

HPRS5905/6905

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MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Schleiermacher II



HOW CAN CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE BE
GROUNDED IN EXPERIENCE?

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN SCHLEIERMACHER

The previous lecture examined Schleiermacher's foundational move: the relocation of religion's ground from speculative metaphysics and ecclesiastical authority to the immediate self-consciousness of the religious subject, crystallised in the feeling of absolute dependence.

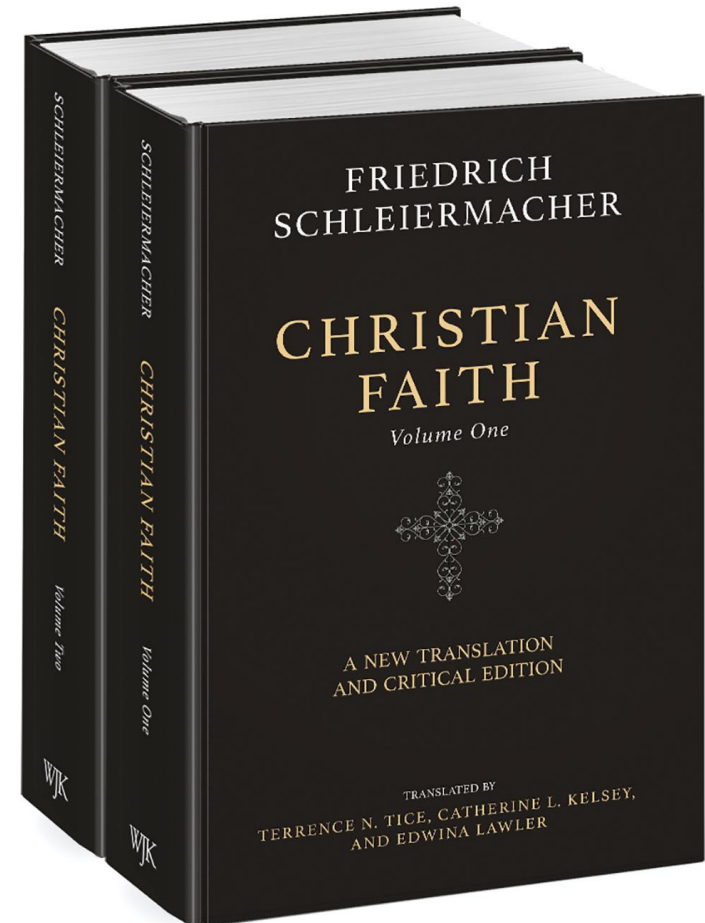
This lecture asks the question that follows: Given that the foundation of theology is experiential rather than dogmatic, can the traditional content of Christian doctrine be genuinely reconstructed on this new basis?



CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN SCHLEIERMACHER

Schleiermacher's 'The Christian Faith' (1831) is an ambitious answer to this question. It attempts nothing less than the complete systematic reconstruction of Christian doctrine on the sole basis of the immediate Christian religious feeling.

For Schleiermacher, the Christian Faith is organised around a central distinction between two forms of propositions about Christian religious states: those that describe the relation of the self to God (e.g. doctrines of the divine attributes) and those that describe the modifications of human self-consciousness that constitute Christian piety (e.g. doctrines of sin and grace).



