

Adolf Schlatter's "The Significance of Method for Theological Work": Translation and Commentary

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Like most disciplines, biblical research has its classic statements. A generation ago Samuel Sandmel produced one on the abuse of biblical parallels.¹ A decade later F. F. Bruce commented authoritatively on the subject of the New Testament and classical sources.² Though hailing from quite recent times, Leander E. Keck's 1996 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature may likewise prove to be of perennial importance.³

New Testament theology's classic statement is undoubtedly that of J. P. Gabler in 1787.⁴ But it is by no means the only seminal treatise on the subject. As Robert Morgan's *The Nature of New Testament Theology* implies, essays by William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter furnish examples of ground-breaking methodological reflection of no less importance.⁵ It is not surprising that Morgan found Schlatter's work of such value if he is in fact anything like Germany's "premier biblical theologian," to quote the subtitle of a recent popular-level biography.⁶

Although Schlatter's essay first appeared in 1909, it is readily accessible today, in English, in both the Morgan and Neuer volumes.⁷ But its length, profundity, and wide-ranging scope makes it of more value to seasoned researchers in the field than to readers whose grasp of New Testament theology's methodological complexities has not yet reached terminal levels.

A shorter, generally overlooked article by Schlatter called "The Significance of Method for Theological Work" furnishes

both the flavor and some of the substance of what makes his approach so timelessly distinct.⁸ My translation appears below. Italicized section subheadings have been added to clarify the half-dozen issues Schlatter succinctly addresses.

Following the translation are remarks corresponding to the introduction and to each individual part of Schlatter's presentation. Since Schlatter's significance lies not least in his critical realist approach during an age dominated by idealisms of various descriptions, such a pithy presentation of what amounts to his hermeneutical method *in nuce* cannot fail to benefit anyone seeking to learn from his counsel and example. Hopefully it will encourage additional study of Schlatter at a time when American publishers are making works by and about him available on an unprecedented scale.⁹

Translation

Introduction. Many a well-meaning theological effort fails because it raises the suspicion that its method is deficient. Our spiritual leaders have good reason to take this to heart because it is important for the church, not only that its leaders be receptive to scholarship, but also that they contribute effectively to it. But this is where the suspicion becomes a serious hindrance: clergy tend to despise method, or fail to master it in such a way that their attempted scholarly work could make a real contribution to learning.

Those confronted with this charge

sometimes respond that their critics' zeal for method is only a pretense to hide their aversion to taking ideas seriously that are foreign to them and run counter to their own views. Now in many cases the narrow-mindedness of a reader's thought process does account for his complaint about deficient method. But this fact must not obscure the serious importance of the methodological question. The greater the difficulties which we must surmount to arrive at even mutual understanding, let alone agreement, the more true it becomes that careful attention to our methods is an essential condition for the success of our work. The question whether the coming decades will bring defeat or progress for theology in Germany depends to a considerable degree on the skill with which we master the methods of scientific labor.

Below I compile a view major points regarding method.

1. *Method of thinking.* There is no special method for theological thinking, as if its form were to be distinguished from our other intellectual work. The object, not the form, of our work makes it theology. Our work is theological when it concerns itself with those incidents and processes through which God bears us witness to himself in such a way that our assurance of God receives its grounding and content. For the apprehension and assessment of religious incidents and processes, however, we need not utilize some mode of thinking that is different from the one given to us all and through which we arrive at knowledge in all other connections. It is a weighty methodological mistake when a work, whether historical or dogmatic, makes the claim to possess a special method in which its theological character consists, and this because it is valid for application only in the religious realm. This is sure to raise such pro-

found suspicion that the work, whatever its merit otherwise, will go unheeded. Theological oracles, esoteric presentations that rely solely on the assent of the initiated and like-minded, have only damaging effect on theological thought in our present situation.

