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*ouis H. Beto Memorial Lecture*

# Schleiermacher As Prophet: A Reckoning With His Christian View Of History

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COVENANTS ARE MADE in the wilderness. They come to fruition in new commonwealths and cities. But the "seed of Abraham" are a forgetful people. When they have become dwellers in a place, it has always been necessary for particular men to call them to recollect their creation as a people by God in wilderness. Accordingly, a prophet has typically been one who comes into the city from the wasteland to deliver his oracle: God does not dwell in places, even in holy places. God moves like a pillar of fire, like a Lord of armies, like an unnameable Being "above the circle of the earth," bringing its princes to nothing. Whoever would call this being Adonai cannot settle in his house or garden. He may only camp there a day or a generation, always ready for another journey.

If this image of covenantal religion as a movement forever seeking possession of new towns and nations suggests a likeness between Christianity and the great migrations that have for thousands of years affected the civilizations of Asia and Europe, it does so because we have still to mention one more decisive feature. Christianity is primarily a movement in time rather than in space; it is a journeying from age to age, more than from territory to territory. It is a quitting of old ways, old customs and manners of speech for the sake of a new mind. It is not a sacking of treasuries but rather "putting behind of what is past," a readiness to be "slain all the way long," for the sake of what God will do in the future.

The mission of the prophet is to enter the city of habit, the one fortresses of our accustomed ways, and to melt them with appeals to our recollections of God's earlier mercies and with percep-

tions of his present majesty. We have always acknowledged our dependence on such men, on Elijah of the desert, on the herdsman of Tekoah, on the Baptist clothed in camel's hair, and after them—in the age of the Spirit—on Ignatius of Antioch, Augustine of Africa, Wycliffe, Huss, Luther, Calvin, and John Knox. But we have not customarily put Friedrich Schleiermacher, a man of modern times, into this company. Indeed, if anything, the fashion has been quite the opposite: to think of him standing at the other extreme, as a sanctifier of the status quo, as an apologist for the culture of his day and so as a spokesman for the German Christian establishment of the early 19th century, but not as a member of the prophets' band.

I wish, nonetheless, to review Schleiermacher's work as a prophet, not in order to raise him among those ancient fiery biblical and reformation figures who burned with the Word of God in their bones but rather to test and perhaps to enlarge our understanding of what Christian prophecy may be in modern times.

### I.

There is, however, an initial difficulty in this undertaking. It is a difficulty present in the attempt to assess any man's right to the office of acknowledged prophet. For a prophet is a foreseer of future consequences of our present actions, a man possessing a preternatural clarity of vision. He is not an astrologer. He does not practice occult arts. His foresight is a moral foresight, resulting from his endowment with a steady and often painful sense of the presence of God. Hence the prophet is, by any religious standards, a great man, a man whose personality is charged with an almost irresistible power. Accordingly, the difficulty that presents itself is this: Does a prophet justify his title in the eyes of others because he foresees so clearly what is to come? Or is the forcefulness of his own personality the instrument that works the effects he has predicted? Does the future make the prophet, or does the prophet make the future because he is a great man?

We, therefore, have to ask whether we are tempted to make Schleiermacher into a prophet because of the clarity of his moral and religious perception of history or because of the extraordinary influence he exercised on later generations.

As it happens, Schleiermacher himself was conscious of the general problem besetting us here: it is the issue of human greatness. What makes a man a "great man"? He delivered a public address on this subject on the occasion of King Friedrich Wilhelm III's birthday; and in this address he suggested an answer that is relevant to our own dilemma. The great man, Schleiermacher said, is one who wields a decisive moral influence upon his own people—a simple enough definition. But, then, to this he added a significant qualification: the great man is able to wield a decisive influence on his comrades because he himself stands under the influence of the same spirit that informs them. Greatness, in other words, is not an attribute of solitary individuals but is an attribute of a man truly belong-

ing to a people, receiving and sharing with that people a determinate and characteristic spirit that the great man himself then expresses with a new clarity and vigor. He does not stand above the times or transcend his fellow mortals; he recapitulates the times and gives to his shared mortality a renewed awareness of its own responsibility and destiny, its own unique and unrepeatable moment of history.

Thus the antinomy between prophet and great man disappears. They are different names for the mortal instruments that the Spirit employs, which broods over history. On these terms, Schleiermacher qualifies not only as a great or influential man but as a prophet, for reasons that I hope to persuade you are valid.

## II.

In physical appearance Schleiermacher was not prepossessing. He was a small man with a slight deformity. One does not picture him slaying the priests of Baal. Yet his gaze was sharp and brought discomfort to those through whom he seemed to look.