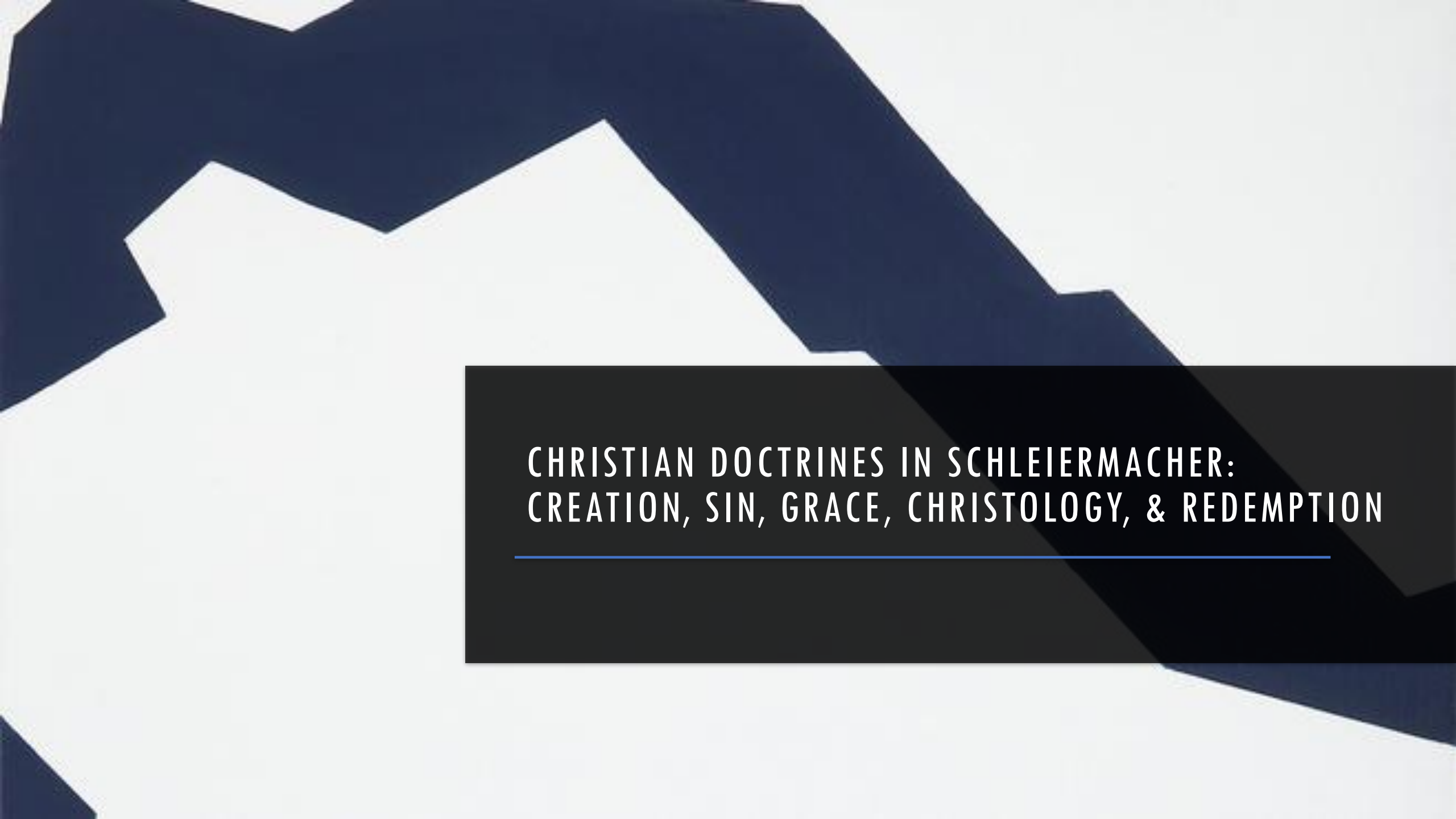
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN SCHLEIERMACHER

The method in Schleiermacher's work is consistent throughout 'The Christian Faith': every doctrinal claim is derived from, and tested against, the religious feeling of absolute dependence.

For Schleiermacher, the specific doctrines are not invented from a prior human experience, instead they are the articulation of what is already formed and sustained by the Christian community's encounter with Jesus Christ.

Theology, on this account, is the grammar and articulation of Christian piety.





CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES IN SCHLEIERMACHER: CREATION, SIN, GRACE, CHRISTOLOGY, & REDEMPTION

CREATION

The doctrine of creation is Schleiermacher's first major test case, and it illustrates his method with particular clarity.

Traditional dogmatics had understood the doctrine of creation primarily as a cosmological claim: that the world was brought into being by God from nothing, at a particular moment, by a free divine act.

Schleiermacher does not deny this, but he reconceives what the doctrine primarily means and how it is to be known. The doctrine of creation, for Schleiermacher, is the theological articulation of the feeling of absolute dependence taken in its most comprehensive form: the sense that everything that exists, including ourselves, owes its being entirely to the one upon whom it depends.

CREATION

In Schleiermacher's conception, to say that God is creator is not primarily to make a metaphysical claim about the cosmological origins of reality, but instead it is to express the totality of the creature's feeling of dependence.

