

# Schlatter Reception Now: *His New Testament Theology*

Robert Yarbrough

**Robert Yarbrough** is Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has translated Werner Neuer's biography *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premier Biblical Theologian* into English. He has also translated a number of other works written in German, and has recently co-authored *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (Baker, 1998).

Past reception of Schlatter's two-volume New Testament theology, now becoming available in English for the first time ever,<sup>1</sup> may be readily mapped out. After all, reviews of it have been in print for 70 years or more. But current reception would seem more difficult to characterize, since the English translation has only recently been completed, and there has been no time for reviews to appear.

In any case, to assess current reception of Schlatter's New Testament theology, first several misconceptions need to be identified. Otherwise, present consideration may be hampered by past misunderstanding. A number of common opinions about Schlatter are at least slightly skewed. For example, George Ladd linked Schlatter directly to the Erlangen school. But this view has almost nothing to commend it.<sup>2</sup> Leonhard Goppelt rightly notes that connections between Schlatter and Erlangen are formal and not genetic.<sup>3</sup> James Dunn and James Mackey seem to imply that Schlatter's main distinction is his use of the New Testament to "do" conservative theology.<sup>4</sup> This is a distortion, not least because "conservative" is at best a vague and crude characterization of Schlatter's theological outlook.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it overlooks the fact that the majority of Schlatter's major scholarly works were rigorously philological and historical, not theological as Dunn and Mackey use the term. To imply that Schlatter primarily exploited the New Testament for conservative theological purposes suggests unfamiliarity with the full Schlatter corpus.

The only English-language monograph yet to appear on Schlatter tries to depict him as post-modern before such a thing as "the great 'proto-narrative' theologian of the late 19th and early twentieth-centuries" existed.<sup>6</sup> The mind boggles at the attempt to enlist Schlatter, a critical realist who insisted that the historian could see with his eyes and not just through self-tinted glasses,<sup>7</sup> for the post-modernist cause. Gerald Bray writes that Schlatter defended J. T. Beck and was a follower of Hermann Cremer.<sup>8</sup> Neither of these claims can be sustained.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to reconsider Schlatter's place in the history of scholarship, especially as it relates to recent New Testament theology. In some ways this assessment is already taking place, for as stated below, Schlatter's name and thought have influenced an astonishingly diverse set of New Testament theologians right up to the present time in spite of common misrepresentations of his heritage and views. This fact, combined with the availability of an increasing number of his works in English, suggests that Schlatter will remain a significant, though perhaps unnoticed, force for some time to come.

In the interest of bringing clarity to this rethinking, I will explore how Schlatter both figures into and defies Bultmann's monumental treatment of New Testament theology. Next I will comment on other ways that Schlatter has continued to play a role in the methodological discussion so foundational to current New Testament theology. I will conclude with a few

observations on grounds for his future importance.

### Schlatter and Bultmann

Reginald Fuller notes, “Bultmann had a high regard for the theological side of Schlatter’s exegesis, though he was poles apart from him in matters of historical criticism and NT introduction.”<sup>10</sup> Bultmann agreed with Schlatter’s rejection of the “doctrinal concepts” approach to New Testament theology used by those such as Bernard Weiss and Theodore Zahn.<sup>11</sup> He also agreed with Schlatter’s criticism of the history-of-religions reductionism that replaced the New Testament’s “theology” with “religion.” Bultmann believed in theology—of a sort. But beyond this he parted company with Schlatter, who believed that Jesus was the Messiah promised by God in the Hebrew Scriptures, and that historical evidence centered in the first century, primarily consisting of the New Testament documents, supported this assertion.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, his New Testament theology affirms the conviction that the earthly Jesus actually possessed and exhibited what can only be termed divine prerogatives—an impossibility for Bultmann’s philosophical naturalist commitments, which inclined him to affirm that Jesus became the Christ only in early church preaching. And this exaltation-through-proclamation was the effect of Hellenistic influence, according to Bultmann, whereas Schlatter saw the primary background of the four gospels’ presentation as real events and reminiscences rooted in the Jewish soil of Galilee and Palestine.<sup>13</sup> In Bultmann’s words, Schlatter was oblivious to “the importance of Hellenistic syncretism.”<sup>14</sup> For Schlatter’s part, he found documentary evidence for the