2. *The Mechanics of Thinking.* The act of thinking takes place in two stages: observation and judgment. After something is implanted in our consciousness, whether from without or within, in the course of living, we subsequently exercise judgment to determine the relation between that something and the rest of our store of knowledge. It is a weighty methodological mistake when we, through our formation of ideas, hide from ourselves or others the fact that the entire worth of our thinking depends on the execution of the first stage—how we apprehend the facts. The suspicion is still widespread, and not without substantial justification, that the theologian utters only opinions, only combinations of concepts. These are perhaps intellectually suggestive, but the theologian proceeds in such a way as to give several impressions: that he did not gain his concepts through observation; that he sought to exercise judgment without seeing; that he did not make clear to himself the seriousness of the task that genuine observation places on him; and that as a result he was merely concocting a system and nothing more. Works which generate this objection against them are dead in the water. This is true not only for the dogmatician but also for the historian. For it is not only dogmatic work that becomes worthless when it is wrenched away from the presence of facts and dabbles only in abstractions: the historian likewise succumbs easily to a despicable system-building mentality in which the

apprehension of what he is actually looking at is repressed by the judgments he has previously formed.

3. *The Tension between Parts and Whole.*

The task of observation lies in the simultaneous attempt both to sharpen and to broaden the field of vision. Every phenomenon we observe demands from us a particular adjustment of our capacity to see. This introduces flexibility into method. It means that intellectual force must be brought to bear in the discovery and formation of those methods that are helpful for the apprehension of the facts of the matter before us. Hindrances here will of course include the intensity of the observation-and-judgment process and the breadth of the field of vision possessed by the observer. In this connection every person has certain limits in intellectual capacity. The desired goal, however, remains for both historical and dogmatic activity that we work our way up out of the two extremes of either specialization, with its immersion in amassing of tiny details, or the abstract trafficking in accepted ideas that characterize our "disciplines." Here we should also mention the working out of healthy levels of interaction with older literature. It is a mistake in method when the observer depends only on his own eyes and lightly esteems the confirmation and correction of his field of vision through the works of others. Often theological publications give the impression of originating in a monastic cell practically sealed off from the world; the author heeds only his own thoughts and has not clarified to himself that the intellectual task we face is a common enterprise. But the opposite mistake, scholasticism, also calls for our vigilant opposition. This occurs when secondary literature buries phenomena from our

view so that we are no longer able to arrive at independent observation of them. We will continue to see exegetical works appear that show how the author pored over commentaries about the text but left the text unread. We will see dogmatic treatises which reveal that the writer knows his dogmatists, especially from his own school of thought, but that he has never seriously observed the religious matters that actually come to pass. Whether the self-gratifying originality of our intellectual hermits, or the scholastic mode that distills one new book out of seven old ones—both are seriously weakening to our theological pursuits.

4. *Individual Versus Corporate Certainty.*

In the formation of judgment, a way of thinking proves itself to be correct in method first of all in that the certainties through which we attain our judgment are clear to us with respect to their existence and their soundness. The fitness of intellectual work rests essentially on the sharpness of the control with which we oversee the relations in which the matters we have to observe place us vis-à-vis the store of knowledge we already possess. In the function of making judgments our own productive power works far more potently than in observation; in judgments our entire intellectual repertoire constantly makes its presence felt. For that reason we must continually subject the judging function to attentive discipline that is alert to which components of our consciousness we combine with what we observe and assess, on the one hand, and which ones we separate our consciousness from, on the other. In other words, we must be clear regarding the basis for our affirmations and disavowals. When a work is charged with having no method, that often means its judgments amount to

random links provided by the author's flow of ideas. At the same time the criticized work likely fails to make visible the certainties through which it receives its justification. The concern, in itself justified, to stamp even the course of our thinking with our intellectual peculiarity has done serious damage to our scientific work. Out of this arises the preference to base the formation of judgment on those certainties which the thinker values as his own individual property, that which distinguishes him from all others. And so the course of thinking succumbs to an intellectual egoism that makes it worthless for others. A mutation of this may be observed when the formation of judgment is derived solely from the certainties that are regarded as established for one's own group. Here intellectual work falls prey to a corporate egoism that thinks of nothing but its own sect. The oscillations between the rationalistic ideal, which placed the act of thinking totally under the sovereignty of ideas regarded as generally valid and thereby endorsed the sovereignty of the majority, and the modern impulse toward an individualist structuring of our life including our deepest certainties, will continue to cause disturbances in our theological work. The next goal, the attainment of which the methodological worth of our work depends, is that we become able to reveal, not conceal, both to ourselves and to others, the certainties that are at work in forming our judgments.

