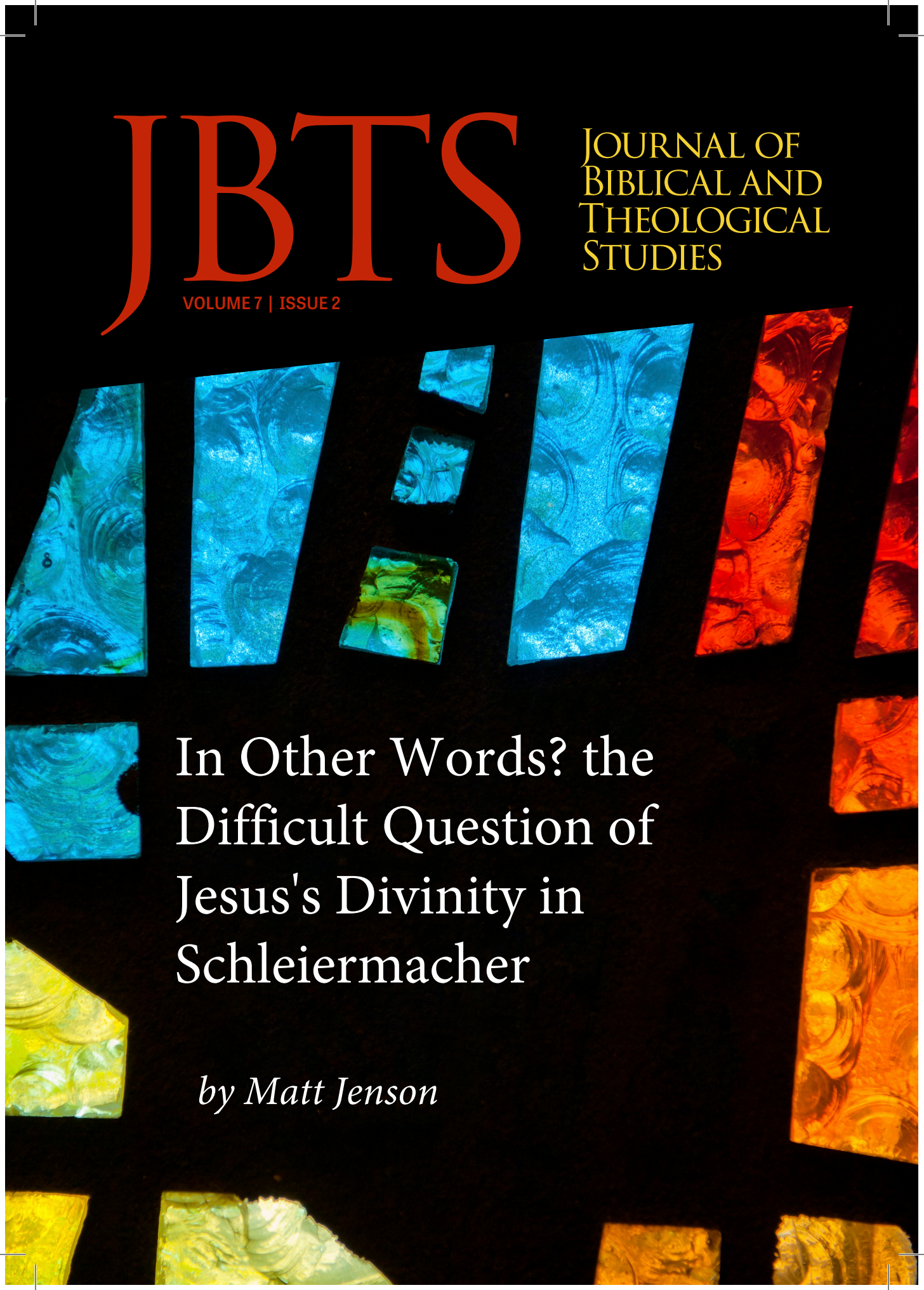


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In Other Words? the Difficult Question of Jesus's Divinity in Schleiermacher

by Matt Jenson

In Other Words? The Difficult Question of Jesus’s Divinity in Schleiermacher*

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Abstract: The apparently straightforward question of whether Friedrich Schleiermacher believed that Jesus is God proves surprisingly complex. As a teenager, he confessed to his father that he had lost his faith; but later he claimed to have become a pietist again, if of a higher order. He sharply critiqued Chalcedonian categories but spoke of “an actual being of God in [Christ].” Perhaps Schleiermacher offers an orthodox Christology in other words, one that purifies philosophical categories while retaining the central biblical witness to Jesus as God in the flesh. In the end, however, I argue a cumulative case on the basis of epistolary, exegetical, and dogmatic evidence that Schleiermacher persevered in his unbelief “that He, who called Himself the Son of Man, was the true, eternal God.”

Introduction

At the age of eighteen, Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote an anguished letter to his father, in which he confessed:

I cannot believe that He, who called Himself the Son of Man, was the true, eternal God: I cannot believe that His death was a vicarious atonement, because He never expressly said so Himself; and I cannot believe it to have been necessary, because God, who evidently did not create men for perfection, but for the pursuit of it, cannot possibly intend to punish them eternally, because they have not attained it.

