

SCHLEIERMACHER'S TEST FOR TRUTH: DIALOGUE IN THE CHURCH

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If we were to play a theological word-association game and I mentioned the name "Schleiermacher," most of the responses would probably be words such as "feeling," "subjectivity" and the like. Such responses would not be without merit. But I would like to suggest in this paper that they represent only a one-sided understanding of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Such words as "reason" or "dialectic," words that we usually associate with his great antagonist, G. W. F. Hegel,¹ are equally as germane to Schleiermacher's thought as the aforementioned ones. Thus part of what I want to show here is that his subjectivity, for which he is so famous, is actually tempered with a mechanism for achieving objectivity. This mechanism, for Schleiermacher, is represented by the Christian Church. I will conclude my observations on Schleiermacher with some possible means of applying his contribution to evangelical theology.

I. REVELATION AS FEELING

Let us begin by drawing some important conceptual distinctions. First we must distinguish between source for truth and test for truth. The source for truth is where one learns a certain piece of information. This could be anything: a book, a spoken word, a feeling. Some sources are more reliable than others. Then sources can be tested. In order to test the information given to us by a certain source we need criteria. Unless we are overwhelmed by the authority of the source, these criteria are external to the source itself. One example ought to clarify this distinction. I may be told on a television commercial that a certain brand of toothpaste is best. This is my source of truth. But my test for truth will not be the message itself—unless I am remarkably credulous. Rather, the test for truth will be in this case the pragmatic application of the product to my teeth to see whether it functions as well as the advertisement claimed.

The application of this distinction to theology is not simple. The ultimate source of truth for the theologian is revelation, which in fact is authoritative. But dogmatic theology is not merely the repetition of the revealed material. Instead the theologian collates and synthesizes the information received from revelation and expresses it in the terms dictated to him by his own culture. And it is at this point that a test for truth becomes necessary. Theologians disagree. But it is the

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¹Elsewhere I have shown that, on balance, Hegel's thought also contains a good amount of subjectivity; cf. W. Corduan, "Hegelian Themes in Contemporary Theology," *JETS* 22/1.

theologian's appropriation of truth, not the source of truth, that is subject to the testing criteria. One such criterion would obviously be conformity to revelation, but theologians use many other criteria as well—such as consistency, livability, or intelligibility—in evaluating the formulation of a certain doctrine.

Thus a theologian will possess a source of truth and a scheme for testing the truth of theological assertions. This is also the case with Schleiermacher, and especially in his case must this distinction be observed. His source of truth is not identical with his test for truth.

Every beginning student of modern theology knows that for Schleiermacher religion consists of the feeling of absolute dependence. It is not a feeling of dependence on God, but a general feeling of dependence from which we learn that there is a God. The feeling comes first. Schleiermacher states:

The sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one; to feel that aught single and particular is only possible by means of this unity; to feel that our being and living is a being and living in and through God.²

The important point to see here is that the information expressed in this religious sentiment is based on the feeling of man. Thus feeling is the source of truth, the ultimate revelation, for Schleiermacher.

I shall not here repeat any of the well-known criticisms of Schleiermacher on this point. Let us stipulate that it is inadequate. God has spoken, not merely through some vague feelings, but directly and propositionally, through his inspired and inerrant Word.

But for Schleiermacher his source for truth is not identical with his test for truth. Feeling is the source, but feeling is not the test. It is possible to adjudicate between differing theological positions because the existence of a feeling in itself does not validate a theological expression. Schleiermacher is frequently charged with a subjectivism bordering on solipsism. So Gordon Clark has asserted that

the romanticists of Hegel's day, Jacobi, Schelling, Schleiermacher, claimed that contact with reality is not made conceptually or intellectually, but intuitionally, mystically, immediately. Thus reality, God, or the Absolute would not be conceived, but merely felt; and the writings of such men turn out to be expressions, not of the real object, but of their own subjective feelings. For example, Schleiermacher . . . abandoned theology and substituted the psychology of religious experience. Instead of writing about God, he wrote about himself.³

I will now attempt to show why such judgments on Schleiermacher are rather inadequate.

II. DIALECTICAL CONVERSATION

Of the various thinkers surrounding Schleiermacher's own life and times, he himself would have to be counted among the least subjectively and individualistically oriented. Post-Kantian philosophy generally took one of two routes. Either it accepted the conclusions of the critical philosophy and adopted the transcen-

²F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper, 1958) 49-50.

