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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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God in this matter and in declaring that the authority of Scripture is in no way jeopardized by the fact that the copies we possess are not entirely error-free.

Similarly, no translation is or can be perfect, and all translations are an additional step away from the *autographa*. Yet the verdict of linguistic science is that English-speaking Christians, at least, are exceedingly well served in these days with a host of excellent translations and have no cause for hesitating to conclude that the true Word of God is within their reach. Indeed, in view of the frequent [p. 19](#) repetition in Scripture of the main matters with which it deals and also of the Holy Spirit's constant witness to and through the Word, no serious translation of Holy Scripture will so destroy its meaning as to render it unable to make its reader "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" ([2 Tim. 3:15](#)).

## INERRANCY AND AUTHORITY

In our affirmation of the authority of Scripture as involving its total truth, we are consciously standing with Christ and His apostles, indeed with the whole Bible and with the main stream of Church history from the first days until very recently. We are concerned at the casual, inadvertent, and seemingly thoughtless way in which a belief of such far-reaching importance has been given up by so many in our day.

We are conscious too that great and grave confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible which God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once one has started. This means that at bottom independent reason now has authority, as opposed to Scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and if for the time being basic evangelical doctrines are still held, persons denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move further.

We affirm that what Scripture says, God says. May He be glorified. Amen and Amen. [p. 20](#)

# The Promise of Adolf Schlatter

W. Ward Gasque

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The work of Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) is not well known in the English-speaking world, although he authored scores of books, including commentaries on every book in the New Testament and hundreds of essays, rivaling both Ferdinand Christian Baur and Rudolf Bultmann for bulk and erudition. Only one of his books and one essay have been translated into English.

In his day, Schlatter made a profound impression on the life of the church in Germany and German-speaking Switzerland. During my sabbatical year in Europe in 1975–76, I met a number of elderly German and Swiss pastors who had studied under Schlatter. It soon became clear that the sometimes North American impression of the German church as

totally controlled by very liberal theology is a caricature. There are many exceptions, and no one has outdone Schlatter in leading at least a segment of the church in a much more positive direction. His popular commentary on the New Testament, for example, still in print, is widely read by both lay people and pastors. His major commentaries have also been kept in print or recently reprinted.

## ACADEMIC NEGLECT OF SCHLATTER

In the academic theological community, his impact has not been as profound as upon the church, for until very recently, his work had generally been neglected by academia. Possible reasons for this have been suggested:

(1) He was somewhat isolated, generally eschewing controversy, and refusing to get directly involved in the current heated debates, to stoop to name-calling or to become embroiled in polemics. Rather, he went about his scholarly research and taught in a quiet manner, attempting to offer a positive alternative to the radical theology of his day. Even in his writings, he is somewhat aloof from the controversies though the content often speaks very appropriately to key theological issues of the time.

(2) Schlatter was overshadowed by the developing dialectical theology of the 1920's and 30's, which divided into the two very diverse but extremely influential streams of German-speaking theology, one led by Karl Barth and the other by Rudolf Bultmann. In a sense, the dialectical theologians stole much of Schlatter's thunder since in some ways he is similar to Barth—at least manifesting some of the same theological concerns—but ultimately Schlatter was overshadowed by him. [p. 21](#)

(3) The school of Bultmann has dominated German academic theology in the past several decades, being generally hostile to the attempt to combine the most rigorous New Testament historical criticism with an equally profound commitment to the church's faith. Rather than separating between faith and history as the Bultmannians insisted, Schlatter sought to bring the two together very intimately.

(4) There may be a fourth reason. Various German writers have indicated that his style was quite difficult to understand. Personally, I find most German theologians difficult to understand! Someone whose mother-tongue is German would be better judge of whether Schlatter is any more difficult than normal.

## RECENT INTEREST IN HIS WORK

There is, however, a good deal of evidence to suggest that this academic neglect of Schlatter is coming to an end. First, in 1972, Robert Morgan, a young British scholar, published a monograph entitled *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, which included two essays thought to sum up the key issues in the scholarly debate about the essence of New Testament—one by Wilhelm Wrede and the other by Schlatter. Morgan's introduction was a lengthy, programmatic essay bringing Schlatter's name to the attention of the English-speaking world and underlining his significance by including him with Wilhelm Wrede whose theological importance had been universally recognized.