5. *Historical and Dogmatic Work.* Another aspect of the discipline that we owe to the forming of our judgments is the distinction between our historical and our dogmatic judgments. It is self-evident that even in historical work we can never merely observe; we rather bind our per-

ceptions into the unity of an entire structure. In historical work, however, we give the concept of truth a relative position, for we leave undecided, for us personally, the significance of the matters we observe. We consciously separate off our own connection to them from the investigation. The dogmatic question is different. It does not only strive for what was true for others and gave them their religion. It takes a further step, granting an absolute position to the idea of truth, so that we ascertain what is true for us ourselves and how for us, and so for everyone, that truth becomes God's revelation by which we attain relationship with him. Now it must be conceded that the distinction between historical and dogmatic judgment can never be perfected to an absolute separation, because the historian in his historical work can never deny himself in such a way, can never annihilate his convictions—and also should not—in a such a way that they do not determine his historical observations and judgments. Attempts to make of oneself a lifeless mirror, which only picks up and passes on life that is foreign to itself, are fruitless and both logically and ethically wrong. Just as little can the dogmatician withdraw from historical work, since he can judge his connection to the relevant facts only when he has clarified them, first of all independently of his own goals, according to their reality as given to us. An essential aid to the methodological aptness of thought lies, however, in the fact that we set ourselves against the promiscuous intermingling of the two forms of judgment, the historical and the dogmatic. We make clear to ourselves what is now driving us. Is it the conception of what has happened in the past on its own terms? Or is it the grounding of the convictions and forms

of volition that lead us, which can find their content not only in our inner life but also draw their content, in all of us, from the great events and processes that give shape to the world? A methodologically disturbing intermingling of historical and dogmatic intellectual work is presently encountered especially in works that in the guise of historical presentations polemicize against the New Testament and Christianity. Naturally, anyone is free to assume the role of polemicist against the Christian sequence of thought. We are dealing, however, with a corruption in idea formation, from both the historical and the dogmatic point of view, when the polemicist leaves his convictions, which ground within him his opposition to the past, unnamed and untested, lying quietly in the dark. At the same time he no doubt believes the illusion that he concerns himself solely with the fathoming of what happened in the past. This muddled hodge-podge of *Dogmatik* and *Historik* is a perennial weakness of studies that employ the atheistic method—i.e. studies that consciously and completely hold the idea of God far removed from the observation of what has happened in the past.¹⁰ The tension that is thereby introduced between what is being observed and the observer unavoidably results in the deformation of religious phenomena from that which it once was into that which, in the judgment of the observer, it “must” have been. Our theologians have a pair of great tasks before them; they must elucidate a “then” and a “now.” They must understand what God once meant for others and what he now means for us. For this reason our task so far as method is concerned consists in placing these two branches of labor on their respective own independent bases, while at

the same time binding them together in such a way that they move and fertilize each other reciprocally.

6. *Etiology*. Etiological judgments, attempts to explain origins and causes of observed phenomena, occupy a place of secondary importance in the domains of both historical and dogmatic work. It is for that reason a mistake in method when they immediately assume dominance over the formation of thoughts. The first task, in which we have to confirm both the sharpness of our capacity to see and the wealth of our judgment formation, consists in this: that we through the structuring of our thoughts reproduce reality with the fullness of its connections. It is true that this includes the task of gauging the significance of causal processes for the things that they brought about. But from rationalism our science is still plagued with the mania for explaining everything, and explaining it right now—before the relevant phenomena have even approximately been assimilated. This error renders many scientific works so much chaff.

Commentary

Introduction. By “spiritual leaders” Schlatter likely has in mind especially pastors. In an age when many New Testament scholars in the German university saw their work as having little or no direct positive value for gospel preaching,¹¹ Schlatter sought to produce work of value to both academe and pulpit. But for the pulpit to benefit from the thoughtful labor of gifted specialists like Schlatter, preachers must think and toil themselves if they are to engage in “theological work” worthy of the name. In Schlatter’s day as in ours, this did not always take place. For this reason Schlatter urges not only awareness of and openness to scholarship but also an ongoing pursuit of it. This may

refer in part to academic publishing as such, not impossible for some pastors. But it refers most directly to the ongoing ministry of preaching, as week by week spiritual leaders seek to take Scripture's timeless words of yesterday and set them free to produce new life today in thirsty listeners. This happens best when attention is given not only to past verities but also to currently emerging ones. Biblical and theological scholarship is seldom the total wasteland or barren "ivory tower" of populist mythology, and effective pastors do their work cognizant of its debates and findings.

