Friendship and the Cradle of Liberalism: Revisiting the Moravian Roots of Schleiermacher's Theology

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Certain observers of American Protestantism believe that the shadow of Friedrich Schleiermacher has penetrated American Christianity in surprisingly significant ways.[1] It is my conviction that particular emphases present within many communities of faith exhibit striking though transmuted continuities with the motivations and methods of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

The purpose of this article is threefold. First, I will explore Schleiermacher's discovery of a distinctive type of friendship and its relationship to his understanding of Christian faith and community. Next, I will examine the particular kind of apologetic theology Schleiermacher developed, giving special attention to its connection with his pursuit of friendship. Finally, I will suggest that certain trends within the church today may well owe more to Schleiermacher than is usually noticed.

Friend to the End

Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, tutor, philologist, translator, pastor, preacher, churchman, professor, theologian, husband, father, but perhaps most of all – friend, died in Berlin on February 12, 1834 at the age of 65. The great German city was seized with grief and a massive outpouring of sympathy ensued. Heinrich Steffens, Schleiermacher's close friend and sometime colleague of three decades had this to say following the events surrounding the passing of the father of modern theology:

> Never has a funeral similar to this taken place. It was not something arranged but a completely unconscious, natural outpouring of mourning love, an inner boundless feeling which gripped the entire

1 See eg, David F Wells *No Place For Truth: Or What Ever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1993) p 116, pp 125-6 and Wells' *God in the Wasteland: the Reality of God in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994) pp107-11; Os Guiness and John Seel edd *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody 1992)

> city and gathered about his grave; these were hours of inward unity such as have never been seen in a metropolis of modern times.[2]

No one familiar with the convictions and sensibilities of Schleiermacher could doubt the pleasure with which he would have greeted Steffen's words. The metaphysician whose zeal for unity was grounded in his conviction that only within community can individuality fulfil its own destiny would surely rejoice at the spontaneous drawing of individuals into an inward unity prompted by his death. The proselytizer whose life was invested in the quest not only to identify 'feeling' as the locus of human religion, but to see that feeling heightened to its maximum potential within every human breast, could hope for nothing greater than that his passing might result in a 'boundless feeling' gripping his former auditors.

What accounts for such loyalty and depth of feeling on the part of those who knew the preacher of Trinity Cathedral best? What explains the intense attachment felt by so many to this slight and frail, yet brilliant teacher? Surely the clue lies partly in that singular passion which animated the mind and motivated the heart of Schleiermacher from no later than the age of 15 until his death – a passion for friendship.

Schleiermacher's Moravian Encounter

Though he had long since rejected the pietism of his parents and had acquiesced in the sceptical attitudes of Enlightenment rationalism, Friedrich's father Gottlieb continued to serve as a Reformed chaplain. In this capacity, while ministering to Prussian troops quartered at Gnadenfrei in 1778, Gottlieb came into contact with a community of Moravian Brethren and was converted, at least inwardly, to a renewed embrace of Jesus Christ as the expiatory sacrifice for sins and to a life embracing that warm and deep communal piety which prevailed among the spiritual heirs of Nikolas von Zinzendorf.[3]

Friedrich Schleiermacher's own initiation into the community of the Brethren began on 5 April 1783 when his parents set out for Gnadenfrei in order to enrol their son of 15 in the Moravian school at Niesky. Schleiermacher essentially fell under the constant influence of the Moravian Brethren for just under four years; studying and worshipping first at Niesky, and finally, at Barby. It was 19 years after his acceptance at Niesky, when he was a Reformed pastor at Stolpe, that Schleiermacher

2 Martin Redeker trans John Wallhausser *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1973) p 213

3 Redeker pp 8-9. See also John R Weinlick *Count Zinzendorf: The Story of His Life and Leadership in the Renewed Moravian Church* (Bethlehem PA: The Moravian Church in America 1984)

wrote of these early days during a return visit to Gnadenfrei:

> Here it was that for the first time I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world ... 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 skepticism.[4]

By attempting to distinguish from among Schleiermacher's early experiences within the Moravian schools those happily retained from those intentionally discarded, the eventual direction of Schleiermacher's distinctive theological development is strikingly foreshadowed.

Schleiermacher's precocious mind soon chaffed so at the restrictions on reading material at Barby that he conspired with his comrades in the smuggling of forbidden books.[5] Writings such as Goethe's *Werther* introduced these clandestine 'independent thinkers' to the high spirits of humanism while other volumes of contraband opened Schleiermacher to the rationalism of the Enlightenment.[6] To what extent such promiscuous reading conspired with Schleiermacher's own intractable inner constitution to produce his radical doubt on an array of doctrinal commitments precious to the Moravians remains a mystery. Nevertheless, in January of 1787, Schleiermacher felt compelled to compose a letter to his father, the contents of which he rightly feared might render Gottlieb physically ill.

