

SCHLEIERMACHER

*AN UNDERSTANDING OF HIS HERMENEUTICS AND ITS EFFECT ON THE MODERN
EMERGING CHURCH*

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The theology and hermeneutics of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher are present in many of today's Protestant denominations. For this reason, he has often been called the "Father of Modern Protestant Theology." However, Schleiermacher's writings and methods of Biblical interpretation challenged the traditional Christian doctrines of his day. The purpose of this paper is to explain the hermeneutical methods used by Schleiermacher in his attempt to understand the deity of Christ and man's need for redemption. In addition, this paper will seek to answer the question: How did Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion affect the modern Protestant churches' understanding of redemption, specifically the Emerging Church movement?

Born in Germany, Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a product of both his Christian upbringing as well as the culture of his time. Schleiermacher came from a family filled with clergy on both his paternal and maternal sides.¹ While enlisted as a Reformed chaplain in the Prussian army, Schleiermacher's father frequently encountered the Moravian Brethren. The pietism of the Moravians influenced Schleiermacher's father and later would persuade him to send his son to be educated in the Moravian schools.² Schleiermacher attended the Moravian schools through seminary, which heavily influenced his religious beliefs and insights. For example, Schleiermacher found himself absorbed by the pietistic practices of contemplative prayer.³ As Schleiermacher

¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, Jack C. Verherdren, and S. MacLean Gilmour, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden, trans. S. MacLean Gilmour (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), xvi-xvii.

² *Ibid.*

³ Wendy Farley, "Schleiermacher, the 'Via Negative,' and the Gospel of Love," *Theology Today* 65, no. 2 (July 2008): 153.

matured, however, he began to question his Moravian brothers' understanding of religion. Soon, he found himself questioning everything he had learned.

Schleiermacher was not the only one changing at this time. The religious and cultural landscapes of Germany were changing, too. In the religious arena, a divide developed between conservative "orthodoxy" and those who despised religion.⁴ In the cultural arena, German Romanticism was blooming, and Schleiermacher yearned to be a part of the movement. He soon left the Moravians to attend the University of Halle, in order to study the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.⁵ Schleiermacher's new sense of individuality and philosophical freedom conflicted with his traditional pietistic education. These two diverse worldviews would inevitably affect Schleiermacher's theology and hermeneutics for the rest of his life.

The theological chasm between liberal and conservative Christians in Germany interested Schleiermacher. The closing of the Pietistic and Enlightenment periods and the emergence of German Romanticism accentuated this conflict, and Schleiermacher sought a reunion between the diverse branches of the Protestant church in Germany.⁶ He longed to integrate faith with modernity and believed that, in order to obtain a reunion of faiths, the entire theological enterprise necessitated restructuring⁷ with a focus on the analysis of consciousness.⁸ While studying at Halle, Schleiermacher commenced his restructuring by concluding that God is not an object, but is the essence

⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵ Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, xvi-xvii.

⁶ Andrew W. Hoffer, *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2007), 309.

⁷ David Ford, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 9.

⁸ Farley, "Schleiermacher", 146.

of all that is.⁹ This hypothesis became a revolutionary tenet of Schleiermacher's understanding of God and truth. In addition to challenging Schleiermacher's upbringing, this single principle would also affect his comprehension concerning God's relationship with man. The crux of Schleiermacher's philosophical argument would stand or fall with his one statement concerning the ability to know God. Every additional warrant, backing, and ultimately, Schleiermacher's theological conclusion, rested in his one dogmatic statement concerning the ability to know God. Since Schleiermacher believed that God is not an object, objective truth is unobtainable to man. Therefore, according to Schleiermacher's theory, the intimacy Christians sought between God and creation becomes the self-impartation of God and love.¹⁰ In other words, Schleiermacher's understanding of self-impartation is the new life found in the power of Jesus' "God-consciousness."¹¹ Schleiermacher emphatically rejected the traditional understanding of Christian theology. However, he did so by appending new philosophical terminology to the existing theological terminology. Schleiermacher not only brought a new vocabulary into his religious framework, he also altered the traditional definitions of the existing theological terms, which compounded the complexity of understanding his religious convictions. The complexities of Schleiermacher's variations are revealed in his understanding of the nature of redemption. A systematic excursion through Schleiermacher's Bibliology, Christology, and Soteriology will assist in explaining his framework.

