

Barth, Schleiermacher and the task of dogmatics¹

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Abstract

The article focuses on the similarities and differences between Friedrich Schleiermacher's and Karl Barth's views on the task and nature of dogmatics. It shows that Schleiermacher sought to awaken in his hearers an awareness of the immediate presence of God, a presence achieved and fulfilled in Jesus Christ and emanating from him as "the union of the divine essence with human nature in the form of the common Spirit which animates the corporate life of believers". Barth aimed by contrast to speak of the transcendent power of the Word of God in Jesus Christ, which he identified as "the humanity of God," as the true ground, object and goal of Christian theology. In this sense, both identified the essential substance of the faith christologically and, at the same time, as contemporary.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dogmatic Theology is the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian Church at a given time (Friedrich Schleiermacher).²

¹ This article was originally published in Thompson, J (ed), *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the centenary of the birth of Karl Barth*, May 10, 1886, pp 267-284, by Pickwick Publications, Allison Park, PA. HTS is granted permission for its republication.

² Fr Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*. ET of the 2nd German edition, edited by H R Mackintosh & J S Stewart. Edinburgh: T & T Clark and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1928, 88 (par 19).

As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God (Karl Barth).³

The relation between Barth and Schleiermacher has already been the subject of numerous studies, so the topic I have chosen might appear passé. Yet it has its own interest and significance, if for no other reason than the acknowledged stature and continuing influence of both. The two definitions of the task and nature of dogmatics quoted above have both come to hold almost classical status, and there are worse questions for rising theologians to cut their dogmatic teeth on than that of the similarities and differences between them. *Similarities* as well as *differences* exist – which brings me to a further reason for the choice of subject.

Many of the comparisons of Barth and Schleiermacher, at least in the English-speaking world, tend to fall into one of two categories.⁴ Either they set out to prove Barth and Schleiermacher wrong; or they aim to support the view that Barth neither properly understood nor adequately overcame Schleiermacher's legacy. Both views are inevitably colored by the hermeneutical problem involved in translating and applying the work of either to what is in part different cultural contexts. Sometimes, at least, it is an uprooted and withered Barth or Schleiermacher who is placed under the microscope of Anglo-Saxon commentators for dissection and evaluation – uprooted, that is, from their place in the broad stream of modern Germanic Protestant, specifically Reformed theology. In the process both the similarities and the differences between them can become somewhat refracted, as when Schleiermacher is seen as the godfather of theological relativism and

³ K Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1. 2nd edition, translated by G W Bromiley. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975, 3 (par 1).

⁴ This seems to be the case at any rate at what might be called the popular academic level. Profound insights and useful references to further literature can be found in a series of articles in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol 21 (1968): T F Torrance, "Hermeneutics according to F D E Schleiermacher" (pp 257-267); J B Torrance, "Interpretation and Understanding in Schleiermacher's Theology" (pp 268-282); J K Graby, "Reflections on the History of the Interpretation of Schleiermacher" (pp 283-299); T N Tice, "Article Review" of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* and *Hermeneutik* (pp 305-311). See also J E Davison, "Can God Speak a Word to Man? Barth's Critique of Schleiermacher's Theology", *SJTh* 37 (1984), 189-211; Brian A Gerrish, *Tradition and the modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1978; id, *A Prince of the Church: Schleiermacher and the Beginnings of Modern Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

religious pluralism, Barth as the representative *par excellence* of a conservative theological reaction against the whole drift of modern culture. The two had much more in common than such one-sided accounts suggest, and it is only in the light of the resemblances that the real nature and significance of the contrasts can adequately be seen.

2. BARTH ON SCHLEIERMACHER

Barth himself was well aware of sharing common concerns with Schleiermacher – an awareness in no way weakened by his intensive criticism in the course of more than forty years, for he sensed that Schleiermacher was *the* figure whom he had to counter, but whom at the same time he must not only *criticize* but also *appreciate*. Certainly he could say in his commentary on Romans 61, 20 with characteristic vehemence:

... the Gospel of Christ is a shattering disturbance, an assault which brings everything into question. For this reason, nothing is so meaningless as the attempt to construct a religion out of the Gospel, and to set it as one human possibility in the midst of others. Since Schleiermacher, this attempt has been undertaken more consciously than ever before in Protestant theology – and it is the betrayal of Christ.⁵

Certainly too he could insist in his 1922 lecture, “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie”,⁶ that the ancestral series to which he appealed ran back through Kierkegaard to Luther and Calvin, to Paul and Jeremiah, but most emphatically *not* to Schleiermacher.⁷ Yet, precisely for this reason, Barth devoted one of his early lecture courses in Göttingen in the winter semester of 1923-24 to Schleiermacher, whom he treated in a highly original and, though thoroughly critical, by no means unsympathetic way.⁸ The remarks with which the lecture manuscript ends are revealing:

⁵ K Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C Hoskyns. London: Oxford Univ Press, 1933, 225.