Among the several sad tidings borne by this letter was the admission that, after much study and inward striving, Schleiermacher could no longer believe in the deity of Jesus Christ or the vicarious nature of his atoning death.[7] This within a religious tradition which, notwithstanding its original preference for heart religion over dead-letter creedalism, also resisted the unbelieving rationalism it found within many established churches.[8]

Gottlieb's initial response to his son's confession fairly represents the limits of late eighteenth-century Moravian anti-creedalism. The Reformed chaplain disowned his son, accusing him of crucifying the Saviour afresh and with disturbing the grave of Friedrich's own recently departed mother. What the young Schleiermacher presented as rational objection and honesty, Gottlieb branded as prideful conceit. The heartsick father abandoned himself to prayer for his lapsed son since the only remedy lay in the hope that Friedrich might attain to faith, a gift only God could

4 *Letters* I p 283
5 *Letters* I p 44
6 Redeker pp 12-13
7 *Letters* I pp 46-9
8 On Schleiermacher's praise of Moravian resistance to doctrine in preference to feeling and community, see his *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox 1994) pp 151, 189

bestow.[9] Within two months either Gottlieb's resolve had weakened or his strategy had changed. He agreed to help finance Friedrich's forced departure from Barby and resumed frequent correspondence with his wayward child.[10]

Separating Pietist Wheat From Dogmatic Chaff

Schleiermacher recognized the impossibility of his remaining at Barby. Already, he had been forbidden by his supervisors to broach any of the doctrines about which he had doubts. However, while Schleiermacher abandoned forever all formal participation within the community of the Brethren, he clung tenaciously to enough of what he had tasted among them to claim 15 years later that he had 'again become a Moravian, only of a higher order'.[11]

Still, one dimension of Moravian community wilfully discarded by the future father of modern theology was precisely that expectation which precipitated his disciplining and finally his departure, namely, the call for doctrinal fidelity. Among those Christian communities which have embraced some measure of doctrinal latitudinarianism, surely the Moravians must be ranked as rather enthusiastic members. That Friedrich Schleiermacher found even this community too doctrinally narrow for his comfort is a fact within the history of theology whose significance it would be difficult to overstate.

Before he had read a single word authored by Immanuel Kant, before he had pondered one poem penned by Friedrich Schlegel, Schleiermacher knew what it was to question radically the foundational doctrines of orthodox Christianity. Schleiermacher drew back even from the relatively minimalist confessional commitments of the Brethren prior to any direct familiarity with the Kantian epistemological challenges. While his aversion to doctrinal zeal ought not to be understood apart from the clash between Enlightenment rationalism and emergent Romanticism, neither should it be reduced to such considerations. From his earliest confrontations with demands for confessional conformity, Schleiermacher felt that something vital to true religion was being undermined.[12] Speaking of his childhood Schleiermacher confessed: 'I had a peculiar thorn in the

9 *Letters* I pp 50-2
10 *Letters* I p 62
11 *Letters* I p 284
12 *Letters* I pp 4-5. Schleiermacher's eventual appropriation of the Enlightenment and Romantic forces which impinged upon his thinking seems quite complex. From the Enlightenment Schleiermacher accepted the epistemological suppression of transcendent referents and the quest for the construction of a comprehensive metaphysic. From the Romantics he embraced the identification of feeling as a necessary conduit of truth.

flesh. It consisted in a strange skepticism... I conceived the idea that all the ancient writers, and with them the whole of ancient history, were suppositious.' Schleiermacher took full responsibility for his sceptical posture toward doctrine and saw himself as an exception in this regard: '... in my case [this scepticism] bears the impress, and is the conscious product, of my own mental history'.[13]

So just what took hold of Schleiermacher among the Moravians which 'supported him and carried him through all the storms of skepticism[?]' And scepticism about what? Certainly not the trinitarian nature of God or the deity of Christ. These could be doubted without damage to true faith.

