

Schleiermacher's Theology of Christmas

Colleagues,

For this week's posting Matt Becker of Valparaiso University reviews a newly published edition of Schleiermacher's 200-year-old classic on Christmas. For some of you this may be the first time you ever saw the name Schleiermacher. And even those who have seen it may still wonder how to pronounce it. ["Schlei" is English "shy" with an "l" in it. So "shly." "-macher" is "ma" (as in calling your mother) and then a guttural "ch" to make "khur." Schleiermacher literally = "veil-maker."] Theology students have to know about Schleiermacher—at least in my student days they had to—for reasons Matt spells out below. So even if this is the first time you've seen his name, let Matt get you acquainted. In some places Schleiermacher's path goes deep into the woods, but hang on to Matt's hand and you'll not get lost. He knows the territory. He knows where he's going—and where he wants us to arrive..

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

**Friedrich Schleiermacher. Christmas Eve Celebration: A Dialogue
Edited and Translated by Terrence N. Tice.
Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010 (Amazon price \$18.00)**

For those who were classically trained in the Missouri Synod (or almost classically trained; I graduated from Concordia Seminary,

St. Louis, in 1988) and who stayed awake during Dogmatics 101, 102, and 103, where the main textbook was either Franz Pieper's Christian dogmatics or J. T. Mueller's compendium, there was no one worse among the heterodox theologians than Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Pieper even had a label for him and his ilk: "Ich-theologe," which is probably best rendered as "self-centered theologian" or "theologian of the self." Pieper accused Schleiermacher and those influenced by him, such as the Lutheran Johannes von Hofmann (1810-1877), of substituting the subjective views of the "theologizing subject" for the sole "objective authority of Scripture."

In Pieper's view, as soon as one gives up the divinely-inspired and inerrant Bible and replaces it with something else, such as the theologian's own religious self-consciousness, then it will naturally follow that eventually the vicarious atonement of Christ will be replaced by something else as well. "Now, since Christ is always right, Schleiermacher, Hofmann, Frank, and all who employ their method, all who ask the 'Christian subject' to furnish independently of the Word of Christ full assurance or, at least half assurance, are in error. Their theological method is not Christian but unchristian" (Franz Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 3 vols. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-53], 1:115). Strong words, indeed. Of course another, much more famous theologian was just beginning to set forth his critique of Schleiermacher and the liberal theological tradition he inaugurated, when Pieper's words were written in the 1920s. [Ed. Insiders know this theologian was Karl Barth.]

While I had my doubts about Pieper's view of the Bible, the world, and theology already in seminary (who wouldn't, given that he doubted the verity of the Copernican Theory and thought that Einstein's theories of relativity would eventually vindicate a geo-centric biblical cosmology?!), I did not have sufficient time then to study Schleiermacher for myself. That

study came later, especially when I participated in the year-long dogmatics seminar at the University of Chicago that was taught by perhaps the leading Schleiermacher scholar of his generation, Dr. Brian Gerrish. This was one of the great intellectual experiences of my life.

While the ultimate goal of the seminar was to develop a contemporary summary of the Christian faith, the means by which we did this involved very close readings of Schleiermacher's 1821 "Glaubenslehre" ("The Christian Faith") and Calvin's 1559 "Institutes." (The syllabus recommended that we work with the original languages as much as possible.) As a result of these investigations I came to conclude that Pieper's view of the so-called "father of liberal Protestantism" was at least partly wrong. I also came to appreciate Schleiermacher's attempt to restate the content of the faith in the post-Kantian world that was nineteenth-century Prussia, even if I also was convinced I had to depart from his own conclusions at several key points.

If I had to recommend a place to begin the study of Schleiermacher, I would not direct a student to the famous second speech of the 1799 "Speeches on Religion," which is where many are first told to go. [Ed. The full title was "Speeches on Religion addressed to Religion's Cultured Despisers." Here he sought to show the intelligentsia of the burgeoning "Enlightenment" of his day that their disdain of religion brought with it a sacrifice of the "secular" intelligence they so highly prized.] Instead, I would send that person to the slim volume that I have been asked to review here, "Christmas Eve Celebration," which is just under 90 pages in length. As my teacher Dr. Gerrish told us, "This is quintessential Schleiermacher in both thought and style." It is the closest the Reformed theologian ever came to writing the novel that his friends had wanted him to write. (He was close to several in the "Sturm und Drang" movement and lived for a short

time with the creative writer, F. Schlegel.)

Terrance Tice, himself a long-time major scholar of Schleiermacher's life and work, has done a masterful job of bringing together both the 1806 and 1826 editions. His translation is generally good, and his notes are excellent. This is now the single best place to start one's reading of the famous Berliner (or refresh oneself, if it has been awhile since one has read the "Reden" or the "Glaubenslehre").