But Schlatter foresees defensiveness on the part of the spiritual leaders he wishes to address. He knows that some will decry "method" because of the bad name given to it by those who misuse it. One thinks in our own time of the "methods" of the Jesus Seminar.¹² How many flabby sermons on some gospel text, one wonders, have been propped up by thunderous denunciations of the Seminar's notorious voting system and other controversial practices? *Abusus non tollit usum*, Schlatter responds—the abuse of method does not nullify its rightful use. If pastors wish to communicate with listeners who have already been put off or misled by bad methods, or perhaps by preaching or writing employing no discernible methods at all, the need of the hour is for discipline in approach that will yield better founded and more convincing fruit, not the abandonment of method itself.

One of Schlatter's lines bears repeating: "The question whether the coming decades will bring defeat or progress for theology in Germany depends to a considerable degree on the skill with which we master the methods of scientific labor." Schlatter wrote in the heyday of Europe's celebrated pre-war cultural optimism. Thereafter came two glo-

bal conflagrations, interspersed with (in Germany) three utter social breakdowns and the Holocaust and followed by a bitter harvest of German theologies like those of e.g. Tillich, Bultmann, Rahner, and (in my opinion) Moltmann.¹³ Schlatter's words were eerily prophetic. It can safely be said that "the methods of scientific labor" as applied to Scripture resulted in far more defeat than progress for coming generations.

In our own time, with Dow Jones and other cultural indicators repeatedly flirting with all time highs, yet moral, spiritual, and geopolitical indicators at alarmingly low ebb, we cannot be sure that we are not standing at a similar crossroads ourselves. There is need today, as well, for renewed attention to the way we approach interpretation and ultimately proclamation of Scripture. For the church stands or falls, humanly speaking, by what it proclaims. And what it proclaims has everything to do with how its leaders think, which in turn affects what they see when they gaze on Scripture—issues to which Schlatter now turns.

1. *Method of thinking.* Schlatter's remarks in this section would answer well to a situation in which church leaders were substituting raw intuition for solid reflection. Sometimes "the Holy Spirit told me" or "our church has traditionally taught" replaces the result of measured study of Scripture, persistent prayer, and reasoned inference. But these are probably not the abuses Schlatter addresses. While his statement challenges any form of spiritualizing special pleading, it relates most directly to the widespread tendency of his time for academic theologians and exegetes to pursue "Christian" thinking under the aegis of philosophical idealisms that amounted to flights from history instead of solid attention to it.¹⁴

“Valid for application only in the religious realm” are key words in this section. Schlatter was well aware of modes of thinking that in the name of new forms or methods sought to understand, say, Jesus in a totally different light. When Schlatter published his essay in 1908, Albert Schweitzer’s now legendary account of a century of pseudo-historical, ideologically driven “Life of Jesus” research had been out for barely two years.¹⁵ Justification for these various and generally disparate “new” interpretations will invariably be found in the author’s (sometimes covert) dependence on some philosophical or ethical “absolute” foreign to the ancient gospel texts themselves. Examples would include Reimarus’ commitment to rationalism, F. C. Baur’s belief in Kant’s categorical imperative and utilization of Hegelian dialectic, or Harnack’s indebtedness to Ritschlian liberalism. Approaches like these read the New Testament in the light of patently modern hermeneutical constructs, not with the help of categories and assumptions drawn from the New Testament documents themselves. This is where Schlatter’s words “mode of thinking ... different from the one given to us all and through which we arrive at knowledge in all other connections” come into play. What if we took other ancient texts and read them strictly in the light of today’s reigning cultural norms? Wouldn’t this inevitably result in our finding there no more than what we went to them assuming they would contain? In biblical interpretation various rationales have been used to justify precisely such a “special method” (Schlatter’s words) in interpreting Scripture.