⁶ Reprinted in J Moltmann (Hrsg), *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, Munich: Kaiser, 1962, 197-218.

⁷ Op cit 205.

⁸ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*. Edited by D Ritschl; translated by G W Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982.

The higher one values Schleiermacher's achievement in and for itself, and the better one sees with what historical necessity it had to come and how well – how only too well – it fitted the whole spirit of Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries, the more clearly one perceives how easy it is to say No in word but how hard it is to say it in deed, namely with a positive counter-achievement. Schleiermacher undoubtedly did a good job. It is not enough to know that another job has to be done; what is needed is the ability to do it at least as well as he did his. This is the serious and humbling concern with which I take leave of Schleiermacher, and if you agree with my assessment, I hope you will share this concern. There is no occasion for triumphant superiority at his tomb, but there is occasion for fear and trembling at the seriousness of the moment and in the face of our own inadequacy.⁹

Or, as he put it some years later in his history of Protestant theology in the nineteenth century:

We have to do with a hero, the like of which is but seldom bestowed upon theology. Anyone who has never noticed anything of the splendour this figure radiated and still does – I am almost tempted to say, who has never succumbed to it – may honourably pass on to other and possibly better ways, but let him never raise so much as a finger against Schleiermacher. Anyone who has never loved here, and is not in a position to love again may not hate here either.¹⁰

⁹ Op cit 260. The very last sentences may not have belonged to the original lecture, but may have been added by Barth later. This volume also contains the illuminating "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher", which Barth wrote to accompany a selection of readings from Schleiermacher, published as H Bolli (Hrsg), *Schleiermacher-Auswahl* in 1968, and in which he reports autobiographically on his engagement with Schleiermacher over many decades.

¹⁰ K Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*. London: S C M, 1969, 308. – This is also perhaps the appropriate point to remember that in the "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher" (op cit, 277) Barth concluded a series of probing questions about Schleiermacher's theology and his own struggles with it with this remark: "The only certain consolation which remains for me is to rejoice that in the kingdom of heaven I will be able to discuss all these questions with Schleiermacher extensively ... for, let us say, a few centuries". (The English translation by Bromiley speaks only of "a couple of centuries", but both Barth's German and his characteristic style of expression suggest that a more generous temporal allocation would be appropriate.)

The same tone of admiration, fascination and criticism runs through the numerous references to Schleiermacher in the *Church Dogmatics*. It is worth noting that in the frequency of such references Schleiermacher runs more or less neck-and-neck with Thomas Aquinas and is surpassed only by Augustine, Luther and Calvin.

Certainly, Barth's criticisms of Schleiermacher's achievement were meant seriously. He regarded Schleiermacher as the apostle of anthropocentric Neoprotestantism, the counterpart of ecclesiocentric Roman Catholicism; and on both he declared war. Theology could not make it its business to speak of God by speaking of humanity, religion or the Christian community in a raised voice: it must, precisely as a *human* enterprise, speak *of God and from God*. Its calling is to hear and witness to the Word of God which evokes and addresses faith; it cannot properly allow its agenda to be dictated from "outside" if that "outside" is taken to be any kind of philosophical, metaphysical, sociological, psychological or otherwise "scientific" account of human existence in the world rather than the "from without" of the inbreaking, perennially new revelation of God himself. Barth therefore viewed Schleiermacher as the genial advocate of an approach which in effect reduced theology to anthropology and aimed to set against that approach his own "counter-achievement". Yet precisely as a *counter*-achievement it was necessarily related to that which it opposed. Barth and Schleiermacher may indeed be poles apart, but the poles are those of an ellipse, in which the second can best be appreciated in its tension laden relation to the first. In this light, a number of general resemblances between Barth and Schleiermacher deserve more attention than they are generally given. Both were revolutionary thinkers; both were theologians of rare insight and industry; both sought to open up deeper paths of theological reflection in the light of the circumstances and challenges of their own time.