But not everything was equally dispensable. Brian Gerrish's insight is particularly helpful: 'what Schleiermacher in the long run was *not able to doubt* was the blessing he had actually received from the Savior, particularly in the Moravian community'.[14] To be even more precise, it was not exactly the blessing of the 'Savior' which Schleiermacher could not doubt, but rather the 'influence of the Savior' *as mediated through* the Moravian community.[15] Karl Barth is right to question any continuing need for Jesus Christ in Schleiermacher's theology. Once the power of Jesus' religious self-consciousness is passed on to the believing community through which the spread of that influence occurs, any concrete role for a resurrected, ascended, and living Saviour evaporates.[16]

Friendship at Niesky and Barby

Among the valued experiences he underwent among the Moravians, Schleiermacher singled out their rich worship and the enjoyment of intimate communal life for special praise. It is important to note that the value of this communion and worship for Schleiermacher did not correspond to that which its providers intended. More central to Moravian identity than their minimalist doctrinal convictions was the expectation that every believer should undergo and stand poised to confess a personal conversion experience with the crucified and risen Lord. Struggle and strive as he might, Schleiermacher could not achieve this essential goal of

13 *Letters* I p 7. By 1799 Schleiermacher would lament the widespread perception of Unitarianism as lying outside the parameters of the Christian family. *On Religion* p 197

14 B A Gerrish *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1984) p 36. Emphasis added.

15 See eg Schleiermacher *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1986) pp 476, 480-95, 532-6, 560-81

16 See eg Karl Barth *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982) pp 22, 51, 67-8, 76, and *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1961) 4.3.754-5, and his truly excellent chapter on Schleiermacher in *Protestant Thought From Rousseau to Ritschl* (New York: Harper & Brothers 1959) pp 306-54 esp p 313.

the United Brethren and he resisted the temptation to fain the mandatory experience.[17]

Mercifully, Schleiermacher was not alone in this failure. One Von Albertini shared with him both this identical longing and the falling short. During the abortive quest was born Schleiermacher's first taste of that peculiar friendship, that distinctive communion which would inspire and shape his ministerial and public life for the rest of his days. Schleiermacher writes that Von Albertini became 'the confidant of my heart and the companion of my intellect. Our joys and our sorrows had a common source, we thought, we felt, we studied in common...'[18] From this point on Schleiermacher deliberately sought friendship with extraordinary if not unmatched zeal.

The importance of the fact that his discovery of friendship occurred among United Brethren was not lost upon Schleiermacher. With 12 years distance from his life among the Moravians, Schleiermacher reflected thus: 'my recent mood ... a fit of true Christianity, such as sometimes comes over me ... is deeply seated in my nature, for it belongs to the consciousness that I am a plant which requires a peculiar soil'.[19] Not only could Schleiermacher not doubt the value of his experience among the Moravians, he could never shake the conviction that this communion flourished somehow organically within that particular Christian context, yet without being integrally dependent upon that community's doctrinal commitments. Of a piece with Schleiermacher's close relating of Christian communion with true friendship was his eventual insistence that 'the essence of the church is fellowship'.[20]

Friendship Outside the Congregation

Upon leaving Barby, Schleiermacher matriculated at Halle where he devoured the recently published works of the celebrated philosopher of Königsberg, Immanuel Kant. While there, young Friedrich must have found special comfort in the lectures of Johann Semler for whom 'a consensus on such dogmas as the Trinity and the person of Christ, was not now, and never had been, necessary for authentic "participation in the Christian religion"'. Furthermore, only a 'coarse atheistic presumption' would prompt a church 'to enforce conformity to its dogmatic formulas'.[21]

17 *Letters* I pp 7, 12
18 *Letters* I p 11
19 *Letters* I p 213
20 *Speeches* p 213
21 Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol 5, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1989) p 27

In July 1790 Schleiermacher completed his theological examinations in Berlin. In only one area did the future father of modern theology receive the relatively low mark of 'satisfactory' – dogmatics. Meanwhile, Gottlieb secured for his son a position as a live-in tutor for the children of Count Dohna at Schlobitten in distant East Prussia.

It was in Schlobitten that Martin Redeker claims Schleiermacher became 'a virtuoso in friendship'.[22] By September of 1802, Elenore Grunow, the object of Schleiermacher's unrequited love, could second Redeker's opinion. In a letter to Elenore, Friedrich wrote: 'You have declared me to be a virtuoso in friendship, and you may be right, for I do believe that I am this by the grace of God.'[23] Schleiermacher recalled his Schlobitten period as a watershed of discovery which became, in my estimation, determinative for his later views:

> In a stranger's home my sense for the beauty of human fellowship was first awakened; I saw that it requires freedom to enable and give right expression to the delicate intimacies of human nature, which remain forever obscure to the uninitiated...[24]

Schleiermacher pursued perfection in this ability to give 'right expression to the delicate intimacies of the human nature', prized it in others, and celebrated it wherever it occurred.