Second, Peter Stuhlmacher of Tuebingen, the successor to Ernest Kaesemann one of the last of the influential generation of Bultmann disciples to hold a New Testament chair in Germany, has regularly drawn attention to the significance of Schlatter (See, for example, his *Historical Criticism and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* 1977). More recently, in *New Testament Studies* (24 1978, 433–46) he contributed an essay on Adolf Schlatter's interpretation of scripture. Although one cannot simply push the clock back, repeating Schlatter's interpretation of Scripture, one can find a basic rapprochement

to the current hermeneutical impasse in which the historical-critical method seems to have broken down and become of very little value in the task of constructive theology.

This year Stuhlmacher has led his students in an in-depth seminar study of Schlatter's work. Doubtlessly there will result from this seminar many other papers, and possibly monographs, giving further indication of a revival of interest in Schlatter. [p. 22](#)

As for the English-speaking world, the time seems ripe for the translation of the more significant Schlatter commentaries. More importantly, some young aspiring biblical scholar or systematic theologian should write a major work on Schlatter, introducing him and his thoughts to English-speaking readers. Here is a Ph.D. thesis which is bound to find a publisher.

According to Stuhlmacher, Schlatter was "theologically the most important figure in the faculty of Protestant Theology at Tuebingen in the first third of this century." In the opinion of Morgan (who finds a greater spiritual kindship with Wrede than with Schlatter) he was "the greatest conservative of the generation before Bultmann ... perhaps the only 'conservative' New Testament scholar since Bengel who can be rated in the same class as Baur, Wrede, Bousset and Bultmann." Bishop Stephen Neil says: "There are certain writers of the past—Augustine, Calvin, Bengel, Westcott, Schlatter—to whom we shall always turn with gratitude for the timeless insights that are to be found in their writings." In view of these comments, it seems high time for the Christian community at large to wake up and take notice of Adolf Schlatter.

## **SCHLATTER'S LIFE**

What about the man? Schlatter was born in St. Gallen, in German-speaking Switzerland in 1852. His father was a pharmacist and Baptist lay preacher. His mother remained a member of the local Reformed Church in Switzerland, though she was united with her husband in a common commitment to Christ and involvement in the revival movement of the time. This dual home background gave Schlatter an ecumenical attitude in his relationship with Christians and in his concern for the church. In school, he first was interested in natural science and philosophy. Through the influence of his sister, he decided to study theology but not without a great struggle for to him it represented a challenge to his own faith. Could he maintain a positive, evangelical faith while at the same time studying academic theology? Looking around him in many of the university settings of the day, it did not seem very likely. His sister managed to convince him that he might not lose his faith if he studied theology. It was this desire to go into theology that he later regarded as the time of his conversion to Christ.

From 1871 to 1875, Schlatter studied theology in the Universities [p. 23](#) of Basel and Tuebingen. From 1875 to 1880, he was a pastor. At the request of Swiss revival leaders, in 1880 he qualified himself as a lecturer in the Theological Faculty in Berne and taught there for eight years. He first taught Old Testament, then New Testament, and then Dogmatics. From the time of his work in Berne, he was attacked on two sides. On the one hand, some revivalist friends labelled certain of his views concerning the historical nature of the New Testament as too critical and really incompatible with his commitment to supernatural religion and to the Christ of faith. On the other hand, his liberal colleagues in the Berne Faculty of Theology thought he was what we would call today "an unreconstructed fundamentalist." This early battle on two fronts set the pattern for his future work. Besides pointing out the inadequacy of liberal theology, Schlatter constantly had to defend to fellow conservative Christians the idea of New Testament study as a historical discipline.

In 1888, Schlatter accepted a call to Greifswald, Germany, where he joined Hermann Cremer, Lutheran theologian and author of the New Testament theological dictionary that became the prototype of the later monumental project founded by Gerhard Kittel. In 1894, he took a newly established chair of theology at Berlin, a call attempted to appease church leaders outraged by Adolf Harnack's denials of basic Christian doctrine, for Harnack had publicly denied the truth of the Apostles' Creed. Schlatter lectured here for four years, but reading between the lines one senses he was unhappy at Berlin, having been placed in the awkward situation of championing orthodoxy in a university where this view was by no means popular.

In 1897, Schlatter was called to Tuebingen University to fill a similarly created chair, which he himself named "Chair of New Testament." It presumably was flexible; before accepting the job, he got the authorities to agree that he could teach Dogmatics as well as New Testament. He spent the rest of his academic life here in Tuebingen, becoming professor emeritus in 1922, though he continued to give lectures for eight more years since he did not have great confidence in his successor.