Schlatter demurs. Despite his utter independence from anything resembling common sense realism, he lays down common-sensical counsel. In ways resem-

bling N. T. Wright’s more recent suggestions, Schlatter calls for a “critical realist reading of history, paying due attention to the worldviews, mindsets, aims, intentions and motivations of the human beings and societies involved.”¹⁶ “Esoteric presentations that rely solely on the assent of the initiated and like-minded” (Schlatter’s words), not sober historical observation and analysis, were the basis of much that claimed “historical” authority in Schlatter’s setting. One is reminded of current treatments of the New Testament that rely on maverick understandings of Q and the Gospel of Thomas (Jesus Seminar), or on commitment to post-Bultmannian hermeneutics (Helmut Koester), for their persuasive force. Or one could also think of popular conservative interpretation enamored of various right-wing political or eschatological visions. Such eccentric approaches may be exceedingly popular, but as Schlatter points out they are sure to have “damaging effect on theological thought.”¹⁷

2. *The Mechanics of Thinking*. Schlatter’s point here is basic but weighty. The value of intellectual judgment can never exceed the soundness of the observations on which that judgment is based. Schlatter elaborates on this in another context:

Where judgment cuts loose from the perception which is indispensable to it, where the intellect’s productive power tries to be in command and play the creator so that what we produce is no longer connected with a prior receiving, where thought circles around one’s own self, as though this could create from itself the material from which knowledge comes and the rules by which it is to be judged, there we have rationalism. It stands in irreconcilable hostility to the very basis of the New Testament, because acknowledging God is the direct opposite of rationalism. But this rationalism is at the

same time the road to dreamland and the death of intellectual integrity.¹⁸

It may sound curious to warn enthusiastic preachers about rationalism, but Schlatter's point ought to be well taken. Biblical proclamation (as well as biblical scholarship) that does not proceed from sufficiently sound observation inevitably runs the risk of the proclaimer proclaiming self rather than Scripture.

Observation (*Beobachtung*) must proceed judgment (*Urteil*). Schlatter knows very well that the two acts are invariably intertwined in the knowing and willing of each individual interpreter. Still, through training, determination, and humility it is possible to see something besides our prior convictions in the text before us.

Failure here results not only in academic fiascoes but, in the life of the church, in that all-too-familiar phenomenon: the sermon that says the opposite of the text on which it is based. A recent sermon from Ecclesiastes illustrates this. The preacher was determined to make the point that pursuit of anything in life but God will result in frustration. The point is largely true (though in a fallen world pursuit of God results in frustration, too—but the preacher was too young or too enamored of his main point to mention this. And it should also not be forgotten that in various Psalms, the wicked prosper and experience great relative happiness quite in opposition to God.). But the text he sought to make his point from (3:14) was singularly ill-chosen: "...everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it." Therefore pursuit of anything but God will lead to disillusionment. The trouble was not only in the weakness of this verse

for the particular point he wished to make but also and even more so in the preceding two verses: "I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God." In other words, the choice is not a stark either/or, the things of this world or God. The biblical writer rather says that with God's help a spiritual fullness can be paralleled by a rich enjoyment of created things—a point made by various other biblical writers, as it turns out.

Where did the preacher go astray? He failed to let observation sufficiently condition his judgment. As a result, he ran afoul of Schlatter's strictures, proceeding "in such a way as to give several impressions: that he did not gain his concepts through observation; that he sought to exercise judgment without seeing; that he did not make clear to himself the seriousness of the task that genuine observation places on him; and that as a result he was merely concocting a system and nothing more."

Nothing is more important than *seeing* what we are looking at (observation) before *deciding what it says* (judgment). But on this matter Schlatter has still more to say.

3. *The Tension between Parts and Whole.* In terms of sheer word count, Schlatter devotes most of this section to the danger of either over- or under-utilization of secondary literature, i.e. the published opinions of others. Over-utilization can crowd out observation and skew judgment because the interpreter falls prey to "scholasticism," the view that knowledge lies in what one's intellectual forebears have passed down. Under-utilization results in a stunted vision, one that is idiosyncratic or ignorant of insights widely known and readily available from others. "Theologi-

cal work” as Schlatter understands it calls for a balanced appropriation of the fruit of others’ labors.