For himself, Schleiermacher did not hesitate to admit that 'it is in my nature not to have any independent existence ... all my activity is but the product of communion'.[25] Increasingly, Schleiermacher came to view communion, in which mutual self-expression is achieved and enjoyed, as essential to the fulfilment of human nature:

> ...every human being must, as a matter of course, live in a state of sociableness; he must have one or more persons to whom he can communicate his innermost thoughts and feelings, and the ways in which he is led. In a word, everything that is in him ought, if possible, to be communicated to another. Thus it is ordained in accordance with the divine dictum: 'It is not good for man that he should be alone.'[26]

22 Redeker *Schleiermacher* p 18
23 *Letters* I p 322
24 *Schleiermacher's Soliloquies: An English Translation of the Monologen* (Westport CT: Hyperion 1926) p 74
25 *Letters* I p 309
26 *Letters* I pp 200f

Friendship in the Salons

As Enlightenment rationalism found itself radically challenged from within in the person of Immanuel Kant, a new kid on the epistemological block began to assert itself. Romantics appealed to feeling and emotion and made use of music and poetry as essential conduits of truth. Middle class drawing rooms opened up as seed-beds for discussion of literary, political, and musical topics among the intellectually progressive. The prevailing sensibility within this burgeoning salon culture consigned both the arid logic of ostensibly omnicompetent reason and tired reliance upon religious dogma to the ash heap of bankrupt ideologies.[27]

Serious friendship thrives on hospitable soil. While perhaps not so perfectly fitted to arouse the communion-seeking heart as Moravian worship, the atmosphere of the late eighteenth-century salons proved sufficiently inviting to draw Friedrich Schleiermacher into its sphere. For decades Schleiermacher frequented these cushy enclaves, discovering that, while its members shared a characteristic distaste for religion, many of them were especially adept at friendship![28]

The distinctive character of the friendship Schleiermacher coveted is perhaps best captured in his identification of what the Romantic author and eventual Catholic apologist Friedrich Schlegel lacked. Despite Schleiermacher's desire to own his sometime room-mate as an intimate friend, Schlegel could reciprocate neither 'that tenderness of feeling and that delicate appreciation of the pleasing trifles of life', nor that 'refined expression of elevated sentiments, which often, in small matters, unconsciously reveal the whole character'.[29] For many years Schleiermacher shaped and was shaped by the salons as he pursued and often found that special communion and friendship which animated his desire.

Friendship With Women

Conspicuous among the persons who satisfied Schleiermacher's rigorous standards for friendship were certain women, notably, Henrietta Hertz, Elenore Grunow, Charlotte von Kathen, and his eventual bride, Henrietta

27 On Schleiermacher's relationship to Romanticism see Jack Forstman *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism* (Missoula MT: Scholars Press 1977)

28 Among the many figures Schleiermacher encountered within the salons were: Romantic author and eventual convert to Roman Catholicism, Friedrich Schlegel; daughter of philosopher Moses Mendelsohn and future bride of Schlegel, Dorothea Veit; composer, Johann Friedrich Reichardt; sculptor, Johann Gottfried Schadow; and Danish-Prussian statesman, Count Christian Bernstorff.

29 *Letters* I p 167

von Willich. By the Spring of 1799 Schleiermacher realized that, generally, those of the opposite sex displayed a special competence for the communion he sought: 'This tendency to attach myself more closely to women than to men, is deeply rooted in my nature; for there is so much in my soul that men seldom understand.'[30] That Schleiermacher's fascination with the female sex reached rather startling proportions seems evident in a letter of 1804 to Charlotte von Kathen:

> ...from whatever side I look at it, the nature of woman seems to me nobler than that of man, and their life more happy. Therefore, if I ever find myself sportively indulging in an impossible wish, it is that I were a woman.[31]

Rather than deprive himself of the full benefits of female friendship, Schleiermacher endured relentless gossip and rumour questioning the propriety of his opposite sex relationships. Henrietta Herz, a non-practising Jewish woman and wife of a prominent Berlin physician, hosted the salon of Schleiermacher's most enduring loyalty. During his various relocations outside Berlin, Schleiermacher and Henrietta maintained constant communication through correspondence. Schleiermacher also pursued a sustained and strikingly close relationship with the wife of his good friend Ehrenfried von Willich. Within two years of Ehrenfried's death from typhoid, Schleiermacher and Henrietta, two decades his junior, were married.