Schlatter's writings are voluminous. They include *inter alia*; A thorough-going examination of the concept of *Faith in the New Testament* (1885); a two volume *Theology of the New Testament* (which first appeared in 1909); major works on Christian dogma and Christian ethics; a history of the primitive church (E.T., *The Church in the New Testament Period*); elementary commentaries p. 24 on the whole New Testament (*Erlaevterungen zum Neuen Testament*); and a series of very learned commentaries on Matthew (1929), John (1930), Luke (1931), James (1932), Corinthian Epistles (1934), Mark (1935), Romans (1935), Timothy—Titus (1936), and I Peter (1937). His two greatest commentaries are his works on *Matthew* and *Romans*; (entitled *Gottes Gerichtigkeit*, "The Righteousness of God"). He also wrote many other historical, theological and devotional books and essays. Schlatter died on 19 May 1938, shortly after the end of his 86th year.

## SCHLATTER'S THEOLOGY

When one considers Schlatter's interpretation of Scripture, one is impressed by the difference between him and many of his contemporary theologians. Schlatter makes an interesting comparison to B.F. Westcott and J.B. Lightfoot in nineteenth century England, who were successful in opposing the radical views of New Testament criticism then being expounded in Germany. (See my essay, "Nineteenth Century Roots of Contemporary New Testament Criticism," in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation*, ed, W.W. Gasque and W.S. LaSor 1978, 146–56.) In Schlatter's day the dominant tide of academic theology was certainly not orthodox or what we know as evangelical.

Schlatter stands in contrast to many of his contemporaries in a variety of ways. *First*, he was pre-eminently a "self-conscious Christian theologian" (Morgan, p. 27). He approached his study of the Bible as a theologian, a *Christian* theologian. For him, as Stuhlmacher points out, "his Christian faith, his biblical and historical work, and his theological effort towards an understanding of Christ and faith appropriate to the present day are quite inseparable." He was unwilling to agree that one should, or could, radically separate the biblical historian's work from that of the preacher, or the two from the theologian's. A temporary methodological distinction may be made between these three tasks: The basic, foundational work of biblical-historical is methodologically different from the task of systematic theology and from preaching in that you step back and look at the text, conscious of your own presuppositions and refusing to impose them upon the text; but it is only a temporary stepping back. Ultimately one must lead to the next;

historical criticism must lead ultimately to proclamation and theologizing upon the basis of the text, each p. 25 informs the other in its responsibility. In a celebrated essay, Schlatter passionately rejected the methodological atheism of the historical criticism represented by Troeltsch and others of his day. The assumption of totally objective historical research is, he argued, false. Those who think they are most free from presuppositions in their biblical study are in fact the most determined by them. It is only when we recognize our own presuppositions that we are set free and are able to do a careful "objective" examination of the text. This does not mean, of course, that Schlatter suggested one should allow one's theological presuppositions to determine one's exegesis. That is, he did not simply look at the text and decide that it meant what he already believed it would mean. No, on the contrary, careful exegesis which is based on a historical observation should always provide the foundation for dogmatics. However, neither dogmatics nor historical exegesis are independent of one another; rather, they mutually inform one another.

Schlatter comes to the text as a Christian theologian. He is aware of his own presuppositions, yet he looks at the text objectively and historically to see what is really there, aware that his discoveries may cause a readjustment in his previous theological position. So he turns from the text back to his theology to revise it in the text's light and then again from his theology back to the text in an attempt to carefully examine it. Scripture and theology are thus organically inter-related. One does not determine the other totally; his theology in particular does not determine the historical exegesis but instead the result of his careful, historical examination of Scripture is the foundation for his developing theological system. As he works Schlatter is quite conscious of being a theologian with a definite faith commitment. He refuses to feign some sort of independent, objective approach that is quite apart from theology.

*Second*, Schlatter focused on the Bible as a whole. He was not a *Neutestamentler*, a New Testament specialist in a narrow sense; though he was in another sense. Even though his most important work was done on the New Testament, he did not ignore the Old Testament. Early in his life he wrote a Bible introduction which he constantly revised until his death. In his commentaries there is something strikingly different from other technical commentaries for there is only occasional, rather than detailed, reference to secondary literature. Instead, the pages are filled with appeals to the biblical text. He compares Scripture with Scripture, very p. 26 carefully and thoroughly, observing parallels and showing how one passage illuminates another. He is essentially a biblical theologian and in both his theological work and his exegetical work he emphasizes the unity of Scriptures.

Schlatter recognized and gave due weight to the diversity of Scripture. He insisted on historical interpretation, and it is this historical dimension that lays adequate stress on the real theological diversity in Scripture. However, in spite of diversity among various writings and traditions, there is an over-riding unity, a common view of Christ which links the whole together. Therefore, Schlatter did not limit himself to biblical studies, he also moved into the areas of Christian ethics and systematic theology.

