Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is widely recognized as one of the most influential theologians in the history of the Christian Church. He served as pastor in Berlin from 1796-1802, where he preached regularly and wrote reviews and articles on occasion. He was appointed as the first preacher of the University of Halle in 1804, but returned to Berlin in 1807, where he began teaching at the University of Berlin in 1808. It was at the University of Berlin that Schleiermacher enjoyed the height of his influence, and he remained at his position as professor of theology there until his death in 1834. The majority of his teaching responsibilities at the University were in the area of New Testament studies, but he also lectured on a variety of other topics, such as dogmatics, Church history, and ethics.¹

Schleiermacher’s system of thought is not reducible to any one tradition, though he is most accurately categorized as a theologian of the nineteenth century German Romantic School. He is a vastly perplexing theologian who believed himself to be well within the Reformed tradition, while subsequent commentators on his thought have declared his system to be everything from distinctively Reformed (Schweizer) to fundamentally non-Christian (Brunner).²

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¹ A brief but informative biographical sketch of Schleiermacher may be found in Terrance Tice, Schleiermacher (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.), 1-17.

Yet, as difficult as Schleiermacher can be to understand, his towering theological influence has been felt in the Christian Church for nearly two centuries.

On all accounts, the most important, valuable, and lasting of Schleiermacher’s contributions to modern theology is his two volume magnum opus, *The Christian Faith*. B.A. Gerrish has stated concerning this work, “Schleiermacher’s great theological treatise, *The Christian Faith* (first published in 1921-1922), is… judged to be a work of epoch-making significance, to be ranked with the *Institutes* of John Calvin… as one of the masterpieces of Protestant thought.”

It is the content of this great work which will be the focus of the following paper.

Schleiermacher’s thought was conditioned by his conviction that the essence of religion lay in the Feeling of absolute dependence upon God, and that the primary need which mankind has is the need to be restored to God-consciousness. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that these fundamental features of Schleiermacher’s system dramatically impacted his understanding of both the nature of man and the nature of sin, which in effect also conditioned how he conceived of the person and work of Jesus Christ. We will begin by offering a summary of Schleiermacher’s treatment of the foundational elements of his thought in *The Christian Faith*. After this conceptual foundation is laid we will look specifically at how the notions of absolute dependence and God-consciousness impacted Schleiermacher’s depiction of human nature and Original Sin. This will be followed by an analysis of Schleiermacher’s treatment of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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The Feeling of Absolute Dependence and God-Consciousness

Schleiermacher begins his magnum opus by setting down, at the outset, the fundamental principle of his theological method: the supremacy of that which is inward and essential over that which is outward and accidental. He makes it clear that the essential element of the Christian religion is to be found in an inner Feeling of man, rather than in Knowing or Doing: “The piety which forms the basis of all ecclesiastical communions is, considered purely in itself, neither a Knowing nor a Doing, but a modification of Feeling, or of immediate self-consciousness.”

This emphasis on the inward does not negate the importance of the outward for Schleiermacher, but it does set in proper order the place we give to various aspects of religion in our thinking. It clarifies that the external is always conditioned and made manifest through more fundamental internal processes. Theological propositions, for instance, are subject to criticism, adaptation, and change, while the inner life of the Christian community which stimulates the formulation of such propositions always remains the same. Schleiermacher’s system, then, is conditioned by an inner-outer dialectic, which seeks to get at what is essential and fundamental in each area of Christian doctrine.

Schleiermacher argues that, as Feeling is that one aspect of human nature which is fully passive and internal, it is to be seen as the most foundational element in religion. All of life is seen by him to consist either of what is internal—“abiding-in-self”—or what is external—“passing-beyond-self.” Three elements come into view here: Feeling, Thinking, and Doing. Doing is purely a “passing-beyond-self,” which is conditioned and motivated by what is internal.

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5 See Tice, Schleiermacher, 21-22.
Thinking is both an “abiding-in-self” and a “passing-beyond-self.” But Feeling is the only aspect of human life which is purely an “abiding-in-self,” and is accordingly that one aspect of man which is to be viewed as most essential, as it gives rise to the other two. Schleiermacher explains:

Life, then, is to be conceived as an alternation between an abiding-in-self (Insichbleiben) and a passing-beyond-self (Aussichheraustreten) on the part of the subject. The two forms of consciousness (Knowing and Feeling) constitute the abiding-in-self, while Doing proper is the passing-beyond-self. Thus far, then, Knowing and Feeling stand together in antithesis to Doing. But while Knowing, in the sense of possessing knowledge, is an abiding-in-self on the part of the subject, nevertheless as the act of knowing, it only becomes real by a passing-beyond-self of the subject, and in this sense it is a Doing. As regards Feeling, on the other hand, it is not only in its duration as a result of stimulation that it is an abiding-in-self: even as the process of being stimulated, it is not effected by the subject, but simply takes in the subject, and thus, since it belongs altogether to the realm of receptivity, it is entirely an abiding-in-self; and in this sense it stands alone in antithesis to the other two—Knowing and Doing.”