Schleiermacher had lost his faith. He pled with his father to pray that God would give him faith again, if his father did believe that “without this faith, no one can attain to salvation in the next world, nor to tranquility in this.” And yet he asked him to “not look upon [his current beliefs] as merely transient views, without deep roots. During almost a whole year they have had a hold upon me, and it is long and earnest reflection that has determined me to adopt them.”¹

* Portions of this article appear in Matt Jenson, *Theology in the Democracy of the Dead: A Dialogue with the Living Tradition* (Baker Academic, 2019). Used by permission.

Twenty years later, upon returning to the place of his conversion among Moravian pietists, Schleiermacher seemed more sanguine about the faith of his father. In the intervening years, he suggested, he had become a “Herrnhuter [Moravian] again, only of a higher order.”² Much hangs on the entailments of the phrase “higher order.” Had Schleiermacher rediscovered religious affection only to empty it of its Christian content? One might easily guess as much from an examination of his *Speeches*. And yet, he spent the later decades of his life as a pastor, preaching and commending the faith of Jesus, and writing a magisterial dogmatic work in which he draws much nearer to the language of Christian faith.

In this article, I will examine the question of Jesus’s divinity in Schleiermacher—one that would seem straightforward enough, and surely easy to determine, but which proves surprisingly complex. Recent scholars fall on either side of the question, which turns on the issue of whether Schleiermacher sought to adhere to a somewhat orthodox biblical account of Christ’s divinity, albeit one purified by the acids of critique, or whether his critical moves amount to an abandonment of the belief that Christ is God, despite his warmth towards Jesus and Jesus’s central place in *Christian Faith*.³ Did he, in the end, persevere in his unbelief “that He, who called Himself the Son of Man, was the true, eternal God”?

1. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Schleiermacher as Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, trans. Frederica Rowan (London: Smith, Elder, 1860), 1:46–47.

2. Schleiermacher, *Life of Schleiermacher*, 1:284. It is worth quoting Schleiermacher’s letter to George Reimer at length: “Here it was for the first time I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world—in a diminutive form, it is true, just as it is said that spirits sometimes appear in the form of children and dwarfs; but they are nevertheless spirits, and as regards essentials therefore, it comes to the same thing. Here it was that that mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of scepticism. Then it was only germinating, now it has attained its full development, and I may say, that after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter again, only of a higher order” (283–84).

3. Terrence Tice says Schleiermacher does not believe Jesus is God; Kevin Hector says he does. Tice and Hector can be seen as two ends of a spectrum along which scholars place Schleiermacher in relation to the tradition. Tice celebrates Schleiermacher’s truly liberal theology, free from traditional constraints, whereas Hector finds in Schleiermacher a postmetaphysical theology that is far more amenable to traditional commitments than Schleiermacher himself realized. We might situate Brian Gerrish somewhere between the two, as he sets Schleiermacher in the context of Reformed theology as one who “continued the Reformation.” That such careful scholars could take such divergent opinions is enough to suggest something of the complexity of the question and to warrant our taking another look at the father of modern theology. Tice, *Schleiermacher* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 37; Hector, “Actualism and Incarnation: The High Christology of Friedrich Schleiermacher,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), 307–22. Gerrish, *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Schleiermacher Writes a Letter to His Wife

To begin with, let's consider a letter Schleiermacher wrote to his wife, Henriette von Mühlenfels. Henriette had been the widow of one of Schleiermacher's friends. When the two married he was forty and she was twenty-one, and Henriette "respected Schleiermacher like a father."⁴ Despite their difference in age and maturity, Schleiermacher sought to honor the integrity of his wife's religious experience. At least once, however, he stepped in. Apparently, Henriette was encouraging the children to worship Jesus. This would seem to be right and good, but Schleiermacher wrote and asked his wife to adjust her approach.

I first learned about this letter in a footnote in Abraham Kunnuthara's book *Schleiermacher on Christian Consciousness of God's Work in History*. Kunnuthara tells of a personal note he received from Terrence Tice, one of the great Schleiermacher scholars of our day and the co-translator of the recent English translation of *Christian Faith*. Tice wrote that "in a letter he (S) once strongly admonished his wife against encouraging Jesus-worship, saying that the authentic reference is always to God in Christ, to our communion with God in and through Christ (and he could easily have added: This is what we call the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit)."⁵ This would seem to be definitive, proving that Schleiermacher did not believe Jesus to be God. There's nothing heterodox, of course, with speaking of God in Christ or emphasizing that our communion with God occurs in and through Christ. But when this comes in the context of discouraging the worship of Jesus, it seems clear that, whatever exalted position Jesus might have in mediating God's work in the world, he does so as less than God.