*Third*, Schlatter was one of the earliest German scholars to recognize the distinctive Jewish character of the New Testament, i.e. that the New Testament documents found their home in Palestinian Judaism and also, when Paul moved out into the Roman world, in the synagogue of the Hellenistic world. It is easy to discern a latent anti-Semitism in German theology from the Enlightenment onward, particularly behind some of the critical biblical work from the period immediately preceding Schlatter and continuing to the present. For example, we can see that F.C. Baur generally regards Judaic things in a very negative fashion. Also, Welhausen, the influential Old Testament critic, has recently been scorned for his not only implicit but very explicit anti-Semitism, running straight through his writings as well as his personal life. In my understanding, there is not a trace of this in



Schlatter. Quite the contrary, he stresses very positively the Jewish setting of the Gospels. He is perfectly at home not only in Josephus and inter-testamental literature but also in the Rabbinic writings, and he applies his research results to his New Testament study. Being at the beginning of his discipline he does not sift his materials as critically as more recent scholars do in terms of dating and the historical origin of Rabbinic ideas, but he is certainly moving in the right direction. He pioneered the approach, later taken up by Dahlman, Jaremiás and a host of contemporary New Testament scholars, which fills out New Testament historical background and brings to bear on the text not only Old Testament material but also first-century and subsequent Jewish literature as it carried down traditions already present in Jesus' time.

*Fourth*, Schlatter placed primary emphasis on the biblical text [p. 27](#) rather than on hypotheses about it. He was very skeptical of "fantasies," as he called them, which sought to recreate the historical background on the basis of very little historical data and no very definite textual reference. This concern for the primacy of the text is clear in his historical/exegetical work and in his theologizing. He warned both conservative and liberal students of Scripture against attempting to force the biblical teaching into their own mould. On the one hand, the liberals attempted to rule out the basic message of the New Testament by definition and therefore were unable to hear its authentic voice because of this "methodological atheism". The orthodox, on the other hand, often appropriated Scripture's teaching too quickly into the confines of received theological categories without attempting serious historical study and careful exegesis. Schlatter was really arguing with both trying to gently nudge them into more positive direction. As a result, of course, he was misunderstood to some degree by both, yet he did have a profound influence on many conservatives. In liberal theology, he saw an antipathy to the fundamental ethos of the New Testament teaching. As a result rather than observing carefully what was in the text, the historical criticism had to develop fantastic hypotheses to explain away biblical data, such as the elaborate and unlikely theories to "explain" the doctrine of the resurrection. On the other hand, he saw conservatives frequently assuming they already understood the biblical text without having taken the pains to carefully consider it.

In his writings, Schlatter constantly calls the reader to look at "the facts" of scripture in terms of the historical connections. The fundamental obligation of the theologian-exegete is observation of the text, an obligation Schlatter contrasts to observation with "imagination" or "fantasy." An anecdote often told of Schlatter in connection with his appointment in Berlin is that he was asked by a churchman on the committee, "Herr Schlatter, do you stand on the Bible?" He responded, "Nein, I stand *under* the Bible." This anecdote characterized the perspective of Schlatter in regard to Scripture.

In contrast to the fundamentalists who stand, in a sense, *on* the Bible, Schlatter always gave primacy to the data of Scripture not prejudging but standing *under* the Bible, allowing it to shape his views. This was also in contrast to the liberals, who tended to stand *over* Scripture, judging it from the perspective of "modern" and "enlightened" thinking.

*Fifth*, Schlatter was conscious of doing this New Testament [p. 28](#) work in the context of the Church and, as an exegete, of being a servant of Jesus Christ. This does not mean he allowed the church or its dogmas to dictate the terms of his historical and exegetical work, much less to dictate the results. Rather, he realized he had a pastoral responsibility, that he was not an independent historian simply concerned with historical data, but a servant of Christ entrusted with sacred calling to study and teach the Word of God.

## SCHLATTER'S PASTORAL CONCERN

His pastoral concern for his students is possibly his greatest legacy. He influenced these students not only in the classroom but also outside it by giving regular systematic InterVarsity-type Bible readings. Stuhlmacher writes, “With regard to Schlatter’s theological and pastoral work, it seems to me particularly worthy of note that to my knowledge he never brought his students, or his other hearers and readers, to contempt of their faith or their loyalty to the church. Rather, he continually encouraged them to abide by their faith and in their love for the church.” This does not mean he failed to raise questions. The reaction of some conservative brethren makes it clear that he often raised awkward questions. But he raised them from within the Christian community, and they were intended to strengthen one’s faith through looking at Scripture deeply and asking questions so as to hear the Word of God authentically. He had a profound understanding of the importance of both academic theology and the potential pastoral role of the academic theologian.