His central burden here, however, lies in his plea that as interpreters we “work our way up out of the two extremes of either specialization, with its immersion in amassing of tiny details, or the abstract trafficking in accepted ideas that characterize our ‘disciplines.’” Words from N. T. Wright once again illustrate Schlatter’s point here. The interpretive task, insofar as it is (as it must be, if it is *Christian* interpretation) historically conceived, “is not simply to assemble little clumps of ‘facts’ and hope that somebody else will integrate them.” The task is rather “to show their interconnectedness, that is, how one thing follows another, precisely by examining the ‘inside’ of the events.”¹⁹ The challenge, then, is to move from mastery of particulars to an imaginative construal of the whole—without the “imaginative” component doing violence to the particulars, and without the mass of particulars failing to inform the imaginative construal in a full and forceful way.

The difficulty here is not just the daunting vastness and complexity of the myriad relevant details. Nor is it simply the challenge of arriving at overarching theories that will free the data to reveal the truth inherent in them. It is that the interpreter must be constantly deepening and broadening the understanding that he or she brings to interpretation, along with increasing in mastery of the relevant details. Flexibility toward the emergent “new” becomes as important as consistency in light of the “previously established.” It is precisely here that “method” in the dynamic sense Schlatter uses the term comes to the fore: “Intellectual force must be brought to bear in the discovery and for-

mation of those methods that are helpful for the apprehension of the facts of the matter before us.” “Method” is not, then, a crude (or even sophisticated) meat grinder through which data are passed—the way that, say, form critical or structural “method” has sometimes seemed to function, or the way that the Jesus Seminar’s “seven pillars of knowledge” operate.²⁰ In Wright’s words, “the ‘knower’ must be open to the possibility of the ‘known’ being other than had been expected or even desired, and must be prepared to respond accordingly, not merely to observe from a distance.”²¹

In other words, “method” involves constant adjustment, not wooden application, and the presence of that rarest of all interpretive virtues: humility. Humility is justified, as Schlatter next shows, because the interpreter finds himself caught in a squeeze between his own convictions, on the one hand, and those of the group he identifies with, on the other.

4. *Individual versus corporate certainty.* To start this section Schlatter sketches the essence of sound judgment formation: “the certainties,” the crystallized methods we employ to arrive at judgments, must have clear justification “with respect to their existence and their soundness.” By “existence and soundness” Schlatter surely means not that we declare a methodological premise justified and thereby give it “existence,” but that we do so on ample grounds. As we do this with adequate control (presumably growing out of valid “observation”; see above), careful not to let prior certainties exercise undue pressure on new data we incorporate, we are on the way to the proper use of method. Random or arbitrary judgments raise suspicion of faulty method, absence of method, or perhaps poor execution of method.

At this point Schlatter segues into the hazards of two different but related dangers. The one arises from myopia with respect to personal convictions. “Intellectual egoism” can result, from which no amount of rigor in method can rescue. But there is also “corporate egoism,” the herd mentality of the academy. Examples would be the Ritschlian school and the history of religions school (both exerting great influence in Schlatter’s lifetime) and -isms of various descriptions, whether formal (existentialism, neo-Kantianism, deconstructionism) or simply components (possibly held unconsciously) of the reigning *Zeitgeist* (materialism, naturalism, practical atheism).

Schlatter concludes by setting forth the goal of becoming “able to reveal, not conceal, both to ourselves and to others, the certainties that are at work in forming our judgments.” While today there is the danger that fixation with method (currently taking the form of books on hermeneutics) is overshadowing the actual practice of interpretation, the goal Schlatter called for, one never really taken up by scholarship in his time,²² is closer to being achieved than in previous generations of biblical scholarship.²³

5. *Historical and Dogmatic Work*. Both are needed, since Christian theology is an admixture of the two. But Schlatter clarifies an important distinction between them. Historical method focuses on what was once true for others. Dogmatic method focuses on what we ought to affirm as true ourselves. The ability to distinguish between the two, and to develop sophistication in the exercise of observation in both spheres, is vitally important for fruitful scholarship whether for academic or homiletical purposes.