theory of the early church’s syncretism lacking. He also felt that scholarly aversion to acknowledging the plausibility of Jesus’ messianic claims pointed to an obduracy of modern scholars directly analogous to “the teachers of Capernaum and the theologians of Jerusalem” in Jesus’ earthly days.<sup>15</sup> Bultmann also lamented Schlatter’s “peculiar inhibitions” in “all questions of historical criticism, especially where literary-historical investigation of the gospels is concerned.”<sup>16</sup> This itself seems a peculiar sidestepping of the massive and cogent weight of critical argumentation comprised by Schlatter’s linguistically rigorous commentaries on each of the four Gospels, especially when seen in the light of Schlatter’s numerous historical monographs. Bultmann simply refused to see much historically accurate reportage in the Gospels, while Schlatter insisted that the historically constrained exegete was bound to acknowledge a great deal of accuracy in them.

Where Bultmann followed Schlatter was in his refusal to separate the *Denkakt* (act of thinking) from the *Lebensakt* (act of living). Schlatter saw, correctly in Bultmann’s view, the New Testament documents and their message as both products of and appeals to the will, not just reflections of ancient intellectual processes of possible interest to modern intellectual agendas. The New Testament is not just about thinking and ideas; it is about living, about decision. While Schlatter did not push this in the direction of the existentialist *Entscheidung* (decision) which for Bultmann was the act of faith itself, Bultmann saw in Schlatter’s work a nascent legitimization of his program.

Heikki Räisänen correctly notes that “Bultmann’s *Theology of the New Testament*

still stands as the unrivaled classic in its field. There is hardly a shadow of a challenger in view."<sup>17</sup> Some New Testament theologians, like Jeremias<sup>18</sup> and Goppelt (see below), reacted against Bultmann, while others, like J. M. Robinson<sup>19</sup> and Räisänen,<sup>20</sup> have sought to go beyond him. But it would be foolhardy as yet to ignore him completely, and he will certainly be of central importance in the history of the discipline as long as it endures in anything like its present form. Since Bultmann's importance persists, and given that he took his bearings in some respects from Schlatter, Schlatter's effect remains very much with us in the current discussion. It is with us particularly in the willingness we see in those such as Stuhlmacher, Hans Hübner, and Alfons Weiser to continue to pursue theology in their historical analysis when Wrede, J. M. Robinson, and Räisänen have called for mere religious history instead (see below). This theological focus, whose existence in twentieth-century biblical studies is often traced to Barth and neo-orthodoxy, may owe at least as much to Schlatter. His defense of theological sensitivities precisely on the part of the New Testament historian kept theology alive in his New Testament work, and Scripture at the core of his dogmatics, a full decade before Barth published his Romans commentary.<sup>21</sup>

### **Schlatter in More Recent Discussion**

#### *Robert Morgan, Otto Merk*

Schlatter's current importance for New Testament theology extends back to the early 1970s. By that time Bultmann's hegemony in the discipline had given way to at least a mild form of methodological chaos from which there has so far been

no clear recovery. In 1973 Robert Morgan translated and published William Wrede's classic essay on New Testament theology from a history-of-religions viewpoint, pairing it with an equally formidable treatise on method by Schlatter.<sup>22</sup> Morgan's accompanying 67-page essay rounds out the volume. There Morgan makes his Wredian sympathies clear. But his respect for Schlatter is apparent, too, for Morgan says he "can be rated in the same class as [F. C.] Baur, Wrede, Bousset, and Bultmann."<sup>23</sup> Morgan also wisely comments, "In a state of methodological confusion it is generally wise to look to history to find one's bearings."<sup>24</sup> Schlatter stands as a giant in that history, and Morgan shows why Schlatter has continued to inform at least background debate regarding New Testament theology over the years.

