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Friedrich Schleiermacher

His Contribution to New Testament Studies

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INTRODUCTION

FRIEDRICH DANIEL ERNST SCHLEIERMACHER (1768–1834) is often referred to as the father of modern theology and thus not only the originator of new theology, but of a new era.¹ Mariña ranks him with Calvin, Aquinas, and Augustine.² The claim that he is the father of modern liberalism is certainly justified, but too simplistic. Unlike Luther, Schleiermacher consciously endeavored to revolutionize the area of theology. He had a total reconstruction of Christian theology in mind.³

Schleiermacher's importance within the field of New Testament research is, however, often overlooked.⁴ This topic will be the main focus in our treatment of Schleiermacher, accounting for and discussing his *Introduction to the New Testament*, *The Life of Jesus*, and his *Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke*, Schleiermacher's primary exegetical work on that Gospel. Below, an initial overview of Schleiermacher's life is given; a short section introduces some principal characteristics of his theological outlook; then, as mentioned, the bulk of the article focuses on Schleiermacher's New Testament research. In my concluding remarks an evaluation of Friedrich Schleiermacher's contributions is attempted.

1. Karl Barth uses the same words that Schleiermacher himself used about Frederick the Great to define Schleiermacher's contribution: "He did not found a school, but an era" (Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 425).

2. Mariña, "Introduction," 1.

3. Christian, *Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 12–13.

4. Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 208–9; Helmer, "Schleiermacher's Exegetical Theology," 229.

THE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

In the case of Schleiermacher, it may be argued that to an unusual degree his own life and personal experiences made up the context for everything he wrote, and conditioned it. Therefore, a fairly detailed overview of Schleiermacher's life will be provided. Terrence Tice lists and accounts for as many as thirteen crucial events in Schleiermacher's life that he argues had a formative influence on his thought.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was born in 1768 into a family where he became the third in a line of Reformed preachers. Friedrich's father, Gottlieb Schleiermacher, was a Reformed army chaplain and his mother, Katharina-Maria Stubenrauch, was an unusually devout Christian.⁵ Because of the Bayer Succession war in 1778, the Schleiermacher family had to move from Breslau to Pless. It was in the Herrnhuter Brethren⁶ colony Gnadenfrei near his new home that the eleven-year-old Friedrich came to the understanding that eternal life was granted to humanity by grace and not as reward for a virtuous life. A few years later, in April 1783, when the family spent two weeks in Gnadenfrei, Friedrich experienced what he later would refer to as the birth of his "higher life":

Here my consciousness of the relation of human beings to a higher world first arose . . . Here there first developed that mystical disposition which is so essential to me and has saved and preserved me under all assaults of skepticism.⁷

In his autobiography, there is a letter from Schleiermacher where he writes to his sister about his experience among the Herrnhut brethren:

There is not throughout Christendom, in our day, a form of public worship which expresses more worthily, and awakens more thoroughly the spirit of true Christian piety, than does that of the Herrnhut brotherhood!⁸

The pietistic element of Herrnhut came to be a decisive element of Schleiermacher's thought, even though he broke with the biblical literalism and orthodoxy of the Herrnhut Brethren. In the Brethren school in Niesky, Schleiermacher received an excellent education and developed a strong self-discipline. After two years in Niesky, Schleiermacher and his close friend Johann Baptist von Albertini were promoted to the Brethren school in Barby that educated pastors and teachers. In the months

5. Tice, *Schleiermacher*, 1.

6. The Herrnhuter Brethren had earlier been located in Moravia, but had been expelled by the Hapsburgs during the Thirty Years' War. The Brethren settled in Herrnhut, a small village built on the lands of Count Zinzendorf, who later became the bishop of the Brethren. The Herrnhut Brethren became known for educational excellence, their international work in missions, and their enthusiastic and warm piety. The Herrnhut community still exists and continues its international work. Herrnhut had also certainly contributed to what came to be Methodism when John Wesley visited Herrnhut fifty years before Schleiermacher (Tice, *Schleiermacher*, 2–3).

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

8. Schleiermacher, *Life of Schleiermacher*, 2:23.