3. SOME RESEMBLANCES AND PARALLELS

Both Schleiermacher and Barth first became prominent as theological *enfants terribles* – Schleiermacher with the *Addresses on Religion* (1799) and Barth with the first and, even more, with the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919/1922). Both works were widely regarded as subversive, indeed downright dangerous, if for opposite reasons. What made Schleiermacher suspect was the *pantheistic* tendency of his romantically

tinged view of the relation between the individual and the “universe”; what seemed to be hard to take in Barth was his emphasis on the *opposition*, the “absolute qualitative difference” between God and the world, eternity and history. At this level, the two may seem to have nothing whatsoever in common; and what is more, this level is no mere superficial or trivial one, but one on which the fundamental difference in approach between Barth and Schleiermacher becomes visible *in nuce*. Yet it would perhaps be a mistake simply to leave the matter there, as two considerations may help to show. First, both could, on the negative side, utter similar criticisms of prevailing established conceptions of theology and church. There is more than a mere accidental similarity, for instance, between Schleiermacher’s remark somewhere in the *Addresses* that the Scriptures had become the mausoleum of the Spirit and Barth’s comment in *Romans* that the crater around which the saints expectantly sit is long burnt-out. Both observations reflect a struggling with the question of the *reality* with which theology has to do, a struggling which led both Schleiermacher and Barth to break out of the accepted, given patterns of theological argument, reflection and construction. Schleiermacher sought to place in the centre the reality of what today might be called the existential dimension of human life in and as part of the cosmos; Barth the reality of the transcendent Word of God. Second, this common concern to search after reality would seem to be what Bultmann rightly discerned when he observed in his preview of the 1922 *Romans* that, although Barth himself would dispute this way of putting it, his work could be seen as belonging to the same tradition as Schleiermacher’s *Addresses* or Otto’s *Idea of the Holy*, that is, with the modern attempts to demonstrate the distinct nature of the religious *a priori*.¹¹ Barth himself came to treat Bultmann’s assessment as proof of how deeply Bultmann had failed to understand him because Bultmann himself was so deeply bound to the tradition of Schleiermacher.¹² While the reaction of Barth is understandable and in its own way justified, it should not obscure the fact that behind and beyond the formulations Bultmann

¹¹ Bultmann’s review appeared in instalments in nos 18-21 of *Christliche Welt* (1922). It is reprinted in Moltmann (Hrsg), *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie* I, 119 f.

¹² Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher”, op cit 270. On Bultmann’s attitude to Schleiermacher in this period see M Evang, “Rudolf Bultmanns Berufung auf Friedrich Schleiermacher vor und um 1920”, in B Jaspert (Hrsg), *Rudolf Bultmanns Werk und Wirkung*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984, 3-24.

used to describe it, there is a recognisably similar kind of questioning underlying the early approaches of both Schleiermacher and Barth, even if the questions themselves are posed in opposite directions.

Schleiermacher's concern was to reawaken a direct sense of religious reality (even among the "cultured despisers") by breaking away from the identification of the religious sphere with those of metaphysics or ethics and by pointing to its own distinct character. The Enlightenment had gravely weakened the bonds which earlier generations had sought to forge between Christian faith and metaphysical, physicotheological and natural theology; but the alternative which it offered, most notably in the work of Kant, was, to Schleiermacher's mind, inadequate as an alternative. Kant had removed religion and theology from the sphere of "pure reason", of the "knowable", and relocated them in that of "practical reason", of ethics, with its threefold postulate of God, the immortality of the soul and the reality of the freedom of the will, all of them *practically* necessary in view of the character of the "categorical imperative" experienced by every moral being. Kant understood himself to be restricting the realm of knowledge in order to make room for faith; but the "faith" which resulted, lying in the field delimited by the questions, What can I know? What must I do? For what may I hope?, was for Schleiermacher as unsatisfactory as the former path of speculative metaphysics. Both lacked the *immediacy* which he felt must belong to what is genuinely religious. So he came to insist in the second of the *Addresses* that the authentic interest of religion has to do neither with *knowledge* nor with *action*, neither with *metaphysics* nor with *ethics*,¹³ but with the directly accessible fields of *contemplation* or *intuition* (*Anschauung*) and *feeling* (*Gefühl*), with a capacity

¹³ It would be instructive, if space permitted, to compare and contrast Schleiermacher's position here with that of the 17th century Puritan and widely influential federal theologian William Ames (Amesius) in a passage he inserted in the third edition of his *Medulla Theologica* (1628), I.2.6. After stating that theology consists of two parts, faith and observance, he continued: "Out of the remnants of these two parts have sprouted among certain philosophers two new theologies - Metaphysics and Ethics. Metaphysics, in fact, is the faith of the Peripatetics and ethics is their observance. Hence, to each of these two disciplines they ascribe that which deals with the highest good of man. ... When theology, therefore, is handed down correctly in these two parts of faith and observance, metaphysics and ethics vanish spontaneously, after they have given evidence to this illustrious distribution" (Quoted from K Sprunger, *The Learned Doctor William Ames*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972, 126.) The net could indeed be cast even wider by drawing a comparison between Barth's attempts to liberate dogmatics from philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions and concerns in the years following the appearance of his *Christliche Dogmatik* of 1927 and the aggressive repudiation of scholastic metaphysics in Melancthon's *Loci Communes* of 1521.