⁹ Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 309.

¹⁰ Farley, "Schleiermacher, ", 146.

¹¹ Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, xxxvii.

All doctrines of Christian theology have a starting point in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Schleiermacher also started from this locale, yet he started with a very different presupposition than traditional theologians. According to Schleiermacher, since objective truth is unobtainable, “The Bible must be treated like all other books.”¹² He argued that to uncover the real, earthly history behind the text, the exegete must first remove the mystical and supernatural elements contained therein.¹³ This point is most interesting after discovering that Schleiermacher preferred and even prioritized the Gospel of John to all of the other Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. When Schleiermacher referred to “mystical and supernatural elements,” he pressed the exegete to eliminate all that is scientifically unexplainable. The result of this hermeneutic is a theology lacking the virgin birth, the miracles of Christ, and even the resurrection itself. For Schleiermacher, redemption became the work of an efficacious word and not of an event of the historical past.¹⁴

Schleiermacher’s Christology flows from a mix of his Bibliology with his Kantian philosophical education. Since Schleiermacher removes all mystical and supernatural elements from the Holy Scriptures, he believes that the Scriptures are not necessary in order for man to know Christ. Schleiermacher does not care about the events in Christ’s life, but instead understands that Christ is the ideal of mankind.¹⁵ Christ is like all men in virtue of his human nature, but differs from all men by the constant potency of his “God-

¹² Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg. *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 73.

¹³ Hoffecker, *Revolutions in Worldview*, 310.

¹⁴ Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 99.

¹⁵ Edwin Christian vanDriel, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

consciousness,” which exists perfectly and totally in him at all times.¹⁶ This God-consciousness is the recognition of absolute dependence upon God for all things. Schleiermacher believed that faith is the certainty of needing to be redeemed.¹⁷ Faith is the knowledge of total dependency on God. Schleiermacher does not find this knowledge of self-dependence in the miracles of the Bible. Christ’s self-awareness of his dependency upon God, or “God-consciousness,” also occurs throughout mankind; however, for Christ, this awareness was total and complete. When Schleiermacher writes of Christ’s deity, Schleiermacher is referring to the perfect “God-consciousness” and self-dependence Christ had in God. Since Schleiermacher removed the supernatural elements from his reading of the Bible and he believed that God was not an object, then Christ could not be God; Christ could only be dependent upon God and this dependency existed through Christ’s “God-consciousness.”

Since Schleiermacher did not believe that Christ was God incarnate, how did redemption fit into the theological framework of soteriology? In other words, how does Christ redeem the sinner? In order to comprehend Schleiermacher’s teaching, an understanding of his view on sin and redemption is necessary.

The Westminster Confession of Faith succinctly sums up the traditional Christian doctrine of man: “Our first parents ... sinned in eating the forbidden fruit ... By this sin ... they became dead in sin ... and the same death in sin and corrupted nature [was] conveyed to all their posterity” (VI, 1-3). Contrary to this traditional understanding of man and sin, Schleiermacher redefined original human perfection that allowed for the

¹⁶ K. W. Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (San Francisco, CA: Collins, 1987), 217.

¹⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 68-69.

presence of sin in the human race.¹⁸ Schleiermacher did not believe that Adam plunged the whole of mankind into sin. For Schleiermacher, sin was necessary for man's redemption, because sin necessitated the need for Christ; therefore, God authored and ordained sin.¹⁹ However, sin is not an essential part of our existence.²⁰ Sin is only the tool used to bring man to the understanding of self-dependence upon God. Man, therefore, can become like Christ, who was the ideal example of one who recognized his self-dependence upon God. God fashioned sin as a catalyst for humanity, so that man would be open to recognizing self-dependence upon God, or God-consciousness.