To Elenore Grunow, a married woman, Schleiermacher wrote on 27 November 1802:

> Among all the minds that have stimulated mine and contributed to its development, there is not one whose influence on my heart, and on the purer presentiment of my inner being, can be compared to yours.[32]

For five years Schleiermacher attempted to persuade Elenore that, morally, her unhappy marriage should be dissolved, devoid as it was of that mutual inter-communion which alone justifies marital bonds.[33] At length, Elenore left her husband and initiated divorce proceedings before finally returning to him for reasons of conscience. At that point she broke off all communication with Schleiermacher permanently.[34] Schleiermacher

30 *Letters* I p 198
31 *Letters* I p 382
32 *Letters* I p 337
33 *Letters* I p 142. After taking marital vows himself, Schleiermacher abandoned this earlier openness to divorce in exchange for a quite strict insistence upon the indissoluble nature of marriage.
34 Redeker *Schleiermacher* pp 69-72

sought solace for his wounded heart from that other married woman of his life, Henrietta Herz. Pleading with his soulmate of long-standing to show him why life was still worth living, he lamented: 'I have played the desperate game of placing everything on one card, to win or lose, and I have lost.'[35]

A Dogmatic Apologist

Special attention has been given to Schleiermacher's discovery and pursuit of friendship. I have done so because it seems that certain fundamental dimensions of Schleiermacher's mature theology are prefigured by his special appropriation of those early experiences among the Moravians and coalesce with his lifelong search for friendship in community.

Unquestionably the clash between late Enlightenment reasoning and emergent Romanticism provided the intellectual framework in which Schleiermacher's theology took shape. However, I would argue that certain determinative insights had already taken root in Schleiermacher's thinking before he conceived of constructing a theological system. These unshakeable opinions decisively influenced the eventual contours of Schleiermacher's later theology. Reductive comprehension of Schleiermacher largely in terms of the confrontation between Enlightenment rationalism and the challenge of Romanticism fails to perceive the original impulse of Protestant Liberalism.

At least two seminal convictions had already claimed Schleiermacher's attention by the time he left Barby in 1787. First was his unshakeable persuasion that the experience of communal friendship in the context of the Moravian congregation was of inestimable value. Second was his certainty that radical doubting of the doctrinal bases for fellowship with the United Brethren did not prevent enjoyment of the said experience. These two convictions largely determined Schleiermacher's use of other disciplines and his particular appropriation of the various options available within the confrontation between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Especially important was the apologetic character Schleiermacher's interests imposed upon his theological programme.

While the apologetic impulse in Schleiermacher's thinking is undeniable, it is noteworthy that a certain dogmatism also determined the nature of that apologetic. The dogmatic element was Schleiermacher's identification of the precise content of the religious self-consciousness, namely the feeling of being absolutely dependent. Nevertheless, once the universal presence of this God-consciousness was posited, an apologetic

35 *Letters* I p 368

quest to awaken this latent religious nature within humanity beckoned.

Intuiting the Universal God-Consciousness

Early nineteenth-century Berlin accommodated an impressive array of options for the educated classes. Whatever one's artistic tastes or intellectual proclivities, numerous alternatives ranging from hidebound, unhumbled Enlightenment rationalism to a fairly unbridled Romantic hedonism welcomed seekers of most any stripe. Nevertheless, as Rudolf Otto has noted:

> ...one human interest seemed to be laggard amid this universal stir and excitement and it was precisely the interest which for so long had been the first, indeed almost the only one: religion.[36]

Schleiermacher was intuitively convinced that he had come to grasp something constitutive for human nature through his communion with the United Brethren. He was equally certain that the religious context which gave rise to this watershed experience was integrally and inseparably determinative for that experience. Thus, for Schleiermacher, not only was abandonment or even some distancing from religion out of the question, but religion had to become the supreme concern of his life. This fact appears especially significant since the arena perhaps most inhospitable to religion was also one of Schleiermacher's favourite places to hang his hat – the salons.

Of course religion was threatened not least because of Kant's critique of knowledge in respect to metaphysical referents. But then, Schleiermacher became 'religious' not only without embracing the now epistemologically questionable doctrines of Christianity, but while positively doubting even the minimalist confessional standards of Moravian Pietists. Whatever internal conditions made Schleiermacher's 'conversion' possible, he had taken it with him first to Gnadenfrei and then to Niesky and Barby. Schleiermacher identified this 'something' as the universal God-consciousness.[37]

Schleiermacher's mature theological understanding construed his Moravian experience thus – the dynamic of religious conversion occurred when one's latent God-consciousness encountered the supreme stimulant to its emergence, namely, the influence of Jesus as mediated by the believing community.[38]

36 *Speeches* pp vii-viii
37 *Letters* I p 283; *Christian Faith* pp 12-18, 47, 55
38 *Christian Faith* pp 478-95

The church arose in similar fashion. Jesus, whose God-consciousness always dominated perfectly his entire self-consciousness was, not surprisingly, the supremely efficient 'evoker' of the universal God-consciousness in history. In fact, the recognition of Christianity as the most pure of the religions depends precisely upon this power of the Saviour. The unity of the original church involved its self-conscious mutual sharing of the influence of the Saviour.[39] Eventually Schleiermacher identified the content of the God-consciousness as the feeling of being absolutely dependent.