Written in the three weeks before Christmas 1805, when the bachelor theologian was apparently experiencing some intense feelings about the celebration of Christmas, he intended the work as a Christmas gift for his friends. Set in the form of a dialogue, the story centers on a Christmas celebration in a typical middle-class German home. Through the dialogue the author hoped to evoke a mood or feeling of Christmas joy in the reader. I have to say that the booklet does give one a sentimental view into a by-gone era, especially if one has romantic sympathies to begin with. (As I re-read the dialogue today I couldn't help but think back to the Christmases I've celebrated with my family in southwestern Germany. The book does capture a Christmas mood that one can still experience today, perhaps in a "Christkindlmarkt" [Ed. a street market in Germany associated with the celebration of Christmas during the four weeks of Advent. Literally: Christ-child-market.] or in the warm and inviting home of friends before a Valpo Christmas concert...)

After descriptions of the main activities on a typical German Christmas Eve, such as singing songs, opening gifts, the initial banter of friendly conversation, and sharing the latest family news, the focus shifts to a more serious set of issues. First there is a discussion about the nature of music itself. In keeping with the author's own love of music (this was the era of Beethoven), one of the gathered guests suggests that music is a

more basic means of expressing the essence of religion than the spoken word. This idea is considered for a short time until the very precocious young Sophie steals the scene and directs the reader toward childlike Christmas simplicity and spontaneity. This is the second movement, if you will, of a kind of musical dialectic that goes from elemental feeling ("Gefuehl") through childlike naivete and on to... "feminine nature."

Yes, that's right. All is leading toward the "feminine mystique," ala Schleiermacher's version of it. Here, in the middle portions of the dialogue, he slowly reveals that for him "the feminine" presents the clearest picture of what religion in general is all about and what Christianity in particular is all about. For him, romantic that he was, women had a distinct advantage over men because of their intuition, that is, their ability to intuit "the heart of the matter," to get beyond cold rationalizing and to stress warm emotion. Women, thus, are a perfect example of the nature of religion, which is a matter of feeling, mood, and intuition—and most definitely not a matter of knowledge, praxis, ethics, or outdated doctrines.

Apparently Schleiermacher once admitted that he would have rather been born a woman than a man. Make of that what you will, he was a sensitive fellow. Unlike Luther, who rather reluctantly married Katie (and only because nobody else would have her), Schleiermacher wanted to marry. Unfortunately, the woman he truly wanted to marry, the woman whom he loved, was already married to a Lutheran pastor, and unhappily so. (This woman seems to have served as the model for the hostess in the dialogue.) All of this was in the background when he set out to write his little Christmas gift. It is not too far afield to think that he was likely projecting his own lonely-hearted romantic longings into this fictional middle-class Christmas party.

When the male guests begin discussing critical questions about the sources for the historical Jesus, casting doubt on their reliability, and wondering about the real meaning of the historical Jesus for redemption, the party takes a turn for the worse. In fact, the men almost totally destroy the mood that had been created by the children and women. As the men are arguing and debating among themselves, a late-comer, Josef, flatly refuses to join them in their critical discussion. For him Christmas is taking part in "every little happening and amusement I have come across. I have laughed, and I have loved it all. It was one long affectionate kiss that I have given to the world, and now my enjoyment with you shall be the last impress on my lips, for you know that you are the dearest of all to me. Come, then, and above all bring the child, if she is not yet asleep, and let me see your glories, and let us be glad and sing something pious ['frommes'; Tice translates this as 'religious'] and joyful" (87). And this is how the Christmas party ends, at the piano, with hearts full of joy, and a pious sentimentality infusing the "Gemuetlichkeit."

For Schleiermacher the task of Christian theology is to reflect critically upon the kind of Christian piety that is displayed in the "Christmas Eve" dialogue. Indeed, the dialogue form is essential to the work. For just as in Plato's dialogues, which Schleiermacher had begun translating and editing the year before the "Christmas Eve", whatever truth is under discussion only emerges through the entire dialectic of the dialogue itself. In other words, no one person in the conversation or scene has a complete purchase on the truth; each contributes something to the larger whole. (Schleiermacher would eventually complete his edition of Plato's dialogues four years later. We tend to forget that for a generation he was the leading scholar of Plato's philosophy in Germany.)

In the case of the "Christmas Eve" dialogue, the essence of

Christmas emerges as a dialectical movement through nonverbal music, the naivete of the spontaneously free and uninhibited child, the intuition of the woman, the joy and love of the pietist AND the critical-historical analysis of the men. But the latter rational analysis is clearly subordinated within the larger contexts of the former elements.