for apprehension and response given in and with the human condition – a capacity which he was later to define as “the pious self-consciousness”, “the consciousness of absolute dependence”.¹⁴ In this way Schleiermacher sought in the *Addresses* to point to the fact of our human existence, the gift of self-consciousness, the experience of our being in and of the world as a primary datum for theological reflection. In this regard the *Addresses* were epoch-breaking and epoch-making, and laid the foundation for Schleiermacher’s later attempt to reconstruct the entire substance of Christian dogmatics with reference to that base.

Barth’s approach in the early 1920’s represented an equally radical break with established patterns of thought, particularly those that came to be called “cultural Protestantism”, the form of Protestant theology which had so identified itself with contemporary culture and civilisation that it was no longer capable of protesting against the reduction of theology to history and the misuse of Christian ideals to subserve political and military ambitions. Of special significance here was what he called the *dies ater* in August 1914 when a group of German intellectuals, among them many of his own former teachers, issued a manifesto of support for the war aims of the Kaiser. In Barth’s eyes this destroyed at a stroke the credibility not only of their politics but of their theology too. “God” had become for them a function of what has more recently come to be called “civil religion”. A direct line can be drawn from this moment of profound disillusionment to Barth’s subsequent criticism of “religion” as “idolatry”, the glorification of human cultural self-affirmation over against God, to which God can and does address God’s shattering “Nein!” So Barth’s *Romans* drew on the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament,

¹⁴ In a seminar following the presentation of this paper at Princeton Theological Seminary in October 1985, Prof Daniel Migliore pointed to the question whether Schleiermacher’s reference to *das fromme Selbstbewußtsein* should properly be translated as being “the pious self-consciousness”, given that the standard translation of *The Christian Faith* speaks in these passages of “the religious self-awareness”. It is in fact no easy matter to decide on the most appropriate translation of the German *fromm* into English. The word is in fact most usually rendered as “pious”, not in the sense of “pietistic” but in that of “faithful”, as reflected in the well-known German hymn, “O Gott, Du frommer Gott” – “O God, thou faithful God”. The “pious” awareness of which Schleiermacher speaks is certainly that of *Christian faith*, faith conditioned by the sense of sin and grace, and as such a distinctively Christian modification of the more general and diffused *religious* awareness of “absolute” or “sheer dependence upon God”. Just for this reason, however, the rendering “religious self-awareness” is inadequate, for it does not contain and encapsulate all that Schleiermacher sees as belonging to *Christian faith*. It would therefore be more accurate to speak of “the self-consciousness of Christian faith” in unpacking Schleiermacher’s terminology today. “Pious” in this paper should therefore be understood in this sense as referring to a genuinely and distinctively Christian *pietas*.

the apocalyptic warning of judgment upon the “powers of this world” and the Gospel of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and brought them to bear with a fresh, blazing urgency upon the claims and pretensions of “cultural Christianity”.

How far was this criticism directed against Schleiermacher himself? Only in a differentiated way. To the end of his days Barth remained convinced that Schleiermacher would not have been capable of signing the manifesto of 1914, but insisted at the same time that “the entire theology which had unmasked itself in that manifesto ... was grounded, determined and influenced decisively by him”.¹⁵ The essential difference between them is not to be found in identifying Schleiermacher as a “cultural Protestant”, but rather in their understanding of “religion”. The contrast is most forcefully expressed by Barth in his exegesis of Romans 7, 14-25 under the heading, “The Reality of Religion”, particularly in the introduction to that section,¹⁶ in which he quotes against Schleiermacher the final verse of the poem which Schleiermacher’s friend Friedrich Schlegel had written as his own commentary on the *Addresses*:

The romantic psychologist ... may represent religion as that human capacity by which “all human occurrences are thought of as divine actions”; he may define it as “the solemn music which accompanies all human experience” (Schleiermacher). Against such representations, however, religion is always on its guard. Religion, when it attacks vigorously, when it is fraught with disturbance, when it is non-aesthetic, non-rhetorical, non-pious, when it is the religion of the 39th Psalm, of Job and of Luther and of Kierkegaard, when it is the religion of Paul, bitterly protests against every attempt to make of its grim earnestness some trivial and harmless thing. Religion is aware that it is in no way the crown and fulfilment of true humanity; it knows itself rather to be a questionable, disturbing, dangerous thing. ... Religion, so far from being the place where the healthy harmony of human life is lauded, is instead the place where it appears diseased, discordant, and disrupted. Religion is not the sure ground upon which human culture safely rests; it is the place where civilisation and its partner, barbarism, are rendered fundamentally questionable. Nor

¹⁵ “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher”, op cit 264.