Otherwise we will be blinded to an

important dimension of our subject matter and will inevitably distort it by our interpretation. To be an “historian” without an awareness of the dogmatician lurking in each of us—for we all hold certain convictions, all uphold “dogmatics” in that sense, and these convictions color our observation—will lead to war against the sources to the extent that they contain claims which we find impossible (or inconvenient) to affirm. Thus Schlatter speaks of “historical” works on New Testament topics that are actually polemical essays against the New Testament. Why? The historian’s (hidden) dogmatics drives him to disavow the existence of biblical phenomena or the meaning attached to them by biblical writers (e.g., that Jesus died on the cross, and this atoned for sin). The (second century) Gospel of Thomas becomes a more reliable index to early Christian faith than the four gospels (except for the Q portions of Matthew and Luke). The New Testament’s Jesus, and the entire Gospel of John, becomes anti-Semitic. The resurrection becomes a delusion of wishful, guilt-generated thinking on the part of a few visionaries (Paul foremost among them), which was picked up and furthered by subsequent generations of befuddled “believers.” So common are such “scholarly” reconstructions that an “historical” understanding today commonly implies “skeptical and disbelieving toward pre-Enlightenment Christian understanding of the Scripture in question.”

But we can also be a “dogmatician” without adequate historical control. It is likely that many within evangelicalism are exposed to this danger in their interpretive method. Reduction of requirements for knowledge of biblical languages, history, and background studies in seminary cur-

ricula has left many pastors without the tools needed to observe in Scripture anything much more profound than surface answers to today's "practical" questions about how to be "saved," family life, personal finances, spiritual growth, psychological well being, and the like. Bible verses are quoted copiously, but often with no sense of the historical milieu within which their original meaning took shape—and in which contemporary application must remain rooted. But to remain rooted there it must be recognizable as having existed there. Sadly, for many interpreters "dogmatic" interests (or even sheer and crass "practical" ones) predetermine the answers that the Bible will give, because they predetermine the questions put to it and the range of answers imaginable. Abstinence, even celibacy, were categories of biblical teaching concerning sexual expression in New Testament times; without that historical insight will an interpreter living in the sex-saturated West asking how to be fulfilled sexually be able to draw anything like a full-orbed answer from Scripture? Will someone guilty of sin in God's eyes be capable of drawing convicting truths from Scripture if they are as dogmatically committed to high self-esteem, to "feeling good about myself," and as reluctant to grieve over transgressions as many seem to be?

There is yet another danger of "dogmatic" interests truncating observation of what Scripture says in its fullest historical sense. Schlatter writes:

When one considers that the purpose of dogmatic work is to gain knowledge, whereas the purpose of the New Testament word is beyond this to call men through God to God, and when one recognizes that dogmatic work has been and must be influenced by later situations and knowledge, it becomes advisable not to take the questions that guide the

investigation from the dogmatic tradition, but to get them from the New Testament material itself.²⁴

Other applications of Schlatter's call for division between, yet interrelation between, the historical and dogmatic task would not be hard to imagine. But it should be clear by now what Schlatter seeks to encourage, and how timely his counsel remains in our own time.

6. *Etiology.* For every incident and conviction the New Testament records, any number of questions could be tendered, and answers suggested, regarding the origin, nature, duration, effect, and causal processes lying behind a given New Testament event or idea. Elsewhere Schlatter devotes many pages to the question of how important the "how" question is for New Testament interpretation.²⁵ Here, however, he opts for making a simple point. What the New Testament says is far more important than our ability to probe behind it and ferret out answers to "how" questions. This does not mean "how" is unimportant. It is to say that understanding of what is clearly visible must take precedence over speculation regarding questions whose answers may always elude us. "The glory of academic work is not that it knows everything, but that it sees what the witnesses make visible and is silent when they are silent."²⁶ The same holds true for theological work more broadly that proceeds from the bases Schlatter sets forth here.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Paralleomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962) 1-13.

² "The New Testament and Classical Studies," *New Testament Studies* 22 (1976) 229-242.

³ "Rethinking 'New Testament Ethics,'"

Journal of Biblical Literature 115 (1996) 3-16.

⁴For the text in English see J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980) 133-158. Gabler's importance, though not utter uniqueness, is pointed out at least as far back as J. C. K. von Hofmann, *Die heilige Schrift neuen Testaments zusammenhängend untersucht*, vol. 11, *Biblische Theologie des neuen Testaments*, W. Volck ed. (Nördlingen: Verlag der C. H. Beck'schen Buchhandlung, 1886) 4ff. Hofmann's work was posthumously compiled and reflects views from some decades earlier in his life. For the larger story surrounding Gabler see e.g. Otto Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit*, Marburger Theologische Studien 9 (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1972).