Schleiermacher also defines redemption differently than the theologians of traditional Christianity. For Schleiermacher, redemption is not about the forgiveness of sins, but about a transformation of character.²¹ The work of Christ becomes an enabling of individuals to participate in God-consciousness. Schleiermacher views this act of enabling not as an individual act of election, but as a single act of election with a bent towards universalism.²² Schleiermacher denies a relationship between God and a single person.²³ Instead, election was a single divine decree for all people. Naturally, Schleiermacher next visits the question of faith. If, according to Schleiermacher, election is a single, universal divine decree and sin is necessary for humans to become self-dependent upon God, what becomes of faith? Faith becomes the awareness of the divine and not of the divine itself; therefore, redemption is the bridging between the

¹⁸ Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion: A New Introduction* (New York: Scribner, 1964), 205.

¹⁹ vanDriel, *Incarnation Anyway*, 25, 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17, 25.

²¹ Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 63.

²² Paul D. Molnar, "Reviews: Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 4 (2009): 484.

²³ Matthias Gockel, "New Perspectives on an Old Debate: Friedrich Schleiermacher's Essay on Election," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 3 (2004): 317.

sinner and the awareness of self-dependence upon the divine. Schleiermacher calls the bridging experience “feeling.”²⁴

The means for this entire work of redemption is the incarnation of Christ. However, since Schleiermacher divorces all mystical and supernatural elements from the Holy Scriptures, one must wonder where and when the incarnation takes place. For Schleiermacher, it takes place during preaching. The work of Christ becomes equal to the work of ministry.²⁵ Redemption is associated with the work that Christ carries out when members of the congregation hear about His earthly experiences as depicted in the Bible.²⁶ Notice that the hearing must occur in the company of other members of the church. Schleiermacher was emphatic that redemption took place only in the company of others becoming self-dependent. He stated that “ ... if all believers disappeared and someone read the New Testament they would not understand.”²⁷ Schleiermacher believed reading the word would not be enough; experiencing the word became essential. In addition, this experience must take place in the company of others who are also experiencing the word. Interestingly, Schleiermacher believed that the experience of the preached word was an incarnational event; an event that was supernatural as well as natural, divine as well as human.²⁸ The mystical and supernatural elements removed from the Holy Scriptures find their way to the method of human understanding and feeling. As the word is experienced, the community of faithful grew in God-consciousness and shared their own God-consciousness with others in the group. In

²⁴ Harrisville, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 75.

²⁵ DeVries, *Jesus Christ*, 63.

²⁶ Catherine L. Kelsey, *Thinking about Christ with Schleiermacher* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁸ DeVries, *Jesus Christ*, 64.

addition, the community of faithful shared in Christ's complete God-consciousness. This community was important to Schleiermacher's soteriology, since it did not exist in private Bible study.²⁹ The faithful needed the preached word, as well as each other. This experience of community impregnated the understanding of dependence upon God into the believer, which kindled God-consciousness. In Catherine Kelsey's book *Thinking about Christ with Schleiermacher*, Kelsey attempted to explain this abstract understanding of redemption with the following illustration:

When preaching, we are focused on being open to what God is using us to show or say at that moment. After the fact, we realize that we said more than we know to say. Somehow, God did something better or bigger than our best efforts, yet God worked through our effort. It is not "God and me", but "God through me toward others."³⁰

Kelsey believes that this illustration sums up Schleiermacher's understanding of how God works to redeem believers. The minister reads the Bible, which discloses the experiences of people close to Christ. God works through the preacher so that the listener not only shares in the experience, but also becomes aware of dependence upon God. Although any person's experiences may be used by God to effect this change in the listeners, the experiences of Christ are preferred. According to Kelsey, Schleiermacher believed that Christ lived his entire life in a state of absolute dependence on God. Christ's life, therefore, is the ideal experience to be preached from the pulpit.