This makes the doctrine immune to scientific challenge: no cosmological theory, however radical, threatens a doctrine whose primary referent is the structure of human religious self-feeling rather than the physical origins of the universe.

Creation, for Schleiermacher, is an attempt to say something about **us** rather than the world.

SIN

Schleiermacher's treatment of sin, what he calls the doctrine of the 'consciousness of sin' or the 'antithesis of flesh and spirit', is also very interesting.

In traditional Protestant thinking, sin is primarily an ontological category, that is that humanity stands guilty before God and its nature has been corrupted by the Fall.

For Schleiermacher, sin is the condition in which our God-consciousness, the immediate awareness of, and orientation toward, God, is impeded, obstructed, or overwhelmed by the flesh, understood as the pull of sensuous self-interest.



SIN

Crucially, and differently from say, Augustine, this is not a defect that has been introduced into human nature from outside by a historical catastrophe.

Instead, it is a structural feature of human existence as finite and aware of our own finitude. We are aware of limitations, and this limits us in our relationship with the infinite.

The doctrine of original sin in Schleiermacher's hands becomes an account of the universality of this condition: everyone participates in this corporate human state of impeded relationship with God.



GRACE

In a connected fashion, if sin is the impeding of God-consciousness, grace is its restoration and elevation.

In this way, Schleiermacher's doctrine of grace is inseparable from his Christology – it is only through the influence of Jesus Christ, communicated through the continuing life of the Christian community, that the God-consciousness is awakened within us, strengthened, and brought to its proper dominance over the flesh.

In this way, sin is overcome by grace.

GRACE

This experiential account of grace has both continuity and discontinuity with the Reformation tradition within which he operated.

Like Luther and Calvin, Schleiermacher insists that the restoration of the human person is entirely due to an initiative that originates outside the self, that is in the redemptive influence of Christ, and not to any independent human moral effort.

The discontinuity lies in the characterisation of what grace does: where Reformation theology spoke of justification before God, Schleiermacher speaks of the gradual transformation of religious self-consciousness.



CHRISTOLOGY

The Christology of 'The Christian Faith' is the conceptual centre of the entire system, and it represents Schleiermacher's most daring exercise in this form of doctrinal reconstruction.

The traditional Christology of the Council of Chalcedon (451) defined Christ as one person in two natures – fully divine, fully human – using the ontological categories of substance, nature, and hypostasis.

Schleiermacher regards these metaphysical categories as both philosophically problematic and experientially remote: they try and tell us who Christ is, rather than how Christ makes us feel.



CHRISTOLOGY

His alternative is to ground Christology in the experiential datum that is actually given in the Christian community's encounter with Jesus: the transformative power of his God-consciousness.

What makes Jesus the Redeemer is not a supernatural constitution (being God and Human) but the absolutely unimpeded perfection of his God-consciousness.

It is this perfection that makes him uniquely able of communicating the divine life to us and uniquely able to activate our own God-consciousness.



CHRISTOLOGY

The key concept in Schleiermacher's Christology is the absolute perfection and power of Jesus Christ's God-consciousness.

In every other human being, the God-consciousness is present but impeded by sin. In Christ alone, the God-consciousness was present from the beginning in absolute, unimpeded power, a constant, living orientation toward God that shaped every dimension of his existence and was never obscured or diminished.

This is what Schleiermacher means by speaking of the being of God in Christ: not a metaphysical indwelling of a divine substance, but the perfect and uninterrupted presence of the God-consciousness that constitutes the only form in which God can properly be said to dwell in a human person.

REDEMPTION

The work of Christ, what traditional theology calls the atonement, is reconceived by Schleiermacher in experiential and communicative rather than sacrificial or penal terms.

Christ does not redeem by satisfying the demands of divine justice (satisfaction theory), by offering a substitutionary sacrifice (penal substitution theory), or by defeating the powers of sin and death in a cosmic struggle (Christus victor theory).

He redeems by communicating his own God-consciousness to those who enter into relation with him. This communication occurs, in the first instance, through the Church, which maintains the living influence of his personality across time and space.