This internal-external dialectic therefore forms the foundation for the key element in Schleiermacher’s thought, which is his idea that the essence of religion lies in the realm of Feeling.

Schleiermacher contends that the essential Feeling in religion is absolute dependence. Therefore, as Feeling is the most essential element of human life, and as absolute dependence is the essential Feeling of religion, the essence of religion is to be located in the Feeling of absolute dependence. The idea of “God” is the human expression of this feeling of absolute dependence, which is itself the essence of religion.

If, however, word and idea are always originally one, and the term ‘God’ therefore presupposes an idea, then we shall simply say that this idea, which is nothing more than the expression of the feeling of absolute dependence, is the most direct reflection upon it

6 The Christian Faith, 8.

7 Ibid. 12-18.
and the most original idea with which we are here concerned, and is quite independent of that original knowledge... and conditioned only by our feeling of absolute dependence.  

Thus, Schleiermacher concludes, the Feeling of absolute dependence is essentially one with the consciousness of God, for it necessarily gives rise to God-consciousness:

Now this is just what is principally meant by the formula which says that to feel oneself absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation with God are one and the same thing; and the reason is that absolute dependence is the fundamental relation which must include all others in itself. This last expression includes the God-consciousness in the self-consciousness in such a way that, quite in accordance with the above analysis, the two cannot be separated from each other. 

Accordingly, self-consciousness is always at bottom a consciousness of being absolutely dependent, which is itself also a consciousness of the one to whom we are dependent—God—and therefore a consciousness of God may be said to be included in the essence of religion, as it is in a sense included in the feeling of absolute dependence. Therefore, the degree to which one is conscious of God, or the degree to which the feeling of absolute dependence is realized in the individual, is the measure of one’s piety. God-consciousness is consequently the highest level of human self-consciousness.

Schleiermacher thus sees religious self-consciousness as an essential element of human nature and that fundamental thing in man out of which all religions of the world have arisen, with lower and higher forms of development. Christianity is the highest form of this religious development, and the distinguishing feature of Christianity among monotheistic faiths is that “in it everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth.” 

8 Ibid. 17.  
9 Ibid. 17.  
10 Ibid. 18.  
11 Ibid. 30-40
the human person, Jesus Christ, is the essence of the Christian religion, as he is the one constant which runs through all the various expressions of Christian faith.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{The Corporate Nature of Human Sinfulness}

According to Schleiermacher, the world and man as created in the world were originally perfect. But what he means by this is somewhat ambiguous if we do not keep in mind the preceding treatment concerning the essence of religion residing in the feeling of absolute dependence and God-consciousness. He does not mean to imply an \textit{absolute} perfection in creation and man as many often like to think of it (i.e. a state of absolute unencumbered bliss and purity). Rather, he views the perfection of creation and of mankind specifically in relation to the idea of God-consciousness. Thus, the world as originally created by God was perfect in that it was ideally suited to aid man in the formation of his self-identity:

\begin{quote}
the original perfection of the world consists primarily in this, that in it is temporally grounded the excitation of passive states which are to pass into active states… or, in other words, that they sufficiently determine the receptivity of man to the awakening and shaping of his self-identity.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Similarly, the original perfection of man is not to be located in a state of moral perfection, but rather in his capacity and potential to achieve a consciousness of God with the aid of the world as the medium perfectly suited to help him in attaining that end. Schleiermacher explains:

\begin{quote}
The predisposition to God-consciousness, as an inner impulse, includes the consciousness of a faculty of attaining, by means of the human organism, to those states of self-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 52-60.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 238. Man’s self-identity, it is important to keep in mind, is always for Schleiermacher fundamentally the feeling of absolute dependence and God-consciousness.
consciousness in which the God-consciousness can realize itself; and the impulse inseparable therefrom to express the God-consciousness includes in like manner the connexion of the race-consciousness with the personal consciousness; and both together form man’s original perfection.\textsuperscript{14}

Man’s original righteousness therefore consisted in a higher degree of self-consciousness which has since been lost, only to be recovered in the person and work of the Redeemer.\textsuperscript{15}