Beyond that he was a man who loved domesticity and prized his place as husband and father. One does not easily imagine him eating locusts in the desert. Yet Schleiermacher repeatedly risked his position, his reputation, and his safety. He refused to flee Napoleon's invading armies; he unhesitatingly criticized the King of Prussia in public; royal spies frequently infiltrated his large congregations in his Berlin church to report his seditious sentiments.

Again, he was a gregarious man, at home in sophisticated and polite society, brilliant and witty in conversation. It is hard to place Schleiermacher in the company of men of rustic simplicity, men such as were some of the early prophets. Yet he was the son of an unpretentious family. He grew up in the cultural isolation of Moravian piety; his tutors forbade their students to read the literature, poetry, and criticism of the 18th Century German renaissance. When Schleiermacher came to Berlin as a young man he turned his simple but deep piety into a trenchant criticism of the effete religion of the Berlin romantics.

Finally, Schleiermacher nearly always presented to the world a countenance governed by an unusual serenity. When one looks at his likeness in portrait and sculpture, one beholds firmness of purpose and self-control. It is difficult to envision this man as given to moodiness, as the victim of doubt, as a quarreler with God, in the fashion of Jeremiah and of many another prophet. Yet not only did religious doubt inflict itself on the young Schleiermacher; but through much of his maturity a presentiment of trial and disaster brooded in his mind, especially as he contemplated the present history of France and the German Lands. Schleiermacher rebuked his friends for their complacency in their domestic tranquility. He admonished his parishioners that the kingdom of God comes always through strife and that the greatest strife of all is that of a man with himself. The suffering of Christ was a frequent theme of his sermons. "All honor be to suffering," he wrote to a close friend,

“for in the present times it is a necessary element of a manly life. Is not everyone to whom suffering does not come of itself obliged to go out into the great world to seek it in order that he may grow strong in love and faith?”<sup>1</sup>

From all of these aspects of Schleiermacher we may at least conclude that this was a complex man. But these features still do not tell us that he was a prophet. For evidence to that end we must proceed farther.

### III.

There are three great ideas, three great perceptions, that governed Schleiermacher's mind and make of him something like a prophet. The first is his insight into the meaning of the living word, both in daily life and in the life of personal and communal religion. I do not want to suggest that Schleiermacher resembles in any superficial fashion those men whom we identify today as theologians of the Word of God (of whom Karl Barth has been the foremost). It is nevertheless true that he, like Luther and Calvin, regarded preaching as the chief instrument of God's work in men's hearts. He thought of himself as first and last a preacher, and he conceived of the office of preacher as the office that represents Christ in the age of Spirit. Christianity, said Schleiermacher, spreads over the earth by preaching and all Christian doctrine must justify itself by showing that it is derivable from the preaching and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup> Preaching was indeed for him, as it was for the Reformers, a virtual sacrament.

A significant feature of Schleiermacher's perception of word and language is that he gave the highest place to the spoken rather than to the written word. Hence the church was for him not so much the church of the Bible as it was the church of the continual repetition of Christ's proclamation. It is no wonder, therefore, that his favorite gospel was the gospel of John, the gospel that declares: “In the beginning was the Word.” To Schleiermacher the word was the vessel of life; and he carried this conviction not only into his work as a pastor of the *Dreifaltigkeits Kirche* in Berlin but also into his reflection on human civilization and culture. He was instinctively drawn to Plato above all other philosophers, in part no doubt because Plato understood philosophizing to be the carrying on of dialogue, to be the discipline of living authentically in one's own words with one's fellows. Out of this conviction Schleiermacher revolutionized the art of hermeneutics and furnished it with a new foundation, one on which New Testament scholars and philosophers today are still building. He was the first to recognize that the art of the interpretation of written documents is rooted in the daily business of interpreting the living, spoken words of colleague, friend and neighbor. He was also, by reason of the same conviction, the founder of modern Protestant theology as Christocentric theology, that is, as theology that places itself under the government of Christ's own discourse and that understands faith as transpiring in the

event of speaking and hearing the Word of Life. The prophet Isaiah's understanding that the spoken word of God goes forth and does not return barren, that the word is the instrument by which God forms life, was an understanding that Schleiermacher not only shared but made a principle of his thinking. The sermons that he delivered from his Berlin pulpit are certainly not like the oracles of Isaiah—Schleiermacher had no gift for poetic diction—but they were sermons that gave courage to many a man to embrace his own destiny. Christianity has always been a language-building community, Schleiermacher declared;<sup>3</sup> and, in another place, he added as a personal note: "Preaching, with a little leisure and daily bread, is all that I really require."<sup>4</sup>

The memory of Schleiermacher the preacher and the lecturer, of Schleiermacher the living speaker, survived among his pupils and associates long after his death. No Christian theologian of the times since the American and French revolutions perceived so vividly and so accurately the identity of language and life as did Schleiermacher. And in this age of ours that is a radial age of communication we cannot but look back upon this man as something of a prophet who saw that the tacit covenants by which we live together are carried in our most ordinary speech, that our speech is sacramental.