Also in the early 1970s there appeared Otto Merk's landmark treatment of biblical theology's rise and early history.<sup>25</sup> Merk grants Schlatter monumental importance as a forerunner to Bultmann and as continuing the tradition in New Testament theology stretching back to J. P. Gabler. This trajectory, says Merk, tends to stress "interpretation," the relevance of theology for today, rather than "reconstruction," the analysis of past reality in itself as determined by application of modern historiographical tools and canons.<sup>26</sup> But for Merk, Schlatter's implication in this line of analysis marks Schlatter's fatal weakness as well. Quoting Kümmel, Merk writes, "The historical task, which Schlatter undertook to address, cannot be carried out using this approach."<sup>27</sup> In the end Merk accuses Schlatter of arriving at a "purely theological understanding of New Testament theology" and of "sacrificing reconstruction for the sake of interpretation."<sup>28</sup> This

harsh verdict reflects the fact that Schlatter's historical results, which see as factual and concretely true the New Testament's so-called theological claims (like Jesus' divinity and resurrection), are anathema to the "historical" approach called for by Merk. What Schlatter thinks he has made sense of and given a coherent account of historically, Merk dismisses as nothing "historical" at all. At issue here is Merk's confidence that Enlightenment historical criticism has destroyed the notion that New Testament documents like the four Gospels are historically credible, largely as they stand. Schlatter, in contrast, argued that no compelling historical reasons existed for setting aside the documents' *prima facie* claims as descriptions of space-time phenomena as experienced and later recalled by direct or secondary eyewitnesses. But for Merk, Schlatter's approach to New Testament theology is a line of inquiry without a future in the modern setting, where the New Testament documents must be read first in the light of contemporary, ultimately anti-creedal certainties. Merk's clearly modernist sympathies show no sign of losing strength in the discipline despite the arrival of "post" modernism.

**Leonhard Goppelt,  
Peter Stuhlmacher**

Yet this negative verdict on Schlatter has not prevented others from assessing his program positively and even taking their bearings from it. Leonhard Goppelt saw Schlatter as an important forerunner of his own New Testament theology, noting the continuing importance of Schlatter's essay "Atheistic Methods in Theology" and praising Schlatter's "immense and superior history of religion/philological investigation of the New Testament."<sup>29</sup>

Goppelt likewise followed Schlatter in keeping dogmatics *per se* separate from biblical theology and defended Schlatter against Käsemann's charge that Schlatter was a "theological pietist."<sup>30</sup> Goppelt accorded Schlatter respect not least because of the way Bultmann acknowledged common ground with Schlatter. Also Goppelt's approach is like Schlatter's in seeking to bring historical-critical consciousness into respectful dialogue with New Testament claims rather than woodenly privileging modern consciousness over and above those claims, as contemporary scholarship is wont to do. In other words, whereas most modern New Testament scholars have let their methods be dictated to them by the current largely secular worldview,<sup>31</sup> Goppelt did not, at least not to the extent that Bultmann did. Goppelt's major precursor and ally in this politically incorrect strategy was Schlatter.

Peter Stuhlmacher has long championed a return to Schlatterian insights in New Testament theology. Partially in reaction to reactionary German Pietism, Stuhlmacher has invoked Schlatter's name to underscore "the rigor and necessity of historical criticism in theology."<sup>32</sup> Yet his appropriation of Schlatter serves to check, not abet, the theologically caustic "criticism" championed by Franz Overbeck and Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>33</sup> Interaction with Schlatter heavily informs Stuhlmacher's "hermeneutics of consent," which undergirds his approach to New Testament theology.<sup>34</sup>

Stuhlmacher's New Testament theology makes sparing but strategic mention of Schlatter.<sup>35</sup> At one point Stuhlmacher is openly critical, disagreeing with Schlatter on the meaning of *ktisis* in Romans 8:19-21.<sup>36</sup> But at a dozen other junctures he affirms Schlatter's interpretive tack.

Schlatter has rightly seen that “intellectual and existential understanding must coalesce” and has contributed to a proper understanding of the method and construction of a New Testament theology.<sup>37</sup> Stuhlmacher follows Schlatter’s rejection of an adoptionistic reading of the opening verses of Mark’s gospel.<sup>38</sup> He affirms at a number of points Schlatter’s interpretation of “righteousness of God,” an interpretation picked up by Käsemann and seconded by Stuhlmacher.<sup>39</sup> He also agrees with Schlatter’s insistence that Paul did not view obedience to the law as itself sinful; the law in Paul has a positive as well as condemnatory function.<sup>40</sup> Most significantly, Stuhlmacher sides with Schlatter’s contentions that “the earthly Jesus was none other than the Christ of faith” and that Paul was indeed “the messenger of Jesus” and not the founder of some new religion that made illicit use of the real Jesus.<sup>41</sup> In both its general conception and in numerous specific positions adopted, Stuhlmacher’s New Testament theology probably reflects Schlatter’s exegetical toughness and hermeneutical sophistication more fully than any comparable study written since Schlatter’s death.