Schleiermacher reveals his conception of human sinfulness progressively. He begins by stating, quite ambiguously, that “we may regard sin on the one hand as simply that which would not be unless redemption was to be; or on the other as that which, as it is to disappear, can only disappear through redemption.”\textsuperscript{16} He moves on from this general statement to claim that the self-consciousness conceives sin as “a positive antagonism of the flesh against the spirit.”\textsuperscript{17} After this we are finally provided with Schleiermacher’s most specific definition of sin as the sensual desires which militate against man’s God-consciousness. Sin is therefore, “an arrestment of the determinative power of the spirit, due to the independence of the sensuous faculties.”\textsuperscript{18}

This conceptual foundation for the nature of sin being laid, Schleiermacher goes on to formulate his understanding of original and actual sin, respectively. Original Sin is that which rests in the nature of man, while actual sin is that which consists in outward action. As his inner-outer dialectic would seem to necessitate, Schleiermacher focuses primarily on Original Sin as the real problem of humanity, for it is the internal defect in human nature and is therefore also the most essential aspect of human sinfulness. He defines Original Sin as, “The sinfulness that is

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 244.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 256.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 270.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 271.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 273.
present in an individual prior to any action of his own, and has its ground outside his own being.” This human sinfulness “is in every case a complete incapacity for good, which can be removed only through the influence of Redemption.”

Schleiermacher consequently views Original Sin as personal to all men. Because of the corporate solidarity of the race, Original Sin is not merely the first sin committed which resulted in a fall of mankind from a state of blessedness and imputed guilt or corruption to all. Rather, it is “so really the personal guilt of every individual who shares in it that it is best represented as the corporate act and the corporate guilt of the human race.” Original sin is thus the underlying corruption of human nature which always manifests itself in actual sins.

Conspicuous in Schleiermacher’s treatment of Original Sin is the absence of any adherence to a traditional understanding of the fall of mankind due to the sin of the first man and consequently also an absence of any hint of an imputation—whether mediate or immediate—of the guilt or corruption of that sin to all men. He does seem to view the first sin as having a detrimental universal affect on mankind, but he does not come to any conclusion on whether the first sin was actually committed by the first man, and he explicitly denies the idea that the first sin brought about any actual change in human nature. According to Schleiermacher, the nature of Adam and Eve was corrupt even before they sinned, else they would not have sinned.

19 Ibid. 282.
20 Ibid. 285.
21 Ibid. 286-287.
22 Schleiermacher declines to answer the question of whether the Genesis 1-3 narrative is historical or not, nor does he seem to think it matters much. What is most important to him is what the narrative teaches us: Eve demonstrates the “independent activity of the sensuous element that develops so readily upon any external incentive by way of opposition to a divine
Hence, “Original Sin” was at work within the first parents of fallen humanity before they committed the first act of sin, and this state of corruption which was at work within them is now similarly at work in all mankind, and brings the world of humanity to commit actual sins as a result of the corruption inherited from them. Schleiermacher explains therefore that Original Sin is the corporate sinfulness of humanity, which is only expiated through the redemption brought by Christ: “corporate sin is the corporate act of the human race, originating in the first human beings, and can be taken away only by the activity of Christ, which likewise extends to all mankind.”

Schleiermacher accordingly denies that any change took place in human nature as a consequence of the first act of sin, and maintains that “what is now innate sinfulness was also something native to the first pair.” This, Schleiermacher contends, is perfectly consistent with man being created with original righteousness, so long as we maintain with him that the original righteousness with which man was created consisted in his potential for the development of a God-consciousness rather than a state of absolute moral purity. Adam and Eve were in fact, we are told, originally created with the potential for God-consciousness as well as a sensual nature which had the potential to overthrow this God-consciousness.

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23 Ibid. 300.
24 Ibid. 301.
25 Ibid. 301-302.
Hence, Original Sin is not to be located in the action of the first man. Rather, it is the shared underlying sinfulness of all men which drowns out man’s capacity for God-consciousness. There was undoubtedly a first sinfulness which was acted upon, which Schleiermacher refers to as “originating original sin,” (thus rendering all subsequent sinful actions “originated original sin”), but this was not different in kind or significance to other sins aside from the fact that it was the first sin. Each generation of men can even be said to possess both “originating original sin” with relation to subsequent generations as well as “originated original sin” with relation to previous generations. Speaking of the distinction here mentioned, Schleiermacher states:

On the one hand, we use this distinction to set forth the interrelationship of all who are living at one time, the actual sin of those who play a more vigorous and stimulating role being the originating, that of the more passive the originated; on the other hand, the collective sin of each generation is in turn originating with respect to the sinfulness of the succeeding one, just as that sin itself is rooted in the original sin originated by the earlier. In this compact group of ideas sin in general, and original sin in particular, are seen to be the corporate action and corporate guilt of the whole human race.\(^26\)

To summarize Schleiermacher’s conception of Original Sin: it is that corporate sinfulness which humanity universally possesses and acts upon, which Schleiermacher understands as the tendency of the sensual nature to suppress and vitiate man’s capacity for God-consciousness. This original sinfulness, which is “the corporate act and corporate guilt of the human race,” manifests itself in all men by way of actual sins.\(^27\)

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\(^26\) Ibid. 304.

\(^27\) Ibid. 304-306.
B.A. Gerrish has stated that “it is ‘Christology’—the doctrine of the person of Christ—that dominates Schleiermacher’s theological reflection from beginning to end.” This may very well be true. However, at least with regard to his treatment of the various topics in *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher’s Christology itself seems to have been thoroughly conditioned by his conception of the essence of religion in general (the Feeling of absolute dependence leading to God-consciousness) and of human nature and Original Sin in particular.

According to Schleiermacher, all religions demonstrate that man is inwardly conscious that he cannot rid himself of his natural misery (Original Sin) on his own, but is in need of special divine aid. All religions in the world, in a word, are inclined toward Christianity; for they express the consciousness of mankind that there must be a Redeemer who can restore man to a state of God-consciousness. The supremacy of Christianity over other religions is to be seen in the fact that it alone holds forth not only the promise of forgiveness of sins and the development of a God-consciousness, but it also actually provides, through Jesus Christ, the power to develop this God-consciousness in man, the natural potential for which has been drowned out by the sensual desire brought about through Original Sin.

Just as one is ensnared by Original Sin through taking part in the corporate sin of the human race, so one becomes conscious of divine grace by entering the state of corporate blessedness which has its origin in the sinless perfection of Christ. Thus, what is necessary for the redemption of an individual is a self-conscious awareness of the sinful state of man as well as

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30 Ibid. 358.
an awareness that his only hope to achieve God-consciousness is through partaking of the corporate blessedness—“a new divinely effected corporate life”—of the redeemed community.\textsuperscript{31}

This new corporate life, which is the antithesis of the old corporate life contaminated through sin, has been introduced into humanity through the perfect God-consciousness of Jesus of Nazareth, and is communicated to the redeemed community from him. And herein lies the nature of Christian redemption in Schleiermacher’s system. It is fundamentally a participation in the new creation begun in Christ: “In this corporate life which goes back to the influence of Jesus, redemption is effected by Him through the communication of his sinless perfection.”\textsuperscript{32} It is vital to keep in mind here that what Schleiermacher means by the “sinless perfection” of Jesus is not necessarily his abstaining from sinful acts and doing righteous deeds (though this would be the outward manifestation of it), but more fundamental is the fact that Jesus possessed a perfect God-consciousness. Jesus doing good deeds or accomplishing a certain task is not what is important in Schleiermacher’s system of thought, because for him what is most essential to humanity is the feeling of absolute dependence and God-consciousness.

Thus, Schleiermacher is much more concerned to talk about Christ’s life, that is, his “God-consciousness,” than his death or atonement, because the primary need which man possesses is his need to have his original potential for God-consciousness restored.\textsuperscript{33} And this is precisely what Jesus Christ brought to the race. Through a supernatural divine work, Jesus of Nazareth was born into humanity, but also outside of the corporate life of sin. In him, the supernatural has become natural:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. 358-359.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. 361.
\textsuperscript{33} See Tice, Schleiermacher, 37.
\end{quote}
In the corporate life of sinfulness sin propagates itself naturally, so that an unhindered potency of the God-consciousness in Jesus cannot be understood simply as a product of that life. This God-consciousness, manifesting itself in this potency, can have come into existence only outside the sinful corporate life. And since the whole human race is included in this sinful corporate life, we must believe that this God-consciousness had a supernatural origin… So, too, in relation to the Redeemer himself, the new corporate life is no miracle, but simply the supernatural becoming natural… But in relation to the corporate life of sinfulness, which hitherto had included everything and dominated every formation, the new is something that has come into being supernaturally. The same is true of the passage of every individual from the old corporate life into the new.34