³G. H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1957) 443.

dental starting point with its inherently subjective foundations—this is true even of the great system-builder, Hegel—or it denied the finality of Kant's conclusions and lost itself in the soaring flights of the romantic imagination with its attendant individualism. The latter approach is exemplified by the later thought of Schelling. But, in the words of Rudolf Odebrecht, "Schleiermacher counters the intoxication of the high flights into the absolute with socratic sobriety and irony."⁴ His philosophy is not built on individualistic speculation.

Schleiermacher simply does not accept an individualistic starting premise. For him man is always man-within-a-community. Judgments of truth are not made by an individual but by a community concerned with the particular item under consideration. Thus truth is not recognized by a single person but by the community when it reaches agreement. The *logos* of other philosophers is replaced with a *dialogos* in Schleiermacher.⁵

The communal method of testing truth is expounded by Schleiermacher in his *Dialektik*, one of his lesser known works but one that he himself esteemed highly enough to make it part of his regular teaching cycle.⁶ I will briefly summarize his introduction to this topic in which he outlines his approach.

The vehicle for achieving truth is conversation or dialogue in which several points of view must be represented. A conversation between two individuals where one merely disseminates information that the other merely assimilates does not qualify. On the other hand, an individual engaged in conversation with himself in which he alternately considers competing views on a subject may actually be carrying on the right kind of dialogue that leads to truth. The requisite element is the dialectical interchange of several opinions.⁷

This dialectic takes place within the realm of pure thought. Schleiermacher claims that all thought falls into one of three categories. First is commercial thought, a type of thinking that is practical and application-oriented. It seeks to further some aim or purpose. Second, we have artistic thinking, which attempts to arouse some form of pleasurable feeling. Neither one of these leads to truth. That honor is reserved for pure thinking, where the knowledge of truth is the only concern. Within a community of thinkers who are all interested in knowledge pure and simple, pure thinking is being performed. Truth is known when a thought is consistent with the thoughts of all other subjects within a community. This criterion implies continuity (that a thought is held over a period of time) and coherence (that it falls into the communal pattern).⁸

Not all thinking communities are necessarily engaged in dialogue. There may be a long time when a certain opinion is merely being handed down as received truth or conventional wisdom. Something must occur that causes the established

⁴F. Schleiermacher, *Dialektik* (ed. R. Odebrecht; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976) V.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. VI.

⁶*Ibid.*, as evidenced e.g. on p. XX.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

opinion to be placed in doubt. A differing opinion is introduced. A dispute arises. It becomes the job of the dialectic to resolve the dispute. When the dispute has been settled and agreement on a new form of thought has been reached, the dialectic ceases to operate. In the meantime, however, active dialogue has gone on. Differing opinions have clashed, but out of the clash new truth has been discovered.⁹

The dialectic is the quest for knowledge. It is based on the presupposition that on a particular topic we do not yet have certain knowledge, as evidenced by the lack of agreement. That is why the dialectic arises out of the interplay of opinions. It never consists merely of the explication of one opinion against another. All sides represented in the dispute are taken seriously.¹⁰

The same essential rules of the dialectic apply to all disputes. In this realm of pure thought there are not different rules for different disciplines—e.g. for philosophy and theology. But the actual dialogue of course is severely restricted to the members of a particular community. The perimeter of that community is described by the extent to which a common language is shared.¹¹

Schleiermacher makes a strong correlation between thinking and language. Language is the mode in which our thoughts are expressed. Thus a difference in languages also implies a difference in thought patterns. Then a priori two different language communities cannot be involved in the same dialogue since they could not follow each other's thoughts. But once a means of interpretation has been devised, dialogue can become all the more fruitful, for then the most divergent opinions are brought to bear upon each other.¹²

Now as already indicated, a dispute is settled when agreement has been reached within a community. This gives rise to a serious objection. After all, what we are after is the knowledge of truth, not merely a consensus. Simply because a group believes something is true with unanimity does not mean that it is true.

This objection assumes that in the previous dialogue all that has been going on was the interplay of unfounded opinions. If that were the case, truth could certainly not be known by consensus. But Schleiermacher makes a different assumption. He believes that dialogue concerns itself with the uncovering of being. Not only is language grounded in thought, but thought is grounded in being. Thus when we talk, we talk about being—or, to put it another way, our conversations make reference to what is or is not the case. They do not exist apart from being.