Still, that is quite a claim. I needed to check my conclusion against the letter itself. Along the way, Terry Tice and I became friends. He was a remarkably kind and generous man, a latter-day Schleiermacher in his warmth and genius for friendship. Terry and I corresponded off and on for quite a while, spoke on the phone, and then met up for lunch in Denver a few years ago. After lunch, we went back to his condo to hunt for the letter, which I had had a difficult time tracking down.⁶ After a couple of hours, we found it, as excited as two boys on a treasure hunt. Here is the relevant section, which makes up the bulk of the letter:

In reference to your letter to Hildchen, darling mother, I have something on my mind. You have adopted the way of speaking constantly of the Saviour and placing God quite in the background. If it be the Saviour also who speaks to us from nature, then there can hardly be any direct relation more between

4. Martin Redeker, *Schleiermacher: Life and Thought*, trans. John Wallhauser (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 210.

5. Abraham Kunnuthara, *Schleiermacher on Christian Consciousness of God's Work in History* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 45n8.

6. To say the least! I had contacted most of the senior English-language Schleiermacher experts in search of it. No one could help.

us and God. And yet Christ himself seeks above all to impress upon us that through him we come to the Father, and that the Father abides in us. In your way the true simplicity of Christianity is absorbed in some self-made system that Christ would not have approved. I am so afraid that the poor girl may get confused between your ways and mine; for she is no longer so wanting in reflection as not to be struck by the discrepancy. Dearest heart, do try to hold fast the belief that *with* Christ and *through* Christ, we are to rejoice in his and our Father.⁷

What Tice remembered as a clear indication that Schleiermacher rejects the worship of Jesus turns out to admit of a more subtle interpretation.⁸ True, Schleiermacher does not want his children's piety terminating at Christ. We do not come *to* Christ so much as come *through* Christ to the Father. Christ is the one mediator; he is the way. But how strange if we confuse the way for the destination, confuse the one who brings us to God with God himself. Notice how even my language hops back and forth between orthodox Christological categories (Christ as mediator, the one in and through whom we approach the Father) and more suspect language (a way which is other than the destination). It is more difficult than I first thought to determine if Schleiermacher is only drawing his wife back to a properly Johannine insight, that "no one comes to the Father except through" Jesus (John 14:6), or if he is suggesting a subordinationist Christology, even a Christology in which Christ's mediation exhausts his uniqueness. Surely, he is right to invite his family "*with* Christ and *through* Christ . . . to rejoice in his and our Father." But whether he would join the angels who praise the Lamb who was slain, declaring him worthy of "honor and glory" is another question (Rev. 5:12).

The Same Thing in Other Words?

In the question of how to interpret Schleiermacher's words to his wife, much hangs on the nature and extent of his criticism of traditional Christological terms. Schleiermacher is forthright in his judgments about the incoherence and inaptitude

7. Schleiermacher, *Life of Schleiermacher*, 2:326.

8. In fact, the ambiguity of the letter is such that I later discovered that I had found this letter months earlier, emailed Tice about it, and determined it could not be the letter to which he had referred in his note to Abraham Kunnuthara! Tice seems to read Schleiermacher in a strongly heterodox direction (rightly or wrongly). One bit of evidence can be found in a shift in translation. J. Y. Campbell, in the older Mackintosh and Stewart edition (1928), had rendered "unbedingteste Verehrung" (*Christian Faith* §96.1) as our "unconditional adoration" of Christ, but this becomes an "unqualified respect" in Tice's edition (2016). One can speak of our "Verehrung" for the saints, so "adoration" is too strong; but "respect" is likewise too weak. Neither translation seems to have quite captured Schleiermacher's sense. For the German, see Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, *Zweite Auflage* (1830/31), ed. Rolf Schäfer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). Thanks to Mark Elliott for his help on this.

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of the language of Chalcedon. "Nature," for instance, is fraught with problems. For one thing, it is "used commensurately for what is divine and what is human," illicitly bringing God and the world under one genus.⁹ There's a problem, then, in ascribing a nature to God. There's an additional problem in speaking of Christ as one person in two natures—which confuses our common use of those terms. We speak, instead, of two people who share a nature. What would it mean to speak of one person sharing two natures? "How, then, is the unity of a person's life to endure with the duality of natures without the one yielding to the other when the one offers a larger and the other a narrower course of life, or, without the two natures blending into each other, in that the two systems of law and conduct actually become one in the one life?"¹⁰ Still more confusing is the inversion of these terms in trinitarian theology, so that "we then maintain in the one place three persons in *one* being and in the other place *one* person out of two natures."¹¹

Schleiermacher finds all this language intolerably scholastic, too far from the language and experience of faith, philosophically incoherent and theologically not up to the task. He finds it necessary to no longer treat "Supreme Being as a nature," and he seeks "to denote the interrelation of what was divine and what was human in the Redeemer in such a way that the two expressions—most troublesome, to put it mildly—namely, 'divine nature' and 'duality of natures in the same person,' are avoided entirely."¹² However we speak of him, then, we cannot say that Jesus has a divine nature.