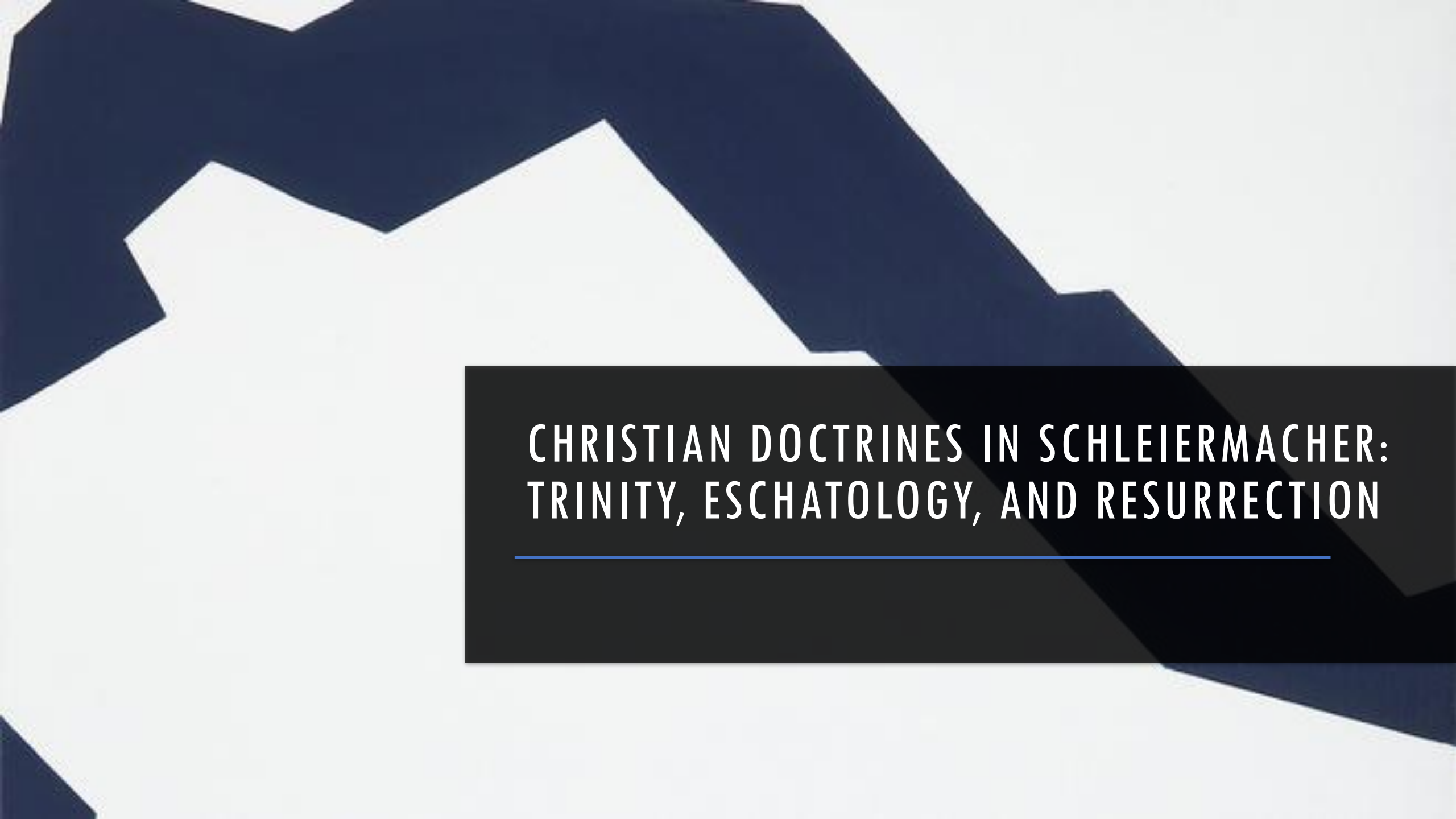


REDEMPTION

The experience of redemption is therefore the experience of having one's own God-consciousness awakened and elevated through encounter with the community shaped by Christ's influence.

Schleiermacher's account is interesting, but it raises an obvious question: is this account of redemption really the same as the New Testament story, with its core of suffering, death, and sacrifice?





CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES IN SCHLEIERMACHER: TRINITY, ESCHATOLOGY, AND RESURRECTION



TRINITY

The most controversial structural feature of 'The Christian Faith' is the placement of the doctrine of the Trinity.