Without question, Schleiermacher's construal of his formative religious experiences involved an attempt to inoculate the theological enterprise from a Kantian critique even as it sought to establish an apologetic basis for dialogue within the culture of the salons. Yet, Schleiermacher's theological enterprise ought not to be viewed merely as an adjustment to prevailing intellectual and cultural pressures. Schleiermacher was convinced that his elaboration of Christian faith and particularly conversion accurately mapped his own religious pilgrimage while simultaneously explicating the faith of the great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1).

The inner process by which a Christian community arises parallels that dynamic which created both Schleiermacher's camaraderie at Niesky and his sense of communion within the salons. It was the dynamic of friendship. Schleiermacher's ideal of friendship involves at least four steps. First, one individual is able to express the innermost feeling or sentiment of his heart to another.[40] Second, the other understands this self-expression together with something of its universal validity and so brings at least empathy and at best sympathy to the reception of it.[41] Third, the hearer then articulates reception of the original self-expression in such a manner that the initiating partner recognizes that understanding has indeed been achieved.

Finally, this exchange results in a mutual heightening of self-understanding as each individual finds unity with another and so fulfils individuality.[42]

39 Though, as long as Jesus remained personally present, the church remained unconstituted. Only as the disciples were drawn together and bound by the Holy Spirit (ie the influence of Jesus which constitutes the common spirit of the congregation) did the church take definitive shape. *Christian Faith* pp 532-6

40 Such sentiments always express the whole of one's self, not merely a separable slice of the self. *Letters* I p 200-1

41 *Letters* I p 167

42 *Christian Faith* pp 46-7, 476-95; cf *Soliloquies* pp 30-4, 38-41

Schleiermacher identifies this event as true human communion. Christian communion occurs when, upon encountering the influence of Jesus, the feeling of absolute dependence achieves a relative heightening within the self-consciousness and thus the essentially religious nature of humanity is discovered, embraced, and eventually shared.

At this point, the basis and goal of Schleiermacher's apologetic theology follows as a matter of course. In his 1799 *Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher attempts to prove that religion is a constitutive dimension of human nature.[43] The neutral epistemological platform on the basis of which he appeals is not divine revelation but rather, the facts of experience. Schleiermacher counts upon the power of expression of the religious self-consciousness to evoke, to stir up the latent religious self-consciousness of the cultured despisers of religion, or more particularly, his friends within the salons. Apart from and, if necessary, in spite of adherence to the dogmas of revelation, Schleiermacher expected that auditors might 'find themselves' as religious creatures in the feeling of being absolutely dependent.

The Goal of Preaching

As a window into the implications of Schleiermacher's understanding of conversion and religion it might prove illuminative to consider his understanding of Christian proclamation within the church?

Karl Barth's contrasting of his own understanding of the nature and goal of preaching with that of Schleiermacher is highly instructive.[44] For Barth, the preacher stands between the congregation and the Word of God, having accepted the obligation to speak the Word of God upon entering the pulpit.

Actual fulfilment of this duty always involves a new miracle in which God speaks in the words of the preacher. For Barth, appropriate sermon preparation entails three activities. First, the preacher opens the Bible to study the record of the revelatory activity of God. Second, the minister opens the windows of historical exegesis as aids to the interpretation of particular texts. Third, the preacher opens the skylight, praying for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, both for his own understanding and that of the congregation.[45]

For Schleiermacher, the preacher is, first and foremost, one member of

43 *Speeches* pp 71-8

44 For what follows see Karl Barth *Homiletics* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox 1991) pp 20-5. *Christian Faith* pp 77, 85-7

45 Karl Barth *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1963) pp 156-70

the congregation among others whose bond with others is constituted by the mutual sharing of the influence of Jesus.[46] Proclamation occurs as the preacher steps out from the congregation, albeit briefly and even somewhat uncomfortably, in order to speak back to the community the content of its common faith. One mark of faithful preaching is its power to evoke the 'Amen!' from the gathered community and thus its common possession of the influence of Jesus is thereby confirmed and so heightened.

Undoubtedly, Barth's conception may be open to the danger of captivation to the idiosyncratic biases and blind spots of the preacher, but the opening of the 'windows' should serve a corrective function at this point. Schleiermacher, according to Barth, displaces the legitimate interpretive Christian norm, the Word of God, and acknowledges what Barth considers to be an alien norm, in this case either the universal God-consciousness or, within the community of believers, the Christian self-consciousness. In either case, the apologetic tail wags the dogmatic dog.

