to a spiritual life...."¹¹⁷ It is appropriate that Schleiermacher has been called "the father of modern theology," for his theological method has been influential upon liberal theologians to the present day.¹¹⁸

From an evangelical perspective, one can agree with Schleiermacher concerning the contingency of nature and the dependence of mankind upon God. Evangelicals believe in the Creator-creature distinction taught in Scripture as well as the biblical teaching that God sustains the world. Evangelicals can also appreciate Schleiermacher's emphasis on the importance of religious experience, though they would only seek experiences of God that match the teachings of the Bible. Schleiermacher should also be commended for his stress on the Christian

¹¹³ Ibid., 719.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 722.

¹¹⁵ See Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 49-54, 57, 70, 132-33, 211, 237, 247, 252.

¹¹⁶ Barth, *Protestant Thought*, 325.

¹¹⁷ Strong, *Miscellanies*, 3.

¹¹⁸ See Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 71-ff; Richard Crouter, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 248-70.

community and his belief in systematic theology.¹¹⁹ In the final balance, though, the criticisms about Schleiermacher's theological method greatly outweigh the positive remarks. Rather than critiquing Schleiermacher's specific theological beliefs, which flow from his theological method, three critical remarks will be leveled against the theological method itself.

Critical Remarks

Faulty Epistemology

The major problem with Schleiermacher's theological method is that it is based on a faulty, unwarranted religious epistemology. How does Schleiermacher arrive at his belief that religion is the feeling of absolute dependence upon God? He does not say. Instead, he must presuppose this religious feeling at the beginning, yet he cannot account for it except by the feeling itself, which amounts to circular reasoning. As Barth stated,

A presupposition that is in us but not in our *self*-consciousness could not be a given.... But with the help of the notorious theological "somehow" Schleiermacher preferred to make a further affirmation..., and so God-consciousness is presented as a given, as something in his consciousness that man knows....¹²⁰

Without a proper explanation of how one comes to know that the feeling of absolute dependence is veridical, Schleiermacher is left without an epistemological foundation. Without a proper theological method, his systematic theology comes tumbling down like a house of cards. To the outside observer, more convincing arguments and evidence are needed to accept the belief that God-consciousness is to be found within oneself.

Theology = Anthropology

The second critique of Schleiermacher's theological method comes from the atheistic philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) in his book *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach claimed that looking inside oneself for religion reduces "theology to anthropology."¹²¹ In other words,

¹¹⁹ Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume One*, 336.

¹²⁰ Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed., Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 199 (italics original).

¹²¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, second edition, trans. Marian Evans (1843, repr., New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1855), 9.

Schleiermacher's depiction of the feeling of absolute dependence is more of a commentary on his human imagination than a visceral experience of God-consciousness:

Feeling speaks only to feeling...thought speaks only to thought... The divine nature which is discerned by feeling, is in truth nothing else than feeling enraptured, in ecstasy with itself—feeling intoxicated with joy, blissful in its own plentitude.¹²²

Evangelicals will not agree with Feuerbach that *all* religion is "the dream of the human mind,"¹²³ but Feuerbach's criticism of religious feeling as a source of knowledge is legitimate in Schleiermacher's case. Hegel, a colleague of Schleiermacher at the University of Berlin, was also critical of Schleiermacher's emphasis on religious feeling. According to Hegel, focusing on religious feelings makes humanity no different from the animal kingdom, except that man is aware of his ignorance. "The dog also has feelings of redemption when its hunger is appeased by a bone."¹²⁴ The bottom line is that Schleiermacher turned Christianity from a God-centered religion into a man-centered religion. The end result is that "we end up worshipping ourselves."¹²⁵

Theological Relativism

The third problem with Schleiermacher's theological method is that it leads to theological relativism. For Schleiermacher, theology is merely a reflection upon the religious experience of the believing community.¹²⁶ But who decides which religious community is correct when mutually exclusive truth claims are made? For example, Hindus believe in millions of gods, Christians believe in one God, and Buddhists do not believe in any God. Which theological viewpoint is correct? According to Schleiermacher's theological method, each view is "true" in the sense that it reflects the experience of God-consciousness (even for the Buddhist!), but this theological method would lead to conflicting experiences of God-consciousness. Additionally, since theology is a reflection upon the believing community, and since the believing community is constantly changing, then theological truths are in a constant state of flux. This viewpoint may be convenient for theological liberals who want to adapt Christianity to the latest social mores, but the resulting theological relativism precludes the religious

¹²² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 28-29.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 186.

¹²⁵ McDermott, *The Great Theologians*, 145.

¹²⁶ Grenz & Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 46.

communities from criticizing or commending other religious communities and divergent theological beliefs (including evangelicals and radical Muslims).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theological method of Friedrich Schleiermacher is ingenious in that it addressed several problems of Schleiermacher's day, and it is important to study because it has influenced liberal theologians down to the present day, but it is inadequate because it focuses too narrowly upon human experience. As noted above, Schleiermacher's theological method of deriving all doctrine from the feeling of absolute dependence or God-consciousness relies on a faulty epistemology, it turns theology into anthropology, and it results in theological relativism. The Gospel that Schleiermacher's theological method produced is little more than man-centered mysticism. It is a *false* Gospel (Gal 1:9). What is needed instead is an objective standard of truth from outside of human nature—namely, God's revelation found in the Bible. In the words of evangelical theologian Carl Henry, "Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle; logical consistency is a negative test for truth and coherence a subordinate test."¹²⁷ Only the sure foundation of the Word of God can authenticate the true experience of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

¹²⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976-1983), 1:215.

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