¹⁶ K Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 257-259; the following quotation is from pp 257-258.

does the frank judgement of honest men of the world disagree with the opinion of religion about itself.

The curtain is raised: the music must cease. The temple is gone, and far in the distance appeareth the terrible form of the – Sphinx.¹⁷

Religion must beware lest it tone down in any degree the unconverted man's judgement. Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion. ... Religion possesses no solution of the problem of life; rather it makes of that problem a wholly insoluble enigma. ... Religion is neither a thing to be enjoyed nor a thing to be celebrated: it must be borne as a yoke which cannot be removed.

This passage displays vividly how much more sombre than Schleiermacher's is the early Barth's diagnosis of religion, civilisation and Christian (or indeed human) existence. It is in part a response to the challenges he felt to be confronting faith and proclamation in the crisis of the First World War, in part a reaction against and a reckoning with the tradition represented by Schleiermacher, in part a recovery of authentic biblical and reformation insights into the height and depth of sin and grace, insights which Schleiermacher had tended to level down and flatten out. But Schleiermacher is not thereby disposed of – neither for Barth nor for us. Both can open our eyes to realities with which our theology is confronted – on the one hand the gift and mystery of human existence as having to do with the reality of God, on the other the reality of the Word of God as a Word of judgment and of mercy upon that existence. In this sense, the early impulses of both Schleiermacher and Barth remain valid, even if Barth's must be recognised as cutting deeper and driving further than Schleiermacher's.

Further similarities can also be seen in the way that the later work of Barth and Schleiermacher developed. Some would characterise these by saying that both became

¹⁷ Hoskyns' translation certainly suffers here by comparison with the original: "Der Vorhang reisst und die Musik muss schweigen. / Der Tempel auch verschwand und in der Ferne/Zeigt sich die alte Sphinx in Riesengröße." In particular, his rendering of the final line is misleading. The Sphinx is not, for Schlegel, *terrible* but *enigmatic*, for it reveals itself after the dramatic preliminaries in Schleiermacher's presentation in the *Speeches* as – itself, larger than ever (in Riesengröße). Schlegel's point is that after all that Schleiermacher has seemed to promise in the *Addresses*, the old, enigmatic questions still remain. As he is also reported to have said to Schleiermacher, "Dein Gott kommt mir etwas mager vor!" (Your God seems to me pretty thin!")

more “conservative” following their first, radical beginnings. But “conservative” is a slippery concept, whether it is understood politically or theologically.¹⁸ It would be more precise to say that both worked from their starting points to include and gather in, in an essentially consistent development, a wider and deeper appreciation and appropriation of the fruits of earlier Christian theology. Both went on to become, in the strict sense of the word, *ecclesiastical* theologians, conscious of the responsibility of their work for the life and witness of the wider Christian community. Once called to chairs of theology – Schleiermacher in Berlin, Barth first of all in Göttingen – they found themselves confronted with other tasks and responsibilities than those of relatively independent thinkers. In particular, they were faced with the question of *how* they were to teach them – a question which can have a sobering effect on the most effervescent spirits if they feel its real force. Both Schleiermacher and Barth did feel that force and got down to the hard work of regular teaching and its necessary accompaniment, intensive study and reflection. Neither of them found this easy or regarded it as a task which could be completed in a brief period and then regarded as finished. For example, Schleiermacher laboured over twenty years at his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*, and issued his *The Christian Faith* in two editions, the second extensively reworked and modified; Barth embarked on the project of a *Christian Dogmatics* only to abandon it after volume one had already been published and to make a fresh start on the *Church Dogmatics*, the task which largely occupied the last forty years of his life. Above and beyond these more external resemblances in what, after all, are not entirely atypical careers for theology professors, one common factor stands out: the seriousness and consistency with which both worked, alongside numerous other tasks, at producing a comprehensive treatment of the main themes of Christian dogmatics, and the originality of the powers and insights they both