Putting Doctrine in its Place

Schleiermacher partook of the community-creating experience of the United Brethren without sharing Moravian doctrinal convictions. Thus, nothing belonging integrally to Schleiermacher's formative initiation into the Christian community biased him against Kant's exclusion of metaphysical referents from the knowable realm. Convinced that the experience he enjoyed at Niesky and Barby held the clue both to the highest fulfilment of human nature and to the secret of universal truth, Schleiermacher also welcomed Kant's insistence that the mind was not competent to comprehend the whole of reality. However, since the precise nature of Schleiermacher's experience involved 'neither a Knowing nor a Doing, but a modification of feeling', he was bound to reject Kant's identification of the moral consciousness as the organ of human religion.[47]

Feeling, according to Schleiermacher, is the unifying element which comprehends the self-consciousness most fully and in an explicitly religious way. Doctrines then, odious to Kant in that they suggest epistemological capabilities beyond their reach, are not dismissed by Schleiermacher so much as they are dethroned and domesticated. No longer should dogmas judge of true faith. Instead, true faith will assess doctrines as attempts to give expression to the content of the Christian self-consciousness.[48]

46 Schleiermacher preached at least once virtually every Lord's Day for the last four decades of his life, including the Sunday immediately prior to his death.

47 *Christian Faith* pp 5-12; *Soliloquies* p 20 n 30-1

48 *Christian Faith* pp 76-93. See also Friedrich Schleiermacher *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (Richmond VA: John Knox 1966) pp 67-8, 78-9

Whenever doctrines stray beyond their descriptive function, they tend to obscure and even undermine true faith rather than confirm and nurture faith. Schleiermacher's fascinating dialogue *Christmas Eve* displays clearly his view of the danger posed to faith by an over-intellectualizing fixation upon doctrinal and historical concerns.

Significantly, this Advent dialogue is set in a middle-class German home quite similar to those which would have hosted Schleiermacher's beloved salons. As various guests arrive, the conversation gradually centres around the question of the virginal conception of Jesus Christ and the broader question of the incarnation itself. The evening is almost spoiled by the tense debating of the men who are bent upon an analytical search for some conclusive understanding of those ancient events surrounding the birth of the Christ child. At length, Ernestine, the hostess, and her young daughter Sophie, rescue the gathering through music. The evening ends with the entire cast singing Christmas hymns around the piano as Sophie plays and true Christian communion is achieved, not just without, but in spite of the thorny questions of doctrine left unresolved.[49]

Evangelical Liberal?

B A Gerrish contends that the apparently oxymoronic labelling of Schleiermacher as a liberal Evangelical is actually redundant.[50]

According to Gerrish, Schleiermacher belongs to the ranks of Evangelicals because it was his own distinctively Protestant consciousness which served as the basis of his theological inquiry. Still, Schleiermacher was a liberal because 'he did not consider himself tied to old expressions of [that consciousness]'.[51] Certain current trends among some self-identified American Evangelicals may indicate an unwitting drift toward proving Gerrish right.

The Psychologized Gospel

When one reflects upon the decidedly psychological focus of Schleiermacher's theological programme, the fascination of the church with the psychology of recovery and self-esteem becomes particularly interesting. Schleiermacher depended upon his ability to describe the actual events within the self-consciousness of his audience in order to win them to communion with the Saviour as mediated by the church. Similarly

49 Friedrich Schleiermacher *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation* (Richmond VA: John Knox 1967)

50 G P Fisher first described Schleiermacher's theology in this way in his *History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1897) p 512

51 Gerrish *Prince of the Church* p 32

today, many pulpits relatively devoid of serious engagement with scriptural texts overflow with elaborate descriptive construals of personal experience aimed at producing the exclamation 'Aha!, that sounds exactly like me'. Audiences act as competent judges while the message awaits their verdict.

From his earliest 'conversion' Schleiermacher could only receive dogmatic confessional demands as a distraction, even a barrier to his embryonic Christian experience. Accordingly, for Schleiermacher, doctrine, far from functioning as a legitimate test of genuine piety, had to prove its viability according to its descriptive power in relation to one's own faith. This meant that the doctrine of the Trinity, the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ, miracles, and virtually the whole of the Old Testament were either retained uncomfortably or denied altogether. Today, the fascination with the psychologist's power to describe experience seems to beg the question of truth in ways strikingly similar to Liberalism's original 'turn to the subject'.

The Thirst For Community

Unlike his spiritual heirs within Protestant Liberalism, Schleiermacher never succumbed to Enlightenment pressures toward autonomous individualism. While focusing great interest in the uniqueness of individuality, Schleiermacher refused to comprehend Christian conversion and spiritual growth apart from the community as the necessary context for their genuine fulfilment. Having set forth his own general understanding of communion as the very basis for Christian identity, doctrine was recognized only insofar as it proved supportive of that distinctive shared experience.

