

*Schleiermacher on the Difference between Protestantism and Catholicism*

According to Schleiermacher, the difference—indeed, the opposition—between Protestantism and Catholicism is the difference between an understanding of Christianity according to which the relation of the individual to the church is made to depend on her or his relation to Christ and an understanding of Christianity according to which, conversely, the relation of the individual to Christ is made to depend on her or his relation to the church (*Der christliche Glaube*: § 24).

For all of the criticism that has been made of this statement (at least some of which expresses valid and important motives, whatever its relevance or irrelevance as criticism of Schleiermacher), I believe that it makes an important, in fact, essential point. This is especially so if: (1) one does not suppose mistakenly that this difference between Protestantism and Catholicism is always to be found only *between* the two confessions and not also *within* each of them; and (2) one can interpret Schleiermacher's main point correctly as in effect an anticipation of Willi Marxsen's when he stipulates the rule that one may never make what is formulated or specified as the *consequence* of an earlier generation's faith into (any part of) the *foundation* of a later generation's faith.

Of course, if this interpretation of Schleiermacher's main point is correct, his formulation of it can be notably improved. It can be improved, first of all, by rejecting the contrast between "relation to Christ" and "relation to the church" as too simple, because any relation to Christ is *eo ipso* a relation to the church—namely, the *apostolic* church through whose witness alone Jesus is to be encountered as the Christ; and then, secondly, by replacing talk about "the individual" and "the church" with talk about the present generation, on the one hand, and any and all earlier generations subsequent to the first, apostolic generation, on the other.

With these improvements, Schleiermacher's statement makes the essential point that there is a difference great enough to require an either/or decision between an understanding of Christianity according to which the present

generation's relation to any and all earlier generations is made to depend on its relation to Christ and the apostles and another understanding of Christianity according to which, conversely, the present generation's relation to Christ and the apostles is made to depend on its relation to some subsequent generation(s) earlier than itself.

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