#### *Gerhard Hasel, Donald Guthrie*

Understandably, Schlatter has loomed large, at least in name, behind the scenes of conservative works on New Testament theology like those of Gerhard Hasel and Donald Guthrie. Guthrie endorsed Schlatter’s theological openness<sup>42</sup> and his critique of over-emphasis on history-of-religions parallels.<sup>43</sup> He likewise called for reconsideration of Schlatter’s conviction that the New Testament is fundamentally a unity, not a monument to disparate diversity.<sup>44</sup> He states that “Schlatter’s

retention of the idea of revelation as an essential factor for a genuine understanding of N[ew] T[estament] theology has not been given the weight it deserves.”<sup>45</sup> He endorses Schlatter’s shrewd insight that “historical criticism is never based on fact alone, but always has its roots in the critic’s own dogma,”<sup>46</sup> a truth still dawning on some who currently underscore this insight as if they were the first to discover it.<sup>47</sup> Guthrie also follows Schlatter’s reasoning regarding the centrality of the canon for New Testament theology.<sup>48</sup> Yet he appears to distance himself from Schlatter regarding “righteousness of God” in Romans,<sup>49</sup> confirming that he did not simply become Schlatter’s unthinking disciple.

Hasel, perhaps influenced by Ladd, too facilely blends Schlatter in with the Erlangen school.<sup>50</sup> He stands on firmer ground when he follows Robert Morgan in seeing Schlatter’s similarity to Pannenberg in the latter’s critique of an ahistorical “theology of the Word.”<sup>51</sup> He sides with Schlatter and against Morgan on the plausibility of Schlatter’s “conservative” conclusions regarding the date and apostolic authorship of most New Testament documents. Hasel concludes, “Schlatter stands before us as a giant who has carefully considered the nature of the whole enterprise of N[ew] T[estament] theology but whose views have not received the attention they deserve.”<sup>52</sup> He rejects the claim that Schlatter was a biblicist,<sup>53</sup> a charge that Schlatter himself pondered and rejected as both inaccurate and peculiar. Schlatter’s professor J. T. Beck might be called a biblicist, but Schlatter was fundamentally at odds with Beck’s ahistoricism.

#### *Brevard Childs, Hendrikus Boers*

Additional recent “conservative” inter-

preters like Ward Gasque and Gerhard Maier could be cited as explicitly supportive of Schlatter,<sup>54</sup> and others like N. T. Wright and Markus Bockmühl as at least implicitly supportive,<sup>55</sup> but it is important to note that New Testament theologians of other stripes have wrestled profitably with Schlatter as well. For example, Brevard Childs notes Schlatter's importance in the history of the discipline.<sup>56</sup> He observes that Schlatter is an example of how "much of the most profound and critical reflection on the Bible operated with various philosophical and theological categories, often as a vehicle for the critical, descriptive task."<sup>57</sup> He praises Schlatter's "remarkable study of faith"<sup>58</sup> and says that in terms of theological reflection on biblical narrative, "Schlatter's handling of the life of Jesus in his New Testament Theology (*Die Geschichte des Christus*) is another excellent model of Biblical Theology...."<sup>59</sup> Much could be written on points of contact between Schlatter and Childs, but these quotations suffice to show that the former has positively influenced Childs' important work.