¹⁸ Neither Schleiermacher nor Barth can be described as “conservative” in any normal political sense. Unlike Hegel, for example, Schleiermacher neither shared the enthusiasm for sheer power-in-action which led Hegel in 1806 to adulate Napoleon as “the World-Spirit on a charger” nor was later inclined to support Hegel’s glorification of the “restored” Prussian state. Similarly, Barth’s decided opposition to the power-obsessed ideology of the Nazis during the thirteen years of the appallingly shabby and brutal “Thousand-Year Empire” did not commit him to unqualified approbation of the geopolitical strategy (if it deserves the name, which may well be doubted) of the Western Allies in the decades following 1945. He was much more disposed to criticise that strategy, to the discomfort of many in the West who expected and would have preferred a McCarthyist blinkered anti-Communism from the acknowledged leading light of Protestant theology.

brought to the task, along with the distinctive character and inner coherence of the resultant works. Three aspects deserve in particular to be highlighted.

- As already indicated above, both came to modify and deepen (not to depart from) their earlier, “radical” insights by drawing in and reworking materials from the earlier history of Christian theology. In Schleiermacher’s case this took the form, for example, of a typological restatement of the pattern of the “natural heresies in Christianity ... the Docetic and the Nazarean, the Manichean and the Pelagian” as well as of “the antithesis between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant” forms in the western church,¹⁹ combined with a thoroughgoing analysis of the “feeling of absolute dependence” in terms of sin and grace as determining the larger, second part of *The Christian Faith* and an account of salvation in terms of the “God-consciousness” realised in Jesus of Nazareth and communicated by him to all who believe.²⁰ Barth went further still, in that he not only included in the *Church Dogmatics* extensive consideration of patristic and medieval theology and the teaching of the Reformers, but also (unlike Schleiermacher) took detailed account of the era of Protestant orthodoxy as well as of Schleiermacher and his nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors.²¹
- At the same time, neither Schleiermacher nor Barth equated the hard study necessary for theological enquiry, teaching and proclamation with mere historical research. Their concern was rather with the present task and responsibility of theological work: What is to be said and communicated here and now? What is the abiding substance of the faith? How must received patterns of thought be corrected and modified in order to address the challenges of the contemporary age? Neither intended the answers to these questions to issue in a simple accommodation of the faith to the questions and concerns of contemporary culture

¹⁹ *The Christian Faith*, 2nd edn par 23, 24.

²⁰ *The Christian Faith*, 2nd edn par 100.

²¹ Cf Barth’s “Foreword” to H Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set out and illustrated from the sources*. Revised and edited by E Bizer, translated by G T Thomson, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950, v-vii.

as such. Both were concerned rather to speak of the things of the faith in a way which would address that culture. Schleiermacher sought to awaken in his hearers an awareness of the immediate presence of God, a presence achieved and fulfilled in Jesus Christ and emanating from him as “the union of the divine essence with human nature in the form of the common Spirit which animates the corporate life of believers”.²² Barth aimed by contrast to speak of the transcendent power of the Word of God in Jesus Christ – which in later years he identified more and more specifically as “the humanity of God” – as the true ground, object and goal of Christian theology. In this sense, both identified the essential substance of the faith *christologically* – and, at the same time, as *contemporary*. Certainly there remains here a major difference, and one which always led Barth to doubt whether Schleiermacher’s christological emphasis was in fact consistent with the broad pattern of his theology; for Schleiermacher’s christology was essentially historically located and his understanding of salvation as horizontally mediated “God-consciousness” fitted into the same perspective. Barth by contrast sought a more *transcendental* point of reference, albeit one which was also and at the same time *historically anchored*, not indeed in Jesus’ “God-consciousness”, but in the interaction of eternity and time in his historical person and work, in his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, the centre and scope of that “history of God with humanity” which lies behind and before the whole run of human history. It is not hard to see that at this decisive point Barth is more the heir of Hegel than of Schleiermacher,²³ that here too his theological reflection goes further and cuts deeper than Schleiermacher’s had done. But for all that, it was concerned to answer the same kind of questions, albeit to answer them differently. With Schleiermacher’s example before him, Barth could see that awareness of the transcendent reality of God amounts to more than “the feeling of absolute dependence” and cannot adequately be expressed in purely historical or anthropological categories – and therefore, too, that christology cannot be adequately expressed in these categories, that christological reflection must break them open if it is consistently followed through.

²² *The Christian Faith*, 2nd edn 123.

²³ Cf G S Hendry, “The Transcendental Method in the Theology of Karl Barth”. *SJTh* 37 (1984), 213-227.