⁵*Studies in Biblical Theology* (second series) 25 (London: SCM, 1973). More broadly see the collection of classic statements collected in G. Strecker, ed., *Das Problem der Theologie der Neuen Testaments, Wege der Forschung* 367 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975).

⁶Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premier Biblical Theologian*, Robert W. Yarbrough trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

⁷Adolf Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics." In Morgan (see note 5 above) it is found on pp. 117-166. In Neuer (see note 6 above) it is found on pp. 169-210.

Below I will cite the Neuer edition.

⁸"Die Bedeutung der Methode für die theologische Arbeit," *Theologischer Literaturbericht* 31 (1908) 5-8. The new and definitive Schlatter biography by Werner Neuer sees fit to omit mention of it; see his *Adolf Schlatter. Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996) 836. Stephen F. Dintaman draws on it in a limited way in *Creative Grace: Faith and History in the Theology of Adolf Schlatter* (New York et al: Peter Lang, 1993) 21, 29, 119-121, 125.

⁹In addition to the biography already mentioned, which contains newly translated primary sources in several appendices, Schlatter's Romans commentary is now available (Hendrickson Publishers; Siegfried Schatzmann trans.). His two-volume New Testament theology is due out shortly (Baker Book House, Andreas Köstenberger trans.).

¹⁰See Schlatter's important essay "Atheistic Methods in Theology," in Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 211-225.

¹¹Willam Wrede, one of Schlatter's leading contemporaries wrote concerning New Testament theology that "like every other real science," it has "its goal simply in itself, and is totally indifferent to all dogma and systematic theology" ("The Tasks and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" in R. Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, 69. If critical New Testament interpretation has nothing to say to the construction of doctrine, how much less concerned is it with practical theology and homiletics—the most pressing daily concerns for ministers?

¹²See most recently Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996). For just one of numerous available provocative responses see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996).

¹³This is not to say that none of these theologies have value. All are of obvious theological and social importance. It is, however, to say that all must be carefully sifted in order to be of any use in furthering truly Christian thought and practice. I think each is more reflective of modern intellectual conventions and cultural convictions than of the truth of Christ, the gospel, and the Scriptures. Faulty methods are part of why they lead astray; better methods can enable constructive use of their insights and interaction with forces they have set in motion.

¹⁴For e.g. "The Attempt to Separate Faith and History" in Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Robert W. Yarbrough trans. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994) 215ff.

¹⁵*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, published in English as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*.

¹⁶Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 118. Schlatter's realism contrasts with Wright's in various ways. But they also have much in common.

¹⁷For additional discussion see the subsections "Objections to the Explanatory Nature of Historical Work" and "New Testament Theol-

ogy and New Testament History” in Schlatter’s “The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics” (Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 196-210).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 196f.

¹⁹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 113.

²⁰ Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). For an examination of the merit and function of these pillars see my “The Gospel according to the Jesus Seminar,” *Presbyterion* 20/1 (Spring 1994) 8-20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²² The number of books on hermeneutics published in Schlatter’s lifetime (1852-1938) in Germany could be counted on one hand with fingers to spare—none appeared between 1880 and 1928, for instance (L. Goppelt, *Typos*, Donald H. Madvig trans. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 15). With the help of obligatory neo-Kantian philosophies and reigning systems of academic appointments, methods were often simply facilely assumed and then universally enforced within academic schools.

²³ In his own time Schlatter warned theologians of too much fussing with the formal appearances and results of thinking and not enough rigorous observation of reality: “We still squander too much energy on the logical training [*Dressur*; Schlatter uses a word that calls forth the image of teaching a dog to obey a command or perform a trick] of our thought processes in contradistinction to clear apprehension

[*Wahrnehmung*] in close contact with reality” (*Die philosophische Arbeit seit Cartesius nach ihrem ethischen und religiösen Ertrag*, Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie 10 [Gütersloh 1906] 204). In the second edition (Gütersloh 1910) the quotation appears on 213).

²⁴ Schlatter, “The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics” (Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 206).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 185ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.