Hendrikus Boers is another notable scholar who in devoting extensive attention to Schlatter pays tribute to his importance. He notes that the principles discussed so insightfully in Schlatter's treatise on New Testament theology "remain influential in all subsequent attempts at theological interpretation of the New Testament, even where the influence of Schlatter himself is not recognized."<sup>60</sup> Boers rightly presents Schlatter as a pioneer among twentieth-century scholars who have been aware of the necessary connection between New Testament faith and other first-century religious outlooks. In other words, Schlatter conceded in principle the valid-

ity of history-of-religions research. But, unlike Bousset, Schlatter rejected the reductionism into which history-of-religions analysis of the New Testament too often fell. Conceding the ties of New Testament writers to their religious milieu, Schlatter never lost sight of their many points of contention, an insight that had profound impact on the church historian Karl Holl.<sup>61</sup> Boers seems to agree with Schlatter that "historical" inquiry of the New Testament cannot be "neutral."<sup>62</sup> The view that it can and must be was the claim of, for example, William Wrede, an opinion commonly repeated today in works such as Bart Ehrman's New Testament survey.<sup>63</sup> Boers appears to agree with Schlatter that this conviction is mistaken. And he agrees with Schlatter that a New Testament theology undertaken with an eye to the New Testament's possible congruence with historic Christian orthodoxy is not necessarily invalid "historically," *contra* Troeltsch and all who have followed his lead at this point. Boers also praises Schlatter's "sharp but correct" insistence that "representing the New Testament writers as if they thought in the abstract way of Greek thinkers leads to a distorting theology of the New Testament."<sup>64</sup>

Yet Boers faults Schlatter, claiming that he separated New Testament history from its temporal nexus, a charge that even Paul Tillich refutes.<sup>65</sup> Further, he complains that Schlatter allows "present-day dogmatic concerns to predetermine the outcome of historical inquiry."<sup>66</sup> Here Boers seems to forget what he earlier praised Schlatter for: the insight that modern "historical" inquiry inevitably is informed by its own *de facto* dogmatics. That means that *all* historical inquiry is at least conditioned by present-day dogmatic concerns. The question then becomes, whose dogmatic

assumptions can make the best claim to account for, evaluate, and, where called for, appropriate the affirmations of the relevant ancient evidence. Boers' conclusion that Schlatter's New Testament theology is "a dogmatic theology and should be appreciated as such,"<sup>67</sup> while meant as a criticism, is actually just as true of any New Testament theology ever written. It is not grounds for setting Schlatter to the side but is rather a testimony to the mainstream relevance of his *modus operandi*, even if many of his critical conclusions and doctrinal convictions have been rejected by the dominant twentieth-century university theologians.

### **Heikki Räisänen**

A thinker's importance can be measured not only by those who support him but also by those who oppose him. Heikki Räisänen finds plenty to oppose in Schlatter. He brackets him with Barth and sets both aside disparagingly as "spiritual masters."<sup>68</sup> "Spiritual" is a negative term for Räisänen, as is "theology" if used to refer to the New Testament, which he views as containing none. Räisänen writes dismissively that Schlatter's New Testament theology "remains in the fetters of dogmatics."<sup>69</sup> He does not deserve to be ranked with Bultmann, is wrong about the unity of the New Testament, and has little to offer because he is "unmistakeably... a figure from a bygone era."<sup>70</sup> He accuses Schlatter of biblicism, disputes his focus on the canon, and concludes, "Schlatter's New Testament theology is, in essence, his (systematic) theology, opaque in construction of its argument and often presented in a rather meditative manner. If the work is understood in this way, it can even be appreciated."<sup>71</sup> Räisänen's polemic extends to Peter Stuhlmacher, whom he

criticizes for his affinities with Schlatter and for suggesting that "atonement" is at the center of biblical theology.<sup>72</sup> Räisänen rejects this because "this notion is rarely mentioned in, say, the Synoptic Gospels or Acts,"<sup>73</sup> thereby perhaps tipping his hand regarding the anti-confessional loyalties that give rise to his impatience with Stuhlmacher and Schlatter.

Might Räisänen be correct? As for his insistence that New Testament theology must follow Wrede in moving beyond New Testament theology, which historical criticism allegedly demonstrates is at best myth and fantasy, it is worth noting that even non-evangelical New Testament scholars continue to turn out synthetic treatments of the New Testament—New Testament theologies—that focus on (Christian) beliefs and not just "religion," as Wrede, Räisänen, and others have requested. Alfons Weiser's treatment of the four Gospels could be mentioned here, for it explicitly repudiates Wrede and by implication Räisänen.<sup>74</sup> Hans Hübner passionately rejects Räisänen's program, denying the necessity of hostility towards the church and towards the kerygmatic dimensions of the results of New Testament theology for the church in order to perform historical-critical analysis of the New Testament.<sup>75</sup> Räisänen's rejection of Schlatter on the grounds that *prolegomena* to New Testament theology is essentially meaningless when compared to the actual results of that discipline's labors is countered by Robert Morgan, who notes the irreducibly theological nature of the discipline and states, "The theological orientation of N[ew] T[estament] T[heology] as a theological as well as biblical discipline means that it is largely concerned with theory."<sup>76</sup> Räisänen's assurance in attempting to

marginalize Schlatter may have less to say for it than he realizes.