- In different ways, both Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* and Barth's *Church Dogmatics* witness to the rare capacity of both to present the main themes of the faith in an integrated way. Not without cause are they widely regarded as the finest statements in the tradition of Reformed dogmatics since Calvin's *Institute*. Not only do they *integrate*; they also *illuminate* each element by setting it in the light of the whole, and so by drawing out the *internal connections* between the different *loci* instead of merely listing them one after another, like so many pearls on a string. The aim of such an integrated presentation is not merely formal elegance or abstract systematisation but, in the properly scientific sense of the word, objective understanding, understanding which follows the dynamics of the reality being explored. The shape such an attempt at understanding will take does of course depend fundamentally on the underlying conviction as to the nature of that reality itself, and here the differences between Barth and Schleiermacher are too apparent to need underlining yet again. Equally, however, it may be doubted whether contemporary Protestant theology in search for orientation can really appreciate what is going on in the *Church Dogmatics* if it has not already paused to learn from what is going on in *The Christian Faith*. Proper appreciation of what Schleiermacher takes to be the object of the enquiry and of the appropriate systematic analysis of its components can at any rate make it easier for us to understand the different characterisations alike of the object and the method which we find in Barth. With this in mind, let me now turn to the specific example of similarity with and difference between Schleiermacher and Barth which I wish to examine in this connection: here too we shall find cause for concluding that Barth did not simply *reject* but rather *deepened* the approach he found in Schleiermacher, and thereby sharply *qualified* it.

4. THE TASK OF DOGMATICS

At the beginning of this paper I quoted Schleiermacher's definition of dogmatic theology as "the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian Church at a given time". This definition constituted the first proposition of the first edition of *The Christian Faith*; the reconstruction of the introductory sections in the second edition led to its

appearing there as paragraph 19. Its specific force can best be understood in the light of Schleiermacher's overall account of the theological disciplines in his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*.²⁴ There he distinguished three broad fields: first, *philosophical theology*; subdivided into *apologetics* and *polemics*; second, *historical theology*, subdivided into three areas: *exegetical theology*, *historical theology* in the narrower sense of *church history*, *historical knowledge of the present situation of Christianity*, this last being further subdivided into *dogmatic theology* and *ecclesiastical statistics*; third, *practical theology*, dealing with *ministry* and *government* in the church. Dogmatic theology thus had as its special task the establishing of the contemporary doctrine of the theologian's particular confessional tradition and formed on the one hand a conclusion to the work of historical theology and on the other the basis for practical application in the life, worship and administration of the church. It was thus both an *historical* discipline and an *ecclesiastical* one, in both senses with a direct contemporary relevance. In Schleiermacher's case and situation, this meant that the task of dogmatics was to gather up and state the contemporary doctrine of the mixed Lutheran and Reformed tradition of the Prussian Church Union: but the same formal pattern could also be applied to other ecclesiastical and denominational contexts or indeed to the present day attempts to construct a new ecumenical theology, one which will relativise and overcome existing confessional differences in a fresh synthesis capable of practical application in a more comprehensive church union. There too, dogmatics can easily come to be looked upon as an essentially historical and ecclesiastical discipline, concerned to gather up and integrate traditional doctrinal elements in a fresh synthesis.

²⁴ Schleiermacher's *Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studiums* was first published in 1810; a second heavily revised edition appeared in 1830. The summary given here follows the critical edition by Heinrich Scholz (Berlin, 1910), reprinted in 1977 by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt. On the originality and significance of Schleiermacher's programme see Edward Farley, *Theology: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, esp 73-98 ("Schleiermacher and the Beginning of the Encyclopedia Movement"). A modified (and historically speaking particularly influential) application of Schleiermacher's scheme was developed by Philip Schaff in his *What is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development*, published in 1846 and reprinted in C Yrigoyen, Jr and G M Bricker (Eds), *Reformed and Catholic Selected Historical and Theological Writings of Philip Schaff*, Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1979, 17-144. See esp the beginning of Section II: "Development of the Idea of Church History" (pp 44 ff). The earliest Protestant presentation of a theological "Encyclopedia" covering and integrating the various theological disciplines seems to have been that sketched in the mid-sixteenth century by the distinguished Zürich scientist Conrad Gesner in his *Partitiones theologicae*: cf J Staedtke, *Reformation and Zeugnis der Kirche*, Zürich 1978, 141-150 ("Conrad Gesner als Theologe").