Clearly, Schleiermacher's critique is radical. But here we should step back for a moment and ask: Can we say that Jesus is God in other words? More specifically, can we say that Jesus is God in non-conciliar words? In one sense, this must be possible. The Bible "says" that Jesus is God—we must confess that, whether we do so with reference to specific prooftexts or in terms of the *skopos* of Scripture—and yet it does so without the benefit of Nicaea and Chalcedon. That much should be non-controversial. And while a commitment to *sola scriptura* pairs exceedingly well with an affirmation of the relative authority of the ecumenical creeds, one can imagine a faithful biblical Christianity that is completely ignorant of Nicaea and Chalcedon. The task, then, is to do just that—*imagine* such a Christianity, and then test it against the rule of Scripture.

This is an issue both for those interested in alternative metaphysical projects and those involved in contextualization in non-Western contexts. In his fascinating reconsideration of theology under the conditions of modernity, Kevin Hector has

9. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, and Edwina G. Lawler, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), §96.1.

10. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.1.

11. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.1.

12. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §§97.5, 96.3.

set forth a post-metaphysical theology in which Schleiermacher frequently plays a heroic role.¹³ It is commonplace to mark Schleiermacher's Christology as "low," given his critique of Chalcedonian Christology. Hector is as bold in response as he is contrarian: "Schleiermacher's Christology is, in some respects, even higher than traditional Chalcedonianism, if by "high" we mean the unequivocal recognition that Christ is God incarnate, and that he is uniquely so. On Schleiermacher's account, every moment of Christ's life repeats the pure act of God's being, such that Christ *is* God incarnate."¹⁴ Notice at once the rejection of substance-language in favor of act *and* the insistence that a different idiom can deliver the goods: Christ's repetition of God's being-in-act demonstrates and enacts the incarnation of God in Christ. We will return to the question of whether Schleiermacher's novel language can carry as much freight as Hector thinks, but for now we simply note his sharp argument that a rejection of Christological concepts need not require a rejection of Christological judgments.¹⁵

I mentioned above the relevance of this question for contextualization in non-Western contexts. We might think of this along one of three lines. First, consider the previously unreached people group, which has joyfully received the gospel of Jesus Christ and been given the gift of at least part of the Scriptures. These people begin the communal project of building a lived theology from the ground up; and while it might be helpful at certain times to be acquainted with the resources of the global church, at other times it might not. Furthermore, the exigencies of the context may make those resources inaccessible (translation alone often presenting a significant hurdle). Or consider Christian witness among Muslims, where Christianity is deemed and dismissed as hopelessly "Western," something inherently antagonistic to the Arabic culture of Islam. Without accepting this false narrative, we could imagine why, say, Syrian or Iraqi Christians might want to distance themselves from the Greek philosophical milieu in which Nicaea and Chalcedon dress Christology (not to mention the Holy Roman Emperors who called the councils). Finally, consider the long witness of non-Chalcedonian Christians in the Middle East, most of whom may not even know that they are heretics (if I can put it so puckishly). There are

13. See Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 1–46, in which he provides the rationale for a "therapeutic anti-metaphysics"; and Hector, *The Theological Project of Modernism: Faith and the Conditions of Mineness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). He also speaks of a "post-essentialist theology" in Hector, "Actualism and Incarnation," 322.

14. Hector, "Actualism and Incarnation," 308. Also see Hector, *Theological Project of Modernism*, 112–16.

15. Here I recall David Yeago's distinction between concepts and judgments in his classic article, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 87–100. And note Jacqueline Mariña's contention that Schleiermacher "preserves the upshot of the insights of Chalcedon while at the same time rejecting the language in which those insights were framed." Mariña, "Christology and Anthropology in Friedrich Schleiermacher," in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153.

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so few Christians in that region of the world, and they face a near-daily existential threat. I can imagine an attempt by a happily Chalcedonian Christian group to forge ecumenical bonds with the Nestorian church for the sake of mutual encouragement and mission and, in the process, exploring non- (if not anti-) conciliar ways in which to confess that the Son is what Chalcedon knows him to be, fully God and fully man.¹⁶

In light of this, we cannot dismiss Schleiermacher's Christology simply on the basis of his critique of Chalcedon. As is always the case, such a critique must be *interpreted*. Does Schleiermacher discern in the ecumenical councils an incoherent deployment of borrowed metaphysical concepts that is philosophically indefensible? Or does his objection extend beyond conceptual scrupulosity to the judgments of the councils? Even if he cannot affirm with Chalcedon that "one and the same Christ" is "recognized in two natures," can he confess (to use Nicaea's less philosophically loaded language) that Jesus Christ is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God"?¹⁷ How far do the acids of critique spread? Before offering our final judgment on this question, we will discuss Schleiermacher's own idiom for articulating the uniqueness and dignity of Christ, to which we now turn.

The Distinction of the Redeemer

No careful reader of Schleiermacher's mature work can deny the centrality of Jesus to his vision of the Christian life. Whatever our final verdict on the question of Schleiermacher's Christology, to suggest that Jesus is of little concern to Schleiermacher is profoundly to misread him. Before we are in a position to answer the vexed question of whether Schleiermacher believes Jesus is God, then, we do well to attend to what he clearly and unequivocally affirms about him.