In traditional theology, the Trinity is the foundational doctrine, the supreme revelation of God's inner being, from which all other doctrines flow.

In Schleiermacher's system, the Trinity appears not at the beginning but at the end. The doctrine of the Trinity, as traditionally formulated, makes claims about the eternal, inner life of God, claims that cannot be directly derived from or verified by our religious self-consciousness, which has access only to God as we experience it.



TRINITY

Schleiermacher does not deny the doctrine of the Trinity, instead he questions whether it can be given the kind of foundational role traditional theology gives it.

This move was deeply unsettling to his contemporaries and remains one of the most disputed aspects of his legacy.

Schleiermacher's handling of the Trinity really strongly highlights a tension that runs through his theology: the tension between the economic and immanent dimensions of the doctrine of God.

ECONOMIC / IMMANENT TRINITY

Economic Trinity

God as God is encountered in the history of salvation
e.g. as Father, creating and sustaining; as Son, redeeming; as Spirit,
sanctifying and unifying.

Immanent Trinity

God as God is in Godself
e.g. in the eternal relations of the divine persons, prior to and
independent of creation

TRINITY

Schleiermacher's method gives him solid access to the economic Trinity, that is the nature of God that we experience in history and in our lives – this is precisely what his theology is based on!

But the move from the economic to the immanent, that is the claim that the nature of God experienced in history and in our lives reflects the eternal and inner life of God, goes beyond what our experience can verify.

ESCHATOLOGY

Interestingly, a similar difficulty arises with eschatology (the doctrines of death, judgement, resurrection, and eternal life etc).

Traditional eschatology makes claims about a future state that lies definitively beyond present experience – that is kind of the whole point!

Since Schleiermacher's method limits theological claims to the articulation of present religious self-consciousness, he is unable to give substantial content to doctrines about a future state that transcends present experience.

ESCHATOLOGY

He affirms the persistence of personal identity beyond death and the ongoing progress of the soul's orientation toward God, but he declines to elaborate the rich eschatological imagery of the New Testament in the detail that traditional theology provided.

This restraint is very methodologically consistent, but critics have argued that it results in a kind of impoverished eschatology, that doesn't do justice to the promised transformation of all things in the New Testament.

Instead, we are just left with an ongoing progressive feeling of drawing closer to God over an eternity.





RESURRECTION

Probably no single doctrinal issue tests the limits of Schleiermacher's experiential method more acutely than the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection stands at the centre of the entire Christian tradition: it is not merely an inspiring story about the triumph of life over death, but the historical vindication of Jesus's identity as the Son of God, and the ground of Christian hope for the future.

For Schleiermacher, the resurrection presents a profound methodological challenge.



RESURRECTION

This is because his Christology is grounded in the perfection of Jesus's God-consciousness during his earthly life, and the redemptive influence of Christ operates through the living community that continues to bear his spirit into the world – the Church.

The bodily resurrection, as a unique supernatural event that definitively transcends the order of natural experience, is precisely the kind of claim that his method cannot easily ground or verify because it strays beyond our experience into meta-physics.

This is a really core structural tension in Schleiermacher's work, but his willingness to address it, and the other areas of tension we have looked at, showcase the systematic quality of his work.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What is the verdict on Schleiermacher's constructive project?

The achievement is undoubtedly real and quite considerable.

He demonstrated that a rigorous, methodologically consistent, and theologically serious system of Christian doctrine could be constructed on experiential foundations.

But its limits are equally real. The method consistently strains when confronted with doctrines that make claims beyond the reach of present religious experience – some of the most important doctrines of Christianity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the most significant lines of reception from Schleiermacher runs through Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), who took the experiential approach in a markedly different direction.

Where Schleiermacher had grounded theology in the feeling of absolute dependence, Ritschl re-centres theology on the moral and communal dimensions of the Christian life and specifically on the experience of the kingdom of God as an ethical community.

Ritschl is who we will be turning to next in our exploration of ‘modern theology’.

READINGS

Veldsman, D “To feel with and for Friedrich Schleiermacher: On religious experience”, *HTS Teologiese Studies*, vol. 75, no. 4, 1 Oct. 2019.

Adams, N “Shapers of Protestantism: F.D.E. Schleiermacher” in McGrath, A & Marks D (2004) *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*. Blackwell Publishing.