We see his pastoral concern also in his ministry to the laity. He never wrote exclusively for the world of scholarship, though he certainly wrote books that were quite technical. He always wrote with the ordinary believer in mind, and he wrote many articles and books primarily for the lay man or woman who was concerned with Scripture study. He was concerned to use his great learning in the service of Christ for the building up of Christ’s body.

Finally, his stance as a servant of Christ, studying Scripture in the context of the church, gave to his work a devotional quality, even in his most technical commentaries. Today, we tend to make a very strong dichotomy between the academic and the devotional. This has not been the Church’s historical view of theology until relatively modern times. Great theologians have not normally distinguished between their intellectual work and their spiritual [p.29](#) work, between rigorous theology and devotion to God. That is as it should be, and certainly that is what one finds in the work of Adolf Schlatter.

## **A KEY TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

Was there a theological key to Schlatter’s biblical interpretation? Was it the Creed? A particular brand of Christianity—reformed theology, revival Christianity or pietism? Was it a doctrine of verbal inspiration or inerrancy? It was not any of these. Not that he did not affirm the Creed, or cannot be theologically pegged in some degree, or did not have a theory, or at least a doctrine, of inspiration. Rather, the focal point of his theology was simply the conviction that Jesus was “the Christ of God,” a phrase that he uses frequently, and that Christ himself is the heart of the New Testament, indeed, of the Bible. A very simple conviction: that Jesus is the Christ of God and that he is the heart of the Scripture. He was committed to the belief that Jesus was already in his earthly life Son of God and Messiah. This was not (as Wrede had argued) something assigned to him at a later date. The Jesus of the New Testament was not the product of the church’s faith but, rather, a historical given. To put it in other words, the church’s faith was the product of Jesus, who himself was the Christ of God. This conviction was not merely an inheritance from his pious parents or from a revivalistic faith. Rather, it was a conclusion he continued to hold because it did the best justice to the historical data of Scripture in the first-century setting. He did not, of course, hold this because he became a Christian through historical research. Rather, as a historian evidence for Jesus being the Christ, the reality of the resurrection validating that life, one sees in the pages of Holy Writ.

It is this, Schlatter was convinced, which gives the certainty that God is speaking to us in the Bible, not a theory of inspiration or detailed doctrinal statement. We see the reality



of God in the fact of Jesus. This principle was the centre and determining factor in Schlatter's approach to Scripture. Stuhlmacher has noted the end of the Bultmannian school's domination over contemporary New Testament scholarship as marking the end of an era. With the later Bultmannians, biblical research, which had lost its moorings in the church and its faith, tended to run aground. There are many signs today, however, of a new vitality in biblical studies. Particularly evident is the renewed concern for a theological [p. 30](#) understanding of Scripture and a return to Schlatter's view that Jesus was in fact the Christ of God and is himself the hermeneutical key to the New Testament. There are definite signs of this in other parts of the world.

In the past decade there has been a spate of writings from a variety of perspectives pointing to the current impasse in the historical-critical task. Historical criticism is supposed to give assured results, yet the results obtained are so very diverse, and there seems to be such a gap between the results of historical research and the church's faith. How can this be overcome? Stuhlmacher is representative of various scholars who seek to bridge this gap by taking cues from Schlatter. It may be that in rediscovering Adolf Schlatter, New Testament scholarship will begin to recover its true faith—faith in Jesus and faith in its true task, the service of the church through the elucidation of the text.

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# Christianity as an African Religion

Byang H. Kato

*Reprinted from Perception (May 1979) with permission*

Religion is generally understood as man's effort to reach a being higher than himself. This effort is expressed through a variety of religious practices such as rituals, sacrifices and prayers. If this is our understanding of the use of the term in this context, Christianity cannot be called religion.

Christianity is a matter of personal relationship. God, a personal being on the one hand, and man, another personal being on the other, interact with each other. But the initiative starts with God. He first gives Himself to be known. Man, created by God also with the capacity to respond, does so in relation to his Maker and Sustainer. In this context, man finds answers to all that concerns him in God who has spoken.

We may, however, understand religion in the general sense of God speaking and man responding. Christianity may then be called religion. We must never forget the fact that the distinctive nature of Christianity is that it is a *revealed faith*. God has spoken decisively through His Word, the Bible, and through the person and works of His Son, Jesus Christ. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created all things" ([Heb. 1:1, 2](#)).

The term "African" must be understood only in a loose and relative sense. It is estimated that there are nearly 1,000 ethnic groups or tribes in Africa. Then there are