## Schlatter and the Future of New Testament Theology

### *Continuing Promise*

Recent studies reveal deep sympathy for Schlatter on the part of some, but serious aversion to him from others. This aversion is largely based upon restatements of objections raised long ago, as is documented in the Köstenberger essay in this issue. These criticisms were offset at the time by positive reviewers and by Schlatter himself. Despite weighty charges against Schlatter and obvious imperfections in aspects of his work, it seems justified to conclude that he has hardly been discredited overall—there still remains a great deal to be learned from his hundreds of publications. And since this corpus is largely *terra incognita* today, the harvest from rediscovery of his work could be considerable indeed. After all, points at which some criticized him, such as his coherent vision of the entire New Testament so disparaged by Holtzmann, are points that others deem his great strengths. Perhaps Schlatter was deluded and pulled many conservatively blinded readers down with him. On the other hand, few read Holtzmann anymore, while some thirty books by Schlatter are still in print in Germany. Significantly, not only his “theological” but also his historical corpus is proving to stand the test of time.<sup>77</sup>

Since Schlatter’s death in 1938 there has never been complete neglect of his writings in German-speaking Europe, as commemorative volumes, doctoral dissertations, monographs, and various critical articles have appeared, albeit with some

irregularity. A milestone was reached in 1996 with the appearance of the first critical biography of Schlatter,<sup>78</sup> an impressive work that quickly precipitated some three dozen reviews in Germany, nearly all of them positive. In North America, Roy Harrisville has recently honored Schlatter with a careful discussion of Schlatter’s many similarities to Bultmann. Harrisville’s playfulness outruns credibility when, evoking Paul’s ode to *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13:13, he concludes, “Now Schlatter, Barth, and Bultmann abide, but the greatest of these is...,” but he succeeds in demonstrating that if Barth and Bultmann remain valid discussion partners, so must Schlatter.<sup>79</sup> (We may leave to one side for now Harrisville’s failure to pay attention to the profound differences between Schlatter and Bultmann, differences so vast that in private correspondence Schlatter spoke of Bultmann’s atheistic tendencies.)<sup>80</sup>

### *New Translations and Studies*

In the United States various translations of works by or about Schlatter have appeared in recent years. Among these are his Romans commentary<sup>81</sup> and a short biography containing several key Schlatter essays, among them his renowned “Atheistic Methods in Theology.”<sup>82</sup> It seems that in English-speaking circles, at least, the coming years may see Schlatter acquire a significance not previously enjoyed as new translations overcome former language barriers.

To be noted recently is the richly ironic appearance in Germany of a lengthy article by Fritz Neugebauer, “*Wer war Adolf Schlatter? (Who Was Adolf Schlatter?)*.”<sup>83</sup> It is ironic in that it appeared in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, the same journal in which Emil Schürer in 1893

attempted to wreck Schlatter's budding academic career with a devastating review of Schlatter's monograph on Palestinian geography.<sup>84</sup> The irony is rich in that whereas Schürer was exquisitely dismissive, Neugebauer is soberly appreciative, not only of Schlatter's past achievement but of his future promise. But Neugebauer focuses on Schlatter's enduring philosophical,<sup>85</sup> hermeneutical,<sup>86</sup> and historiographical<sup>87</sup> importance. What about his contribution, if any, to New Testament theology and theologies yet to come?