Schleiermacher supports this point by making a distinction between a difference of opinion and a dispute. People may hold differing opinions without either opinion being grounded in being—viz., neither opinion may be more true than the other. But when people dispute about a certain point, they assume that there is a reality concerning which they disagree. People do not argue about nothing; they

⁹Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹Ibid., p. 13.

¹²Ibid., pp. 14-16.

argue about something. But regardless of what that "something" might be, it is something. Thus a dispute presupposes some common being to which all disputants make reference. The successful conclusion of the dispute consists then of the common realization of the true nature of the being that was in dispute. Only then has the dialectic achieved its ultimate goal, not when some arbitrary consensus has been established.¹³

Thus we see here in Schleiermacher a realistic epistemology. The dialogue refers to an object that is presupposed by thought. Without an external object, thought cannot take place. And successful thought uncovers the object. We should not need further elaborate arguments to demonstrate how far Schleiermacher is removed from the subjective modes of philosophizing of his day.¹⁴

Now it should also be clear how unindividualistic his philosophy is. The starting point of the quest for knowledge is not an apodictic premise decided on by an individual philosopher (which will undoubtedly be questioned by another philosopher who is not convinced it is in fact apodictic),¹⁵ nor in the basic starting point of pure thought (since there is none), but in the living community, which is already engaged in commercial and artistic thinking and which wants to explore its theoretical foundations of thought.¹⁶

III. COMMON UNDERSTANDING

A similar point can be made on the basis of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, a topic on which he lectured frequently.¹⁷ For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is the art of understanding. As such it is the flip side of the dialogue of the dialectics. In order to converse, you need to understand what your partner is saying.¹⁸

Again, as there is only one kind of dialectic, there are no differing rules for hermeneutics. It does not matter whether the field is philosophy, literature or theology, the principles of human understanding are the same. Thus there is only one basic hermeneutics.¹⁹

If ever one wanted to build a subjectivist philosophy, the area of hermeneutics would constitute a perfect starting point. After all, what is more subjective and individual than understanding? One can take a purely psychological approach to hermeneutics on that basis. One's understanding and interpretation is determined by one's psychological interaction with the writer or speaker. This is in

¹³Ibid., pp. 19-20.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁷F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (ed. H. Kimmerle; Missoula: Scholars, 1977).

¹⁸Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 96.

fact the essence of Dilthey's view of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics.²⁰

But Schleiermacher is not as simplistic in his hermeneutics. To be sure, understanding is subjective and psychologically determined. But that is only one of two poles, both of which need to be considered. We must again remind ourselves of the fact that Schleiermacher does not usually consider individuals but communities. Individuals understand, but they do so as members of communities. And once again a community is circumscribed by the sharing of a common language. Thus the individual supplies his thoughts, but the community supplies the language in which he thinks, and understanding cannot take place without either.²¹

Furthermore, the original speaker or author is also the member of a community that he addressed. Many times the interpreter no longer is a member of that community. Then he must learn to place himself into that original communal position and appropriate it before he can relate it to his own.²²

Thus we see that for Schleiermacher hermeneutics is definitely a public event with private elements. As he put it: "The success of the art of interpretation depends on one's linguistic competence and on one's ability for knowing people."²³ Such a hermeneutic will never yield the kind of total understanding in which the reader gains one hundred per cent of the message the writer tried to convey. But neither is it arbitrary or so subjective that one can only talk to oneself.

IV. THE CHURCH AS DIALECTICAL COMMUNITY

We have seen that with respect to both dialectics and hermeneutics Schleiermacher makes the point that the basic rules apply without exception to all fields of knowledge. Theology also is part of the same schema. Here the basic unit of dialogue is the community of faith, the Church. But the Church develops conceptually along the same lines as any other community—only, of course, its source of information is different. Schleiermacher states:

For what can be said on these subjects by human reason in itself cannot have any closer relation to the Christian Church than it has to every other society of faith or of life.²⁴

Thus we must reckon with the fact that whatever truth is going to be attained within the Church will also be reached as part of the communal dialectic.

Schleiermacher defines the term "church" in general by saying that "a

²⁰W. Dilthey, "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed. G. Misch; Stuttgart: Tübingen, 1924), 5. 327, 329, 333; as cited in Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics* 235.

²¹Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics* 98.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 113

²³*Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁴F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1928) 3.

Church is nothing but a communion or association relating to religion or piety."²⁵ This community is centered around its religious self-consciousness. The Christian Church is based on Christian self-consciousness, the feeling that Schleiermacher characterizes as absolute dependence. Theology consists of the explication of this self-consciousness. Theological truth is reached as a result of theological dialogue within the Church over the ages.

Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* represents one such explication. As such it is only one phase of the ongoing dialogue. It is his understanding of the implications of the Christian feeling. But if it is to be considered true on Schleiermacher's own premises, it is not because he happens to feel this way and you cannot argue with your feelings but only because the rest of the Church has come to the same conclusions.

And that brings up an obvious point. On Schleiermacher's premises his theology is not finally true. For both in his time and afterward many theologians have disagreed with Schleiermacher. No agreement has been reached. But of course Schleiermacher knew that. He did not expect his work to be accepted as the last word in Christian theology. Rather, *The Christian Faith* is to be taken as one step on the way toward reaching final truth.

In fact Schleiermacher did not expect the Church to ever reach final truth. That aim would be incompatible with the original source of truth. For our knowledge of God begins with a feeling, not a concept.²⁶ Thus complete conceptual correspondence will not be possible.

But that does not mean we are left with theological skepticism. Skepticism means that we cannot discern between truth and falsehood, that we have no objective standard. That, however, is not the case with Schleiermacher's theology, as we saw. Let us recall that dialogue is grounded in being. Theological dialogue is grounded in the objective being of God. Thus even though we have not attained final truth, we do have a final reference point. Then there can be no question of skepticism or relativism.

This point is brought out by Schleiermacher in his treatment of the distinction between the visible and invisible Church. The invisible Church is the ideal Church without sin or flaw. Here final truth might be known. But we are actually within the visible Church. This is a Church constituted by sinful and defective people. On this plane we will never attain perfection in knowledge or practice.²⁷

V. EVANGELICAL DIALECTIC

As we proceed toward an evangelical perspective on these thoughts of Schleiermacher, let us again steer away from the many criticisms we could level against his concept of revelation. For over one hundred and fifty years now, criticisms have been brought up against the idea of the feeling of absolute dependence, most of them valid. Instead let us make a positive assessment of what

²⁵Ibid., p. 5.

²⁶Ibid., p. 296.

²⁷Ibid., p. 677.

evangelical theology can glean from Schleiermacher's dialectic.

We have a different starting point from Schleiermacher in that we hold to propositional and conceptual revelation. We do not begin with a feeling but with an inspired Bible. Thus we have an inerrant revelation. But we do not have an inerrant theology. Even for evangelicals who share a commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture, it may still be true that we have as many systematic theologies as there are systematic theologians. Hence we ought not to rush into hasty criticisms of Schleiermacher to the effect that his theology is relative whereas evangelical theology is somehow absolute. There is no one evangelical theology, and no evangelical theologian has yet spoken the final word in theology (including the present writer).

But as evangelicals we do feel that we have some certain knowledge of some points of theology. Included in that list would be the doctrines of salvation by grace through faith, the deity of Christ, the omnipotence of God, and many more. Now it is highly suggestive for our appreciation of Schleiermacher that those points that we feel we do have certain and true knowledge of are exactly the ones for which we would claim agreement within our theological community.

Certainly we ought never to accept or reject a doctrine simply on the basis of consensus. If such a method had been followed, Luther could never have initiated the Protestant Reformation. But let us recall that the Reformation began with the posting of 95 theses—a call to public debate. And historically Luther's ideas crystallized only in the subsequent dialectical encounter with the theologians of his day. Dialogue within the Church ought to be one of the methods that a theologian uses in testing out his doctrinal insights.

The work of the theologian in the Church is ultimately one of teaching. But the gift of teaching is one of the gifts given for the entire body. The Christian theologian ought to work in unity with his brothers, not to distinguish himself by his originality and uniqueness.

This is not to downplay the need for the theologian to search for new and creative ways of expressing the truths of revelation. But such creativity must be bridled by dialogical interaction with the rest of the theological community. No premium is to be paid for individuality alone.

In practice this dialogue would take many forms. It would certainly include contemporary interchange with our peers. But it would also treat historical theologies as an important source for truth instead of a bleak past that is best ignored. Further, a commitment to dialogue would require us to search out the opinions of those with whom we are in strong disagreement, even on the very points that are in dispute. We do not learn anything by merely talking and listening to those whose views we already share.

Schleiermacher's views are complicated and technical. There is much in them that would lend itself to many long debates. But his insight that theology is ultimately the task of the Church as a whole, rather than of selected individuals, appears to be one worthy of unqualified acceptance and thus, on his premises, as true.



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