In what comes close to a programmatic statement, and one that parallels Chalcedon in some ways, Schleiermacher writes of Jesus (who he consistently refers to as "the Redeemer"),

The Redeemer is the same as all human beings by virtue of the selfsame character of human nature, but he is distinguished from all other human beings by the steady strength of his God-consciousness, a strength that was an actual being of God in him.¹⁸

16. These last two examples are not hard at all for me to imagine. They relate to conversations I've had with two Western missionaries in the Middle East over the last few years. On the long history of Christianity outside the West, see Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

17. Of course, the Creed immediately continues with "begotten, not made, *homoousios* with the Father." As much as at Chalcedon, the Nicene bishops found it necessary to employ philosophical concepts even in confessing Christ.

18. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §94.

Jesus is fully human, then. In fact, while Schleiermacher rejects “nature” language for the divine, he happily employs it for the human. Human nature is common to all human beings, and so Jesus “is the same” as the rest of us. With Hebrews, Schleiermacher will emphasize this common humanity and admit of only one qualification, that Jesus is “without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

What distinguishes him from us, though, is not the possession of a divine nature (that is Chalcedon’s answer), but “the steady strength of his God-consciousness.” Jesus always, in every way, lives from an awareness of and dependence on God. The rest of us, on our best days, experience a fluctuation in our God-consciousness, being aware of and depending on God in fits and starts. But God is the source of Jesus’s life, in an absolute sense, such that “always and everywhere all that is human in him came from what is divine.”¹⁹

Note, too, Schleiermacher’s identification of Jesus’s God-consciousness with “an actual being of God in him.” What are we to make of this identification, and of Schleiermacher’s own use of the language of the being of God in Christ? Here he is at length:

The being of God in the Redeemer is posited as his innermost primary strength, from which all his activity proceeds and which links all the elements of his life together. However, everything human simply forms the organism for this primary strength and relates itself to that strength as its system both for taking this strength in and for presenting it, just as in us all other strengths have to relate to our intelligence. Thus, if this expression departs greatly from the former scholastic language, nonetheless it rests in equal measure on the Pauline expression “God was in Christ” and on the Johannine expression “The Word became flesh,” for “word” is the activity of God expressed in the form of consciousness and “flesh” is the general designation for what is organic.

Now, to the extent that all human activity of the Redeemer in its every connection depends on this being of God in him and presents it, the expression that God became human in the Redeemer is justified since the expression befits him exclusively. . . . Always and everywhere all that is human in him came from what is divine.²⁰

Despite his use of the Johannine “Word become flesh” idiom, this seems to describe an indwelling rather than an incarnation.²¹ It is not that the second person of the

19. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.3.

20. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.3. A way of reading this strange passage that I won’t explore further here is to find in it a subtle Apollinarianism, following Schleiermacher’s remark that “the being of God” : Christ :: “our intelligence” : us. This suggests that “divinity” might function to replace Christ’s human mind or soul.

21. While there is some precedent for a Christology of indwelling (Athanasius speaks of “the Lord Who is in the flesh as in a temple” in *Ep.* 60.7), note the problems that come with failing properly to distinguish between the incarnation of the Word in Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit in Christ and believers. See Joanna Leidenhag and R. T. Mullins, “Flourishing in the Spirit:

Trinity “becomes” flesh: Note Schleiermacher’s de-personalized reading of this in which “word” designates not an eternal trinitarian person but “the activity of God.”²² Instead, the Redeemer is uniquely indwelt by God, fully so, such that “all that is human in him came from what is divine.” We might read this as a straightforward reading of the biblical language of God acting in Christ (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:19), though one not tempered or complemented by the biblical language of the Word *who was with God and who was God* becoming flesh (John 1:1). To put it roughly, the New Testament witness requires us to say both that God was in Christ and that God was Christ, whereas Schleiermacher’s account calls that second point into question. And yet—this continues to be a difficult knot to untie—Schleiermacher so esteems the being of God in Christ that he can speak of “this complete indwelling of Supreme Being as [Christ’s] distinctive nature and his innermost self.”²³ That is, even as he withdraws from traditional use of incarnational language, he is not content to use indwelling language in such a way as to draw a sharp line between Christ and the God in Christ. God’s indwelling *is* Jesus’s “distinctive nature and his innermost self.” Strange language, that. He might more easily have said that *God*, not God’s *indwelling* is Christ’s innermost self. But still, questions remain.

Schleiermacher repeats the identification of the Redeemer’s strong and steady God-consciousness with the being of God in Christ a bit later, writing that

instead of our clouded and weak God-consciousness, in [Jesus] there was an absolutely clear God-consciousness, one that was exclusively determining every element of his life, hence one that must be regarded to be a steady living presence, consequently to be a true being of God in him.²⁴

A further clue to Jesus’s uniqueness can be found here in the language of weak and strong, which suggests that this might be a *quantitative* rather than a *qualitative* distinction. Even if no other human being approaches the strength of Jesus’s God-consciousness, the God-consciousness of Christ and that of other human beings is of the same kind. In one sense, this oughtn’t surprise us: Schleiermacher is everywhere concerned to speak of the deeply human work of redemption that Christ performed and the deeply human way we are caught up in it. While he acknowledges the miraculous nature of Jesus’s birth, Schleiermacher insists that Christ’s God-consciousness developed gradually, though it always reigned over his self-consciousness.²⁵ This

Distinguishing Incarnation and Indwelling for Theological Anthropology,” in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 182–99.