The name Schleiermacher may have faded away from many twenty-first century textbooks; nevertheless, no one can deny that his philosophical religious system left an

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁰ Kelsey, *Thinking about Christ with Schleiermacher*, 9.

impact. This influence is especially prevalent in the Emerging Church movement. Many similarities between Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion and that of the Emerging Church movement exist. For instance, the Emerging Church's foundational belief is that, although absolute truth exists, man is not able to gain access to it. This movement is entirely post-modern in character. Since man cannot gain absolute truth, the Emerging Church inevitably leads to pluralism and relativism. By pluralism, the Emerging Church denies that any religious system offers a complete explanation of the understanding of God.³¹ By relativism, the Emerging Church accepts that each individual holds a different understanding of beauty and morals. The combination of these two philosophies constructs a religious system that denounces the ability to know truth and accepts all possibilities of truth proposed by members of the Emerging Church. The movement is a philosophical contradiction at its fundamental being. The movement counteracts this foundational disagreement by emphasizing the union of faith and feeling, which closely resembles Schleiermacher's understanding of "God-consciousness". For example, within the Emerging Church, the sermon continues to be the focal point of the worship service; however, the listeners are encouraged to seek and understand the experience and feelings of people within the Scripture reading instead of what God meant. The discernment of experience has become one of the central doctrines of authentic faith.³² The Biblical "experiences" helps the listener solve his own life's problems by applying the Biblical truth to this moment in time for this particular person. Truth becomes an individual's interpretation of feeling and experience that leads to a multiplicity of valid

³¹ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 31.

³² Seattle Pacific University, "The Emergent Church and Neo-Correlation Theology after Tillich, Schleiermacher, and Browning," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 4 (2008): 454.

perspectives. The acceptance of subjective, individualized truth flies under the banner of tolerance. Ironically, the notion of a single, objective truth is the only truth within the Emerging Church considered unacceptable.³³

In regards to redemption, it is very difficult to understand exactly what the Emerging Church movement actually believes. For some, redemption and salvation may be in a glorious afterlife. For others, redemption and salvation are experienced in this life and focus on removing the shackles of social oppression. Although the Emerging Church appears to differ from Schleiermacher, who clearly concentrated redemption on the totality of acknowledging self-dependency on God, are the two truly different? Schleiermacher believed that “God-consciousness” manifests itself through an encountered experience occurring within the community of members. The Emerging Church may focus its salvation on removing oppressive forces, but the means to achieve salvation (i.e. redemption) is accomplished through experience. In addition, this experience focuses on the value of creating communities out of the local church bodies.³⁴

One additional area in which Schleiermacher’s philosophy is prevalent in the Emergent Church is on the focus of experiencing the life of Christ within the confines of a community. For the Emerging Church, the community experience displaces the need for church attendance. Rob Graham, founder of the Emerging Church community “Levi’s Table” writes, “Jesus was not a church planter. He created communities ... that reflected the kingdom of God in their entire way of life. Emerging Churches ... do not

³³ Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: Bathany House Publishers, 1996), 201.

³⁴ Seattle Pacific University, “The Emergent Church,” 451.

seek to start churches ... but to foster communities that embody the kingdom.”³⁵ The Emerging Church believes these communities are the key to the development of the movement because “Jesus’ community embodied the kingdom.”³⁶ The Holy Spirit continues the work of Jesus and motivates people to live like Jesus; thus, without the community experience, the Christian drifts away from the true knowledge of Christ.

Schleiermacher attempted to revive the church by agreeing with the higher critics of his time and seeking to unite the diverse branches of Protestantism throughout Germany. To the higher critics, he conceded the role of the authority of Scripture. The Bible became an authored “experience” available to the members of the church. Instead of a divine text, the Holy Scriptures became subjective and dynamic to each individual person. To the diverse branches of Protestantism, he redefined traditional Biblical terminology into a philosophical system of self-awareness in the necessity of God. Schleiermacher replaced the work of Christ on the cross with the work of the believer’s feelings. The outcome of such a system produces nothing more than social clubs where sinners share a common knowledge of their depravity and each person becomes his own god. The Emerging Church movement has picked up these foundational principles. Within the Emerging Church, community experience has become a means to salvation. The Word of God is no longer the revelation of God’s truth, but is an ideal example of community, kingdom living. According to the Emerging Church, “the most powerful demonstration of the reality of the gospel is a community embodying the way, the truth,

³⁵ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

and the life of Jesus.”³⁷ However, experience will neither break a heart of stone nor hang on a cross to remove sin. For this redemption, the Father graciously sent His Son, His only Son, whom He loved. We know this truth by way of His gracious, special revelation to us and this is the truth that Schleiermacher and the Emerging Church movement fail to understand.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

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