David F. Strauss (1808-74), who at one time attacked Schleiermacher's Irenaean Christology for its mythical, non-historical foundations, once noted that the content of Schleiermacher's "Glaubenslehre" is just one dogma, namely, the person of Christ. If the Berliner's picture of Jesus, the Savior, made popular in the Moravian piety of his youth, was no longer viable after his university's studies, a new picture emerged for him in the wake of a kind of "second naivete" (to use the much later language of Ricoeur) that followed a second religious conversion. While the piety of his youth was never totally jettisoned, by the time of the "Speeches" he had become, as he told his Reformed chaplain father, "a Moravian of a higher order," that is, a Christian who sought to hold piety and critical-historical-philosophical understanding together in a single whole.

Strauss didn't think this was possible: either history or faith. Feuerbach would also level similar criticism: If theology is simply about analyzing pious self-consciousness, even a collective consciousness in the historic church, who is to say that the object of theology is not a projection based on one's needs, a fiction, a product of one's imagination, and not something that has any real basis in historical facts?

One of the guests, Leonard, speaks for all skeptics. A pleasant-enough fellow, he nonetheless notes how miraculous it is that so many people believe things about Jesus that serious historical scholarship has concluded are unlikely or even absurd. The

gospels contradict each other and contain the most outlandish stories, and yet believers go on believing despite the contradictions and the fantastic claims.

In response to Leonard's historical skepticism, two other male guests ignore his historicism and point in another direction: what must be the actual source of the Christian piety that is celebrated at Christmas? The only source for that must be the actual person of the Redeemer himself. So who must Jesus the Christ be if he is to have this effect? First, he must have the quality of being an "ideal type" ("Urbildlichkeit"), that is, he must be more than a mere moral example to follow but a truly perfect human being (Irenaeus's "Second Adam," following Romans 5) who also has a perfect sense of God, a perfect God-consciousness, which Schleiermacher further defines as "a veritable being of God in him" (which is his rather weak way of asserting Christ's divinity).

Second, the Redeemer must also have the quality of being able to evoke this ideal in others ("Vorbildlichkeit"), that is, he must be able to communicate his perfect God-consciousness to others. Christ works on his followers in such a manner that they are drawn into the circle of his sinless perfection. This faith is transmitted down through time under the power of his personal influence in his historical community, the church. This sinless perfection of Jesus, his absolutely potent God-consciousness, radiates from his historic life and creates and sustains the new community he founded.

"Is Schleiermacher right? Is it the case that if Christians look into themselves, what they find is an influence of Jesus that is at once similar to the experience they have of strong personalities and yet unique in coming from a sense of God to which they know no parallel? Is this, further, a sufficient point of departure for a theological estimate of Christ's

person? And how well has Schleiermacher answered...the intellectual difficulties posed for Christology by the Age of Reason? The questions remain" (Brian Gerrish, *A Prince of the Church* [Fortress, 1984], 50).

Perhaps both Feuerbach and Pieper (now there's a combination!) were partly right about Schleiermacher. His theology is open to the charge of creative invention and a lack of sufficient attention to historical details. The Christ of his piety seems so removed from the apostolic Christ, whose witness isn't quite "history" but neither is it "fiction." Whether we like it or not, the gospel witness is a historical "mixed bag," but that's ok, since that's all we have. What counts, finally, is the historic import and impact of those deeds and words that were seen and heard and interpreted by the apostolic witnesses and passed on through their proclamation, liturgies, sacramental acts, and lives.

Despite the greatness, yes, even the genius, of Schleiermacher, despite the historic importance of the liberal evangelical tradition he began, and despite the fact that every future Christian theologian will continue to have to wrestle with him and his life's work, his Christology and Soteriology come up short when measured against the prophetic and apostolic witnesses to Jesus. To interpret Christ's work in terms of the communication of his perfect God-consciousness is to minimize the historical particularities included within that apostolic witness to the redemption accomplished through Christ. In contrast to Schleiermacher's Jesus, who is a kind of romantic, religious virtuoso, the prophets and apostles witness to a Christ who is lowly, non-docetic, undignified, one whom God made to be sin for us (Second Cor. 5:21), one who truly dies God-damned on the cross, one who screams out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Without these elements, Christmas just doesn't mean that much.

Schleiermacher's "Christmas Eve" is a great sentimental gift for Christmas, maybe better even than Dickens' ghost story. It is also its own kind of witness to a most important era in Christian theology. One can learn a great deal from Schleiermacher and wrestling with him.

But as a witness to the Christ of Christmas this "Celebration" is too purified, too clean, too refined, too neat and tidy, finally, too rosy. The messy, crying baby in the smelly straw, the one who spits up his mother's milk, who vomits his food, who fouls his drawers, who lovingly aches, suffers, b leeds, and eventually saves us from our sins by dying on the cross—that's all missing. If you want that kind of Christmas story, better to turn to one by my friend and colleague, Walter Wangerin Jr.

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