22. Note that even here Schleiermacher avoids any suggestion that the preexistent second person of the Trinity is the Word who became flesh. “The word become flesh is God’s word spoken and enacted in Christ, not a preexistent part of the Godhead become incarnate.” Tice, *Schleiermacher*, 76.

23. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §94.2.

24. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.3.

25. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §93.3. Kevin Hector writes that “Jesus was born not with

Redeemer is a human being who grows “in wisdom and stature” even as he is “without sin” (Lk. 2:52; Heb. 4:15). In fact, it seems essential that Jesus’s God-consciousness is only quantitatively distinct from ours. This grounds what Richard Niebuhr calls the “Christo-morphic” character of Schleiermacher’s theology. “His theology is Christo-morphic in two senses,” Niebuhr writes.

First of all, it asserts that Jesus of Nazareth objectively exhibits what human nature ideally is. . . . In this sense, then, the redeemer is the measure of human nature. And, in the second place, the redeemer is the historical person whose presence mediated through Scriptures, preaching and the Holy Spirit becomes the abiding occasion for the reorganization and clarifying of the Christian’s consciousness of his absolute dependence, of his identity in the world, and of his appropriate actions toward and responses to others.²⁶

Notice the abiding difference Jesus makes in the world for Schleiermacher. He is no mere founder of a religion, but the Redeemer whose mediated presence continues to transform others.

But how, we might wonder, does this one possessed of a perfect God-consciousness redeem? In traditional language, how does this person do his work? For Schleiermacher, Christ’s God-consciousness, Christ’s being this one among us, just *is* redemption:

The nature of redemption consists in the fact that the previously weak and suppressed God-consciousness in human nature is raised and brought to the point of dominance through Christ’s entrance into it and vital influence upon it.²⁷

This passage captures much of what Schleiermacher has to say on the subject. Human nature has always been conscious of God, but before Christ was born this consciousness was weak, diffuse, and suppressed. It lacked the strength to determine human existence, and we participated in its further compromise by burying it beneath our sensory preoccupations. In entering and influencing human nature, Christ raised our consciousness of God to the point where it gained dominance, reaching a height it had never before known. Christ completes God’s creation of humanity as the “second Adam” in whom God-consciousness is perfect and absolute. He is like us in every way, except for sin, and *just so*—by living from a perfect consciousness of God, in absolute dependence on God in every way—he is “the originator and author of this more complete human life, or the completion of the creation of humanity.”²⁸

an absolutely powerful God-consciousness, therefore, but with a sufficiently powerful one—sufficiently powerful, that is, to outpace the development of his sensible consciousness.” Hector, *Theological Project of Modernism*, 114.

26. Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 212–13.

27. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §106.1.

28. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §89.1.

Because redemption is a matter of Christ's elevating human nature by "tak[ing] up persons of faith up into the strength of his God-consciousness," what matters for redemption is that he lived throughout his life in the strength of that God-consciousness.²⁹ Christ redeemed us, that is, by living a sinless life, ever open and receptive to God, and drawing us into that life. To live without sin just is to live in absolute dependence on God, and Jesus's sinless perfection "consists simply in a pure will that is oriented to the reign of God."³⁰ In the New Testament, redemption is frequently tied to the death of Christ, usually recalling the sacrifice for sins in the Old Testament (see Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12, 15). But for Schleiermacher, it is as he lives his life that Christ redeems us. Catherine Kelsey captures this beautifully:

What did Christ *do* that results in our redemption? He made his own inner life visible, a life in which every impulse was motivated by the divine will, a life in which his relationship with God took up, processed, and directed every physical input and every thought and action. In making his inner life visible, he evoked our receptivity to being taken up into that same relationship with God. Finally, he secured all those who are taken up into this relationship into a community, a physical presence for one another and for the world. The redeemed now experience blessedness.³¹

Christ redeems by living in the strength of his God-consciousness and proclaiming himself as the way, the truth, and the life that God has introduced in the world for our redemption.³² The death of Jesus is, strictly speaking, irrelevant to redemption.³³ Or, to put it differently, Jesus died not in order to redeem us but as a consequence of his redemptive life, as lived out in the face of those who opposed the reign of God.

Ever leery of scholasticism and speculation, Schleiermacher makes a programmatic decision in his dogmatics that,

since all Christian piety rests on the appearance of the Redeemer. . . . nothing touching upon the Redeemer can be set forth as genuine doctrine that is not

29. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §100.

30. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §122.3.

31. Kelsey, *Thinking About Christ with Schleiermacher* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 70.

32. According to Schleiermacher, Christ's self-proclamation is the "*one* source from which all Christian doctrine is derived." Kevin M. Vander Schel writes that Christ proclaims himself as the one who "inaugurates a higher life, and in which the relation to God becomes the principle of human living." Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §19.P.S.; Vander Schel, *Embedded Grace: Christ, History, and the Reign of God in Schleiermacher's Dogmatics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 162.