In Jesus Christ we therefore see the perfection of human nature—the full embodiment of the supremacy of the God-consciousness over sensual desire.35 Christ is “the One in whom the human creation is perfected,” and he is thus emphatically the Second Adam: “For this Second Adam is altogether like all those who are descended from the first, only that from the outset he has an absolutely potent God-consciousness.”36 The significance of Christ as the Second Adam, however (as one might guess), does not lie in that he accomplished the things which Adam could not accomplish. Rather, it is in that he is the “second Created One.”37 Though being in a sense created perfect, in that it possessed the potential for the development of a perfect God-consciousness, the human race was in another sense created originally imperfect, for the capacity in man for the development of sensual desire existed alongside the potential for God-consciousness. But this was not so with Christ, who was the truly perfect man: “the God-consciousness in the race to begin with was inadequate and impotent, and only later broke forth

36 Ibid. 367.
37 Ibid. 368.
in perfection in Christ, from whom it continually extends its authority, and proves its power to bring peace and blessedness to men.”\textsuperscript{38}

Consequently, for Schleiermacher, it does not matter in the end whether Christ was fully divine or not. In fact, he rejected both the orthodox formulations of the Trinity as well as the person of Christ.\textsuperscript{39} This was the case because, as Gerrish has pointed out, Schleiermacher wanted to “get back behind the church’s formulas to actual Christian experience, and so to see whether better formulas could be devised which would preserve the intention of the old ones without their defects.”\textsuperscript{40} In other words, in Schleiermacher’s own system of thought, wherein the Feeling of absolute dependence is the most foundational element of religion and in which the restoration of the capacity for God-consciousness is man’s deepest need, the old orthodox dogmas concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ hold little practical force. Rather, what is essential for Schleiermacher is that Christ be understood as a truly human being in every way—indeed, as the perfection of humanity—who possessed a perfect God-consciousness, thus bringing into realization in space and time the full potential of human nature, thereby communicating to humanity a new corporate life which would counteract the old corporate life that stands corrupted through sinfulness, consequently creating a new humanity which has its origin in his own sinless perfection.

Thus, in Schleiermacher’s understanding, the man Jesus Christ was not God, strictly speaking, but he was nevertheless the only one through whom the divine presence entered into humanity. He possessed a perfect God-consciousness, which is, Schleiermacher contends,

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 368

\textsuperscript{39} He held to positions akin to Sabellianism and Adoptionism, respectively.

\textsuperscript{40} A Prince of the Church, 53.
synonymous with saying that God dwelt in him: “to ascribe to Christ an absolutely powerful God-consciousness, and to attribute to him an existence of God in him, are exactly the same thing.”41 Because of this, Jesus of Nazareth is the only Redeemer of mankind, for “He alone mediates all existence of God in the world and all revelation of God through the world, in so far as he bears within himself the whole new creation which contains and develops the potency of the God-consciousness.”42

Conclusion

Thus we have seen that Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theological system is conditioned throughout by an inner-outer dialectic which emphasizes the inward and essential over the outward and accidental. This focus on the inward led Schleiermacher to locate the essence of religion in the Feeling of absolute dependence over against the related elements of Knowing and Doing. Schleiermacher connects this Feeling of absolute dependence to the idea of God, thus concluding that God-consciousness is included in the essence of religion as that ideal to which humanity is striving. These foundational elements of Schleiermacher’s thought dramatically impacted his understanding of the nature of man as well as his conception of Original Sin. Man was originally created perfect, that is, he possessed within himself the potential for the development of a perfect God-consciousness. However, along with this potential for God-consciousness there existed in mankind from the start a potential for the development of sensual desire which might, if allowed to go unchecked, obliterate the potential for God-consciousness. Hence, Schleiermacher saw the Original Sin of mankind as the corporate sinfulness whereby

41 The Christian Faith, 387.
42 Ibid. 388.
sensual desire drowns out the potential for God-consciousness. There was a first act of sin, but this brought no dramatic change in the nature of man. Rather, Original Sin is personal to every man, as it is simply the part each man has in the corporate sinfulness of mankind in general which has destroyed his capacity for perfect God-consciousness. This conception of human sinfulness had dramatic implications for Schleiermacher’s depiction of the person and work of Christ. Jesus came as the new creation, the perfect man who possessed a perfect God-consciousness. He is the Redeemer who was supernaturally kept from the corporate sinfulness of mankind and who fulfilled his potential for perfect God-consciousness. What Jesus said or did is not nearly as important as who he was: the ideal man who has communicated a new corporate life into the human race through which mankind may now be redeemed by taking part in the community within which the potential for God-consciousness has been restored by Jesus of Nazareth.


__________. *Tradition in the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century.*