A new monograph on New Testament theology by Peter Balla in the WUNT series, *Challenges to New Testament Theology*,<sup>88</sup> vindicates at least some of Schlatter's assumptions about New Testament theology and the history within which it arose. These include the relationship between history and theology, the priority of orthodoxy to heresy in earliest Christianity, the canon, and the unity of the New Testament. While Balla chooses not to interact with Schlatter directly, many of his contentions find strong support by articles and books in the Schlatter corpus. We have here, then, something of a Schlatter *redivivus* in Balla's arguments taken as a whole, which is not surprising in light of the fact that Balla above all seeks to refute the Wrede-Räisänen insistence that New Testament theology is both a misnomer and an impossibility. A major difference between Balla and Schlatter is Balla's rejection of revelation as relevant to an historical approach to New Testament theology. This divergence marks Balla as a "historical-positive" rather than a "salvation-historical" interpreter<sup>89</sup> and may explain why Balla omits Schlatter from his study, an omission lamentable for how considerably it impoverishes his discussion.

There is also the rumor of a new edi-

tion of Robert Morgan's *The Nature of New Testament Theology*.<sup>90</sup> It is likely that this event would give considerable impetus to continued discussion of Schlatter's proposals and example, in particular in conjunction with appearance of both volumes of his New Testament theology in English.

## Conclusion

The intent of this essay thus far has been to characterize, not advocate, Schlatter's reception. But in conclusion, three distinctives of Schlatter's approach to New Testament theology deserve commendation for the sake of encouraging future interaction with his writings by those interested in the study of New Testament theology.

One is his determined focus on the original language sources as we have them in their historical setting. Without resorting to, for instance, Childs' canonical strategy, which while admired has drawn criticism from many sides, Schlatter's model encourages painstaking interaction with the text—not some hypothetical source behind it, religious absolute allegedly beneath it, or *Religionsgeschichte* oblique to it. Robert Morgan grants this as one of the strengths of what he calls biblicism: "it allows the text to challenge the interpreter."<sup>91</sup> In Schlatter this is not some sentimental loyalty to Scripture, much less hermeneutical naiveté. It is rather a rigorous historical-linguistic mission to make sure that the interpreter sees what is there. Observation must precede judgment. Neuer calls attention to Schlatter's "'*theology of facts*,' not biblicistic but biblical, not confessionalistic yet indebted to the Reformation heritage, the knowledge of which facts is not found in 'pious consciousness' but in the reality of salvation history and cre-

ation that has independent existence apart from consciousness."<sup>92</sup> If synthetic explanation of the historical manifestation of earliest Christian belief is a goal of New Testament theology, and if painstaking observation of the primary sources is the perennial order of the day, Schlatter abides as probably one of the more suggestive mentors in the recent history of the discipline. The precedent he sets strengthens both sides of the task that New Testament theology presents, the historical as well as the theological, by modeling first of all rigorous and resourceful exegesis.

A second promising dimension of the Schlatter corpus is its attention to the importance of method.<sup>93</sup> His masterful theoretical reflections are at points even more valuable than his two-volume New Testament theology proper. These reflections, because of their hypothetical scope, provoke and liberate the careful reader to many a fruitful insight. Morgan comments that nowadays "the contexts of both text and interpreter so complicate the question of the theological meaning of the Bible that biblical scholars can be pardoned for retreating to their own specialist tasks and leaving theology to the theologians."<sup>94</sup> But this is a sorry state of affairs, for at the same time many theologians would like for biblical scholarship to provide them solid guidance regarding the Bible's message. It is no wonder that some theologies drift farther and farther from organic connection with Christian Scripture, for who is doing historically rigorous work on the Bible with an eye to the theologians' questions and calling? This is part of today's crisis of method in the discipline. Schlatter's extensive deliberations on both historical and dogmatic method are a rich source for gleaning insights and gaining resolve to execute the full gamut of the

biblical theologian's task. What Neugebauer said of Schlatter's biography is also true of the Schlatter corpus in general: it is not so much a quarry to be mined as a treasure chest to be dipped into.<sup>95</sup>

A third strength of Schlatter's approach is his recovery of Jesus as *prima causa* for the early church's faith.<sup>96</sup> Neugebauer notes that modern scholarship's focus on the life circumstances of the early church and what it allegedly confessed makes it the *prima causa*, Jesus only the *causa secunda*.<sup>97</sup> Of course in many approaches to New Testament theology, Bultmann being the most typical among them, this is not seen as a weakness but a necessary corollary to the modern secular impulse. What is there besides man? In any case Jesus was no more than a man, at least from the standpoint of post-Christian scholarship