33. I am putting this more pointedly than Kelsey in *Thinking About Christ with Schleiermacher* (65). This is reflected in the paucity of sermons that Schleiermacher preached on the death (and resurrection) of Jesus. Of 185 sermons on the Synoptic Gospels, 146 cover the time between Jesus's baptism and arrest. Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, 79.

tied to his redemptive causality and that does not permit of being traced back to the original and distinctive impression that his actual existence made.³⁴

Since Jesus's "redemptive causality" is limited to his sinless life lived in the strength of his God-consciousness, this narrows the scope of Christology considerably. The pre-existence, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ cannot, then, and do not belong to Christian doctrine. Surely this contributes to the difficulty of discerning certain aspects of Schleiermacher's implied Christology. Schleiermacher denies Christ's pre-existence, and he suggests that "the facts regarding Christ's resurrection and ascension and the prediction of his return to judge cannot be set forth as genuine components of the doctrine of his person."³⁵ Because we can know the Redeemer apart from these facts, "the correct impression of Christ can exist, and also did so, without taking any notice of these factual claims."³⁶ After all, if we believe, as Schleiermacher does, that people were redeemed during Jesus's life and ministry, we could not suppose that a knowledge of his death or resurrection were necessary to experience that redemption.³⁷ And so, Schleiermacher concludes (with reference to the resurrection and ascension) that "our faith in Christ and our living communion with him would be the same even if we had no knowledge" of these facts or if they were different.³⁸ To which we can only reply with Paul, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 14:14).

But Is Jesus God?

We return to our initial question. In doubting the deity of Christ, Schleiermacher lost the faith of his youth. And yet, he cherished the Redeemer throughout his life and wrote a magnificent account of Christian faith. What became, then, of this earlier doubt? Does Schleiermacher, finally, believe that our Redeemer is God? To put it the other way round, does the mature Schleiermacher object to the truth claim that Jesus is God or (only) to traditional explanations for *how* he is God?³⁹

34. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §29.3.

35. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §99.

36. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §99.1.

37. See Kelsey, *Thinking About Christ*, 11, 65.

38. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §170.3. Schleiermacher is speaking of the doctrine of the Trinity here with reference to the resurrection and ascension. In full, the sentence reads: "Moreover, it [i.e., the doctrine of the Trinity] would also resemble these doctrines in that our faith in Christ and our living communion with him would be the same even if we had no knowledge of this transcendent fact [i.e., the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity] or if this fact were different." While Schleiermacher does affirm the historicity of the resurrection, Nathan Hieb argues that its place in his system is "precarious" at best and judges that Schleiermacher's overall treatment amounts to "an implicit rejection of resurrection." Heib, "The Precarious Status of Resurrection in Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9 (2007), 414.

39. Hector argues for the latter alternative on the basis of Schleiermacher's actualism,

On the one hand, he subjects traditional formulations of Christian doctrine to incisive critique, as we have seen. He dismantles conciliar Christological concepts in such a way as to invite the question of whether he can affirm the judgments they had been enlisted to support. If he is to affirm that Jesus is God, then, we might expect him to be on the lookout for opportunities to do so elsewhere. When it comes to the biblical material, however, Schleiermacher employs a deflationary exegesis. He finds the attribution of divine names to Christ in Scripture ambiguous, pointing out that it is difficult “to distinguish the utterances of a deep reverence that is not in the proper sense divine from strict devotion.” And those divine activities, such as creation and preservation, that seem to indicate Christ’s divinity “are ascribed to Christ only in such a way that it must remain doubtful whether he is not to be effective cause only insofar as he is final cause.”⁴⁰ Perhaps it is not that all things were created *by* Jesus, but that they were created *for* him. At each of these points, where the opportunity arises to affirm that Jesus is God, Schleiermacher balks, calling into question traditional interpretations, suggesting alternative reads.

On the other hand, Schleiermacher insists that Christ is utterly unique among human beings, dignified precisely by the divine presence within him. The absolute strength of Jesus’s God-consciousness “must be regarded to be a steady living presence” and thus a “true” or “actual being of God in him.”⁴¹ Already in the *Speeches* Schleiermacher can speak of this presence in terms of Christ’s “divinity”: “The consciousness of the uniqueness of his religiousness, of the originality of his view, and of its power to communicate itself and arouse religion was at the same time the consciousness of his office as mediator and of his divinity.”⁴² At times, Schleiermacher points to biblical precedent. While he resolutely refuses to speak of Jesus’s “divine nature,” he nevertheless refers to “the being of God in the Redeemer . . . as his innermost primary strength, from which all his activity proceeds and which links all the elements of his life together.”⁴³ He insists, as we have seen, that

concluding that he holds a surprisingly high Christology, one more amenable to more traditional aspects of Christology (like preexistence) than Schleiermacher realized. See Hector, “Actualism and Incarnation.”

40. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §99.P.S. He makes the same move in an 1832 study of Col. 1:15–20, where “he conceives the role of the historical Jesus in creation in a way that avoids claiming Jesus’ preexistence. . . . All is dependent on Christ, not as the mediator of creation, but as its consummation.” Christine Helmer, “The Consummation of Reality: Soteriological Metaphysics in Schleiermacher’s Interpretation of Colossians 1:15–20,” in *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality*, ed. C. Helmer and T. G. Petrey (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 121–22.

41. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.3; §94.

42. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 120.

43. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §96.3. Similarly, he speaks of “God-consciousness in [Christ’s] self-consciousness as determining every element of his life steadily and exclusively” and of “this complete indwelling of Supreme Being as [Christ’s] distinctive nature and his innermost self” §94.2.

“if this expression departs greatly from the former scholastic language, nonetheless it rests in equal measure on the Pauline expression ‘God was in Christ’ and on the Johannine expression ‘The Word became flesh.’”⁴⁴

Schleiermacher’s genuine love for Jesus makes this a particularly difficult question to answer, but I am convinced that, in the end, Schleiermacher did not believe that Jesus is God. This is something of a cumulative case. It begins with the early letter to his father in which he writes, “I cannot believe that He, who called Himself the Son of Man, was the true, eternal God.” This is a strong denial, and as far as I can see Schleiermacher never recants. Secondly, while we have no reason to doubt the sincerity of his exegesis, its deflationary effect further evinces a reverence of Jesus that stops short of identifying him as God. This is *dulia*, not *latria*. Finally, Schleiermacher’s quiet avoidance of Jesus-worship, no matter how often he expresses affection for the Redeemer, suggests a radical revision of the Christian faith: We worship God and celebrate his work in Christ, but we do not worship Christ himself.⁴⁵ This seems to leave Jesus on the side of humanity, no matter how much we reverence him and no matter that God uniquely and completely indwells him.⁴⁶ And thus it fails to do justice to John’s vision:

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb

Be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.’ (Rev. 5:13)

In its praise, all of creation witnesses to this one who is *with* God as God (see John 1:1).

We can test this conclusion against the Gospel of John, Schleiermacher’s favorite gospel.⁴⁷ At times, the Johannine Jesus beautifully exemplifies Schleiermacher’s account of a strong God-consciousness: “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will, but the will of

44. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* §94.2.

45. Kunnuthara points out that “one would not see any reference or allusion to worship of either Jesus or the Holy Spirit in his writing. . . . One may find in Schleiermacher’s sermons expressions that may mislead one to think there is endorsement for Jesus-worship [but this typically] means only utmost respect and nothing more. . . . Schleiermacher does not use even *die Gottheit* [divinity] for Jesus, unless it is in the sense of being a carrier of the divine activity. For him, ‘divinity’ denotes God’s active presence in human consciousness. . . . The perfect humanity and divinity are roughly identical in Jesus; they are only two respects of thinking almost the same thing from two different angles.” Kunnuthara, *God’s Work in History*, 45–46.

46. I agree with David Law’s judgment that, for Schleiermacher, “Christ does not share in the very being of God, but is a human being who is wholly centred on God. ‘Divinity’ is a circumlocution for a quality of Jesus’ human existence, rather than an ontological statement about the character of his being” (36). This seems to be the case in Schleiermacher’s sermon “The Redeemer: Both Human and Divine,” in *Servant of the Word: Selected Sermons of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, trans. Dawn DeVries (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 36–42. Law, *Kierkegaard’s Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Thanks to George Hunsinger for this reference.

47. Here I recognize that I am not following Schleiermacher’s methodology but am subjecting his claim to a biblical criterion. To which I can only reply that his method is not mine.

him who sent me" (5:30). But despite the continual deference of Jesus to the one he calls Father, he claims a startling equality with him, a claim that leads to his death. The Father "has given all judgment to the Son," Jesus says, "that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father" (5:22). As we have seen, Schleiermacher suspects the biblical language of "honoring" to fall short of attributing deity to Jesus, but the strict parallel between the honor accorded to Father and Son here ("just as") suggests that we view the honor given to both in the same light. "This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him," the evangelist writes, "because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God" (5:18). The upshot of these statements of Jesus is that, as Son, Jesus has an utterly unique relationship with the Father. He is the Father's *only* Son, and just so he is ("the Jews" were right on this score) equal to God. While it indeed seems Jesus has a perfect, undiluted, unimpeded God-consciousness, this is not enough to establish his *equality* with God and the *in principle* (not just in fact) unique character of his relationship with God as the only Son of the Father (compare 3:16).

In a study of Schleiermacher's interpretation of Jesus in the Gospel of John, Catherine Kelsey, a sympathetic interpreter, remarks that, though it was his favorite Gospel, "Schleiermacher regularly interpreted John in contradiction to some of the text's strongest themes."⁴⁸ Greatest among these is Jesus as the one who was with God and was God, the one who the earliest believers instinctively worshiped. Perhaps if Schleiermacher had attended more closely to the resurrection narratives, he would have found it more natural to exclaim with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

48. Catherine L. Kelsey, *Schleiermacher's Preaching, Dogmatics, and Biblical Criticism: The Interpretation of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007), 103.