

Foreword to Ian Wishart's
Schleiermacher's Interpretation of the
Bible

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When the following monograph first appeared, as a thesis successfully defended at the Toronto School of Theology in 1968, very little work had been done on Schleiermacher's sermons. Ian Wishart produced one of the most careful studies of Schleiermacher's preaching ever to have appeared in English. The work has been inaccessible until now, available only at the University of Toronto, where it was shelved alongside other successfully defended theses. It is our pleasure to publish it in revised form in *Analecta Hermeneutica*, and, through the revolution of open access, offer it to the world. Since the thesis was written, Barth's commentary on Schleiermacher's sermons has been published.¹ But there is little repetition here. Wishart's approach to Schleiermacher's sermons could not be more different than Barth's. Barth has little time for hermeneutics, and even less time for transcendental psychology; Wishart, recognizing Schleiermacher's decisive contributions to both these fields, reads Schleiermacher's sermons as complementary, indeed essential, to his hermeneutics and psychology.

Schleiermacher is rightfully recognized as the father of modern theology. His influence is everywhere in the twentieth century, not only in theology but in philosophy, in religious studies, and in classics. Karl Barth's theology, and thus the course of Protestant theology in the twentieth century, can be traced back to Schleiermacher. Barth's influential objections to apologetics, to Romanticism, and to theological foundationalism originate, in one way or another, in his critical engagement with Schleiermacher. Barth is always qualified in his critique of Schleiermacher, and it is not hard to discern his debt to him. Barth's signature doctrine of the sovereignty of God is in some ways a reverse expression of Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence." The intra-ecclesial nature of theological insight, another standard Barthian theme, is also rooted in Schleiermacher. In *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Barth cautiously praises Schleiermacher for keeping theology in the Church: "He too safeguarded the specifically theological quality of theology."² At the same time,

¹ Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982), 3-134.

² Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1972), 431.

Barth's *Christian Dogmatics* is founded upon a rejection of the early Schleiermacher's strategy of defending Christianity before its critics. Schleiermacher understands theology as the work of the Church, but he also understands the Church as fitting comfortably alongside secular institutions, with theology assuming its place among the other faculties of the secular university. Theology, as Schleiermacher conceives it, no longer threatens or confronts the secular world, and vice versa. It was this secular irenicism of Schleiermacher's that spurred Barth to rethink the modern theological enterprise as one of dialectical confrontation rather than accommodation. Schleiermacher, in Barth's reading of him, loses the dialectic edge of Christianity and dissolves the revelation of the "strange new world" of God³ into the familiar old world of fallen human beings.

At the heart of Schleiermacher's theology, Barth sees a tension between two apparently irreconcilable commitments: on the one hand, Schleiermacher's transcendental idealist, universalist anthropology of the human being as by its very nature religious, and so everywhere affected by the divine, and on the other hand, his equally strong commitment to the historically contingent, irreducible revelation of the redemptive incarnation of the Christ.⁴ Ian Wishart discerns a similar tension in Schleiermacher, but rather than seeing it, as Barth does, as detrimental for Schleiermacher's theology, Wishart reads the tension as the source of Schleiermacher's creativity. Schleiermacher assumes that all people stand in the light of the divine, even if their prejudices and cultural assumptions make it difficult for them to explicitly recognize it. For Wishart, the hermeneutical Schleiermacher, the psychological Schleiermacher, the Schleiermacher who translates Plato and recognizes an experience of God in other religions as well as in the apparently irreligious ("the culture despisers" for whom he wrote his first book),⁵ all seamlessly converge in Schleiermacher the theologian, who preached most Sundays of his adult life. For all the preacher's syncretistic leanings, Wishart points out how Schleiermacher remains committed to the singularity of the redemptive act of God in Christ. And even if the subject matter of Christian theology is, according to the mature Schleiermacher, self-reflection on the consciousness of the incarnation event, an event it remains—a happening in history. "The basis of all revelation is an original fact, and it is only the original working of that fact which is confined to the self-consciousness."⁶

Most readers of this journal will know of Schleiermacher as the first to define hermeneutics as much more than a technique for reading theological or legal texts. Hermeneutics through Schleiermacher became a general philosophical theory of understanding. Heidegger and Gadamer both devoted considerable

³ From a lecture given by Barth in 1917, quoted in Ebehard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1976), 101.

⁴ Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 105.

⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶ Ian S. Wishart, *Schleiermacher's Interpretation of the Bible: The Doctrine and Use of the Scriptures in the Light of Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical Principles*, published open access in volume 11 of *Analecta Hermeneutica* (2019), p. 31.

attention to the reading of Schleiermacher, the one who had discovered the universal significance of the hermeneutical circle. If we can only understand the whole through its parts, and the parts through the whole, and if the understanding of anything whatsoever (the discourse of the other, the reading of a text, or even the explanation of a natural phenomenon) proceeds in this way, then understanding cannot be a linear application of rules or the deploying of a method; it can only be an endless circling back onto presuppositions, revising them on the basis of discoveries and setbacks, and advancing them further through an *ad hoc* process of intuitive leaps. We understand as we can given our time and place; therefore, no understanding can claim finality. This now-familiar claim of philosophical hermeneutics originates with Schleiermacher's reading of the New Testament. Schleiermacher worked out the theory in the context of reading the scriptures as historical documents written by human beings remote from us in time and place, a reading that required contextualization and re-construction of the author's intention. But his breakthrough was the recognition that hermeneutical reasoning determines all forms of human understanding. To understand is to interpret, and to interpret is to translate, or, in Gadamer's terms, to fuse horizons.⁷ Regardless of whether or not we take the goal of interpretation to be the understanding of the perspective of the other, as Schleiermacher does, or the understanding of the thing meant, as Heidegger does, to interpret is always to understand what a text means and can mean for us today.⁸

Ian Wishart shows us a Schleiermacher who works out his hermeneutical theory in practice, by joyfully embracing his duty as a pastor and preaching the Gospel every Sunday, with the aim of helping his parishioners understand what is perennially true about it, if only by better recognizing what is historically contingent in it. Wishart's book is accomplished, erudite, and full of insight. We are delighted to help it find its readership.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. Second Revised Edition. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995), 306-7.

⁸ See Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenological Interpretations in Connection with Aristotle. An Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation," trans. John van Buren. In *Supplements. From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. John van Buren, 111-45 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), at 112.