#### IV.

The second perception that shaped Schleiermacher's mind and all that issued from his pen and his rostrum is the perception of human finitude. The phrase in which Schleiermacher embodied this insight is the familiar statement in proposition 4 of *The Christian Faith* that religion is a feeling of absolute dependence. But just because this characterization has grown so familiar to us, we are obligated to examine closely just what Schleiermacher intended by it.

Human finitude and mortality are perennial themes of all religion and of the Bible. From the wisdom literature of the Old Testament to the books of Paul Tillich and many theologians and philosophers deeply influenced by existentialism, we have heard and hear repeatedly that death and finitude cast a melancholy and an anxiety over the whole of life. It is the recognition of our finitude that prompts us to raise our minds to the contemplation of the eternal.

But this is not the finitude on which Schleiermacher pondered. We probably should recognize the fact that his temperament did not dispose him to reflect in that mode. The darkness of the infinite, the fragility of man the thinking reed, the shortness and brutishness of human life did not haunt him as these qualities haunted Hobbes and Pascal. The finitude that met and held Schleiermacher's perception was the mystery of individuality: the mystery of the presence of the riches of the infinite in the life-span and identity of persons. This is a theme that appeared in and dominated the first of his books, *On Religion: Speeches to the Cultured Among its Despisers*. In that book Schleiermacher made extensive use of the romantic nature; for him as for Schelling, Coleridge, and Emerson, nature was

the language of God. But an important difference in the meaning of the word nature distinguishes Schleiermacher from the conventional romantic. For nature meant to him first and foremost human nature, so that it was the universe of human nature that spoke to him the language of God. Each individual in that universe is a statement of the divine mind and will—not a partial statement but a statement that embodies the whole of that mind and will. This is the ground on which Schleiermacher was able to affirm that each man is a compendium of mankind.<sup>5</sup> He is a compendium of mankind because he is not, as it were, a fragment, an individual subordinated to the species and existing for the sake of the species. The individual recapitulates the entire species in himself, in a fresh and original way. That is the essential mystery: to be posited in existence not as a part of a larger whole but as a representative of the whole of nature.

So the absolute dependence of which Schleiermacher wrote both in *The Speeches On Religion* and in *The Christian Faith* is the mystery of the abundance that each human life contains. That is the meaning of finitude for Schleiermacher. The individual is not the cause of his own existence; his existence is the effect of a casual power that is ineffable. Yet his finiteness does not tell a story of poverty and limitation but of an unfathomable generosity and of illimitable possibility.

We can perhaps help ourselves to understand the meaning here, if we think back beyond Kierkegaard, beyond Pascal, to Calvin and to Luther who perceived the world as the mirror of God's glory and who perceived the majesty of God in each creature. Or if we cast still farther back in time we are able to catch a part of Schleiermacher's meaning by recalling the attitude of the prophets of the exile and of the psalmists toward the natural world. For these men nature is not a system of causes and effects; it is a series of manifestations of divine intentions, divine glory, even divine playfulness. Nature is theophanic in the Old Testament. For Schleiermacher the universe of human beings and each person therein is a theophany.

Thus Schleiermacher holds a distinctive view of human dependence. Finitude does not mean abandonment or homelessness or alienation from the ground of being. Finitude is the material of divine artistry, and Jesus of Nazareth is the full expression of what God the artist is doing.

Yet Schleiermacher's understanding of finiteness does not end at this point. The theme we have been delineating is counter-balanced by another: the theme of the eternal decrees of God. Schleiermacher does not merely regard the human world as a work of divine art. He also looks upon it as the theater of divine intentions, the realm of God's decrees. And these decrees are never exhausted; they drive human history inexorably on toward an open future.

The recognition of this fact, which is so conspicuous a feature of *The Christian Faith*, leads us now to an examination of the third of the ideas that shapes Schleiermacher's religious and theological

perception and that bears upon our interpretation of him as a prophet.

### V.

Paul Tillich has made us familiar with the phrase "Protestant principle." By Protestant principle Tillich meant the religious conviction that no institution, be it church or state, ever fully embodies and exhibits divine grace and divine purpose. For this reason, the church stands in need of repeated reformation. But Schleiermacher anticipated Tillich not only in recognizing the fact that the church is rooted in history and is involved in the constant process of becoming; he also used the same language: Protestant principle.<sup>6</sup> Nearly the entirety of his theology and of his Christian ethics is an expression and elucidation of the conviction uttered in this phrase and in the more frequent sister term, Christian principle.

What precisely did Schleiermacher mean by these phrases? A complete answer would lead us into an account of the whole of his philosophy and theology of culture. But we can describe the essence of the matter in the following theses. First of all, Christian or Protestant Principle signifies a particular view of historical development. The church—and for that matter all of the other social forms of life—is not simply an institution constituted by settled human rules and laws and conventions. The church is a movement; it is a process in which the essential meaning of Jesus Christ is continually manifesting itself. But in no single period of time does the church manifest the whole of its essence. It is not merely the case, Schleiermacher stipulated, that the essential church assumes differing forms in succeeding eras yet all the while lies concealed within these forms. Rather the very essence of the church and of Christianity is itself involved in the historical process of becoming complete. Schleiermacher, consequently, could never have agreed with the later theologians who maintained that by stripping away the accidental historical accretions that surrounded primitive Christianity one could arrive at the kernel-meaning. On the contrary, only when history has run its full course in the providence of God will the essence of the church be manifest. Only when scholars and critics are in the position of being able to compare and contrast *all* of the possible forms of church life will men be able to grasp the essence of Christianity. Until that eschatological moment, our understanding of Christ, the gospel, and the Spirit of God can be only provisional.

A second thesis follows the first closely. It is that no church may claim to be The Church, the absolute actualization of the divine decree embodied in Jesus Christ. Each Christian community lives not only by drawing on the resources of its own history but also by drawing from the life and grace present in contrasting and opposing churches.

Then a third thesis immediately appears. Just as the church as the society of men and women bound together in communion with Christ and with each other through the Spirit is never a fully



mature society, so also no individual member of the church in history is himself fully mature or grown up into the fullness of the stature of Christ. The Christian principle therefore carries the implication that none of us is fully a person, for none of us yet belongs completely to the Spirit of Christ who is the last Adam, the perfect man, the man from heaven. And what is true of individual persons is also true of corporate persons, of such other institutions as the university, the state, and so on. For history, when we view it under the aspect of Christ, is an unending dialectic of reformation and conservation, of human illness and of new strength consolidated in the recovery from illness, of death and resurrection from the dead.

The ultimate import of this view of history is, I believe, quite plain. Schleiermacher formulated the prophetic vision of the universal reign of God so that it encompasses not only space but time. He found a way of limiting the selfish assertions of churches, universities, and states by showing how all rival institutions are subordinated to the good-pleasure of God. The history of the world is the history of the kingdom of God. This claim is not the complacent or foolish claim that this is the best of all possible worlds. Men who are absolutely dependent on God are not free to speculate on what God might have done. It is simply the claim that the rule in all life is the rule of God's good-pleasure. But the good-pleasure or rule of God comes through strife, and the first and last strife is that of men, churches, and nations with themselves.

## VI.

These then are the prophetic insights of Schleiermacher who partook so deeply of the spirit of modern times:

- (1) Man lives by speaking; the human word is the covenant of life with life, just as Christ is the Word of life itself.
- (2) Men are utterly dependent on God, as the clay vessel is dependent on the potter; but this dependence is the expression of divine abundance.
- (3) There are no settled habitations of the Spirit of God. Each historical age, each church, each nation, each individual—in short—each person is the expression of God's good pleasure, and our destiny is to embrace our times and struggle in them and to recognize in every other person that same destiny and dignity.

These are provocative thoughts. They are no more than human thoughts, but they have the weight of prophecy—for they are thoughts that have come to govern our own perceptions and lives.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *Aus Schleiermachers Leben, in Briefen*, Vol. I (Berlin, 1860), 343.
2. *The Christian Faith*, Trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Steward (Edinburgh, 1948), §18 and §19.
3. "Sendschreiben, Ueber seine Glaubenslehre, an Dr. Lücke," *Sämmtliche Werke*, Part I, Vol. II, 642.
4. Quoted by Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. XII, 36.
5. *On Religion*, trans. John Oman (New York, 1958), 79.
6. *Sämmtliche Werke*, Part I, Vol. 12, 72, 96.