Today certain interpreters of the emergent post-modern culture are celebrating an apparent widespread longing for 'community', 'neighbourliness', and 'civility' as a special point of entry for Christian proclamation and outreach. Supposedly, the church is now in a position to offer its own rich tradition and practice of community as the answer to the current human search. Indeed, rich possibilities of communal intimacy are surely afforded within the body of Christ. However, such confidence does not warrant supposing that the church's own promise of divinely-wrought community will easily mesh with human searching without distortion.

Market-Driven Church Growth

If apologetic doctrinal malleability is an index to a post-Enlightenment loss of theological nerve, some late twentieth-century Evangelicals have more cause to blush than would Friedrich Schleiermacher. However much he may have fallen short of his aim, Schleiermacher did, after all, intend to

ground Christian dogmatics upon its own independent basis, namely, on reflection upon the Christian self-consciousness. It followed that the relative strength or weakness within the self-consciousness of the feeling of absolute dependence became the irreducible barometer of genuine Christian piety.

In this aspect of his programme Schleiermacher's theology was comparatively more dogmatic than say, Paul Tillich whose method of correlation assumed the burden of discerning current ultimate questions before searching out an answer from the Christian revelation. Schleiermacher has the answer ready to hand, namely, the heightening of the religious self-consciousness, the content of which is not open for revision, namely, the feeling of being absolutely dependent.

Today, church growth strategists often speak broadly of meeting felt needs as a means of access to the unbelieving ear with little consideration of the spiritually debilitating effects of sin or of the necessity for the work of the Holy Spirit to convict and draw those who are being saved. Such apologetic efforts would seem to embrace an open-ended and distinctly more robust 'turn to the subject' than did Schleiermacher. Where Schleiermacher insisted upon identifying the 'felt need' Christianity proposed to meet, one hears today of a sovereign audience which churches must satisfy first in order to prepare the way for receptivity to the gospel. One reads of Jesus Christ conceived as a product to be marketed. In a curious irony, it would seem that some Evangelicals may have unintentionally, even unconsciously beaten Schleiermacher at his own game.

The Intrusion of Alien Norms

It may well be that the same person who studied Schleiermacher with the greatest care and even love, rejected his work most aggressively and fundamentally. Of course I am thinking of Karl Barth. For Barth the fatal step for Schleiermacher and for that matter, for any theology worthy of the name Christian, is the temptation to acknowledge some alien norm external to the Christian revelation by which to gauge its viability. Instead, advises Barth:

> theology has first to renounce all apologetics or external guarantees of its position within the environment of other sciences, for it will always stand on the firmest ground when it simply acts according to the law of its own being.[52]

52 Karl Barth *Evangelical Theology* p 15

The crucial intersection between Schleiermacher's quest and so much that informs both theologizing and church leadership today may not involve so much a turning to the subject *per se*, but simply the act of turning itself. Once Christian reflection lets itself become distracted from the one object of its witness, namely God revealed in Jesus Christ, the intrusion of alien norms becomes inevitable. It matters not whether new tests of theological viability issue from current psychological fads, post-modern hankering for community or fascination with market techniques and managerial theory. Once Christian proclamation begins to take its epistemological cues from outside the *norma normans* of Holy Scripture as the witness to God's revelation, a lack of confidence in the possibility of theology itself is already exposed.

The result, too often, as Barth warned, is a Feuerbachian projection of human dreams, hopes, and fantasies into the metaphysical realm. When this occurs, anthropology replaces theology and, as Sidney Cave has put it so well, we 'make our poor experience the measure of what God is'. Unlike Schleiermacher, many today seem oblivious to the erosion of the church's distinctive message as it becomes unwittingly co-opted by psychological interpretations of the human predicament, market-focused readings of church growth dynamics, and the agendas of various political constituencies.[53] However compromising of historic Christian affirmations Schleiermacher's mature theology turned out to be, the father of modern theology pursued his course with his eyes open. Having tasted of something he believed to be universal and true in the rich religious milieu of Moravian piety, Schleiermacher plumbed the depths of that experience, became its champion and spent himself in the quest to discover and nurture this distinctive Christian self-consciousness in others.

Without denying the profundity and genuineness of Schleiermacher's experience among the Moravians, the practice of defending Christianity on the basis of its power to evoke and express the content of the human religious self-consciousness reverses the proper relation between dogmatics and apologetics. Schleiermacher's quest fits nicely with the search for a universally verifiable religion, but not with attempts to articulate a 'Christian' theology where doctrines not only express the faith of believers but also test the appropriateness of appending the adjective 'Christian' at all.

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53 See eg Michael Scott Horton ed *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church* (Chicago: Moody 1992); and Os Guiness and John Seel edd *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody 1992)