The definition as such is by no means a bad one, but it patently contains within itself the seeds of a dangerous one-sidedness, of a kind of historical horizontalism which sees and treats the forms of expression of the faith itself in purely historical terms and is exposed to the risk of a relative absolutisation of this or that tradition or combination of traditions as if the responsibility of dogmatic theology were *merely* to them – and to the practical demands of the present day. Schleiermacher's own presentation of the substance of dogmatics was indeed preserved from surrender to mere traditionalism and pragmatism by his concern to do justice to the reality of "the pious self-consciousness" as the touchstone and test of the validity of dogmatic utterances. But it may with justice be doubted whether that is enough. What is still missing is the vital dimension to which Barth called attention: that dogmatic theology is concerned with the Word of God in its bearing upon both individual faith and the teaching and practice of the church. That is to say, there is a necessary and unavoidable *critical* element in the work of dogmatics: it has to bring the given tradition, teaching and practice of the church ever and again under confrontation with the message of the Gospel, and to seek to re-express that tradition, teaching and practice afresh under the impact of that confrontation. Dogmatics in this sense remains an historical and ecclesiastical discipline in Schleiermacher's sense, but it has a new critical edge in the sense of openness to radical self-criticism in the light of the Word of God. Hence Barth's reworked definition which was also quoted at the start of the paper: "As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God."

Or, in the version rendered in the original translation by G T Thomson:²⁵ "As a theological discipline, dogmatics is the scientific test to which the Christian Church puts herself regarding the language about God which is peculiar to her."

The more recent translation is by and large the more literal and in that sense more correct; but Thomson's version, which speaks of "the scientific test to which the Christian Church puts herself", is arguably a better rendering into English of Barth's "*Selbstprüfung der christlichen Kirche*" than Bromiley's "self-examination of the Christian Church". "Self-examination" in today's English invites comparison with navel-gazing, and nothing could be further from Barth's meaning. What he means is a *critical*

²⁵ *Church dogmatics* 1/1. Translated by G T Thomson. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936, 1.

self-testing. Nor is either “distinctive talk about God” or “the language about God which is peculiar to her” entirely satisfactory as a translation of Barth’s “*der ihr eigentümlichen Rede von Gott*”. His meaning can perhaps be better drawn out with the help of a paraphrase rather than a literal translation: “Dogmatics is the theological discipline whose particular task is the continuing, conscientious, objective and self-critical testing by the Christian Church of the content of her witness to God as expressed in the words and actions of the Church and its members.”

What Barth means by this is unfolded at length in the first²⁶ and seventh²⁷ sections of the *Church Dogmatics*. In a nutshell, his argument is that the task of dogmatics lies in bringing the contemporary speech and action of the church in its intention to witness and respond to the revelation of God before the criterion of the Word of God himself. That Word is real, concrete and actual in Jesus Christ, to whom the Bible witnesses; but, precisely as such, it can never be identified simply with the witness or the tradition of the church, for these always fall short and are therefore in need of constant correction and reorientation in the light of the Word himself. Out of this dialectical self-criticism, understood as a continual, ongoing process, the witness and proclamation of the church is constantly renewed and revived; it lives always and everywhere out of the power of the Word whom it can never contain or encapsulate, represent or embody. Under the conditions of this earthly life it is and will always inevitably be fallible and antepenultimate. Neither biblical conservatism nor confessional rectitude can in itself guarantee evangelical truth, no more than ecclesiastical traditionalism or pious pragmatism, or even the best and highest dogmatic theology or the most subtle and sensitive analysis of the human condition. All these are in the end of value only as they are continually drawn into subjection to Jesus Christ as “the one Word of God whom we have to hear and obey in life and in death”.²⁸

²⁶ *Church Dogmatics* 1/1. 2nd edn, translated by G W Bromiley. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975, 3-24.

²⁷ Op cit, 248-292.

²⁸ Article One of the *Theological Declaration of Barmen* (1934). – It was precisely this sense of being bound to the one Word which has been spoken, is spoken and will be spoken that enabled Barth to describe evangelical theology as a *modest, free critical and happy science*, as in his *Evangelical Theology: an Introduction*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1963, 6-12.

Schleiermacher was inclined, in the wake of the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement, to search for an eternally permanent, self-identical “essence” inserted in Jesus Christ himself as the Word of mercy and judgment. For Barth judgment and mercy spoke once and for all over all humanity and therefore as the Word which is always new, always immediate, always challenging, always calling, always commissioning. The difference can be expressed by saying that Schleiermacher sought to be an advocate of Christianity, Barth of Jesus Christ. But it would be truer to say that Barth aimed to direct us more radically and directly to what Schleiermacher also sensed and sought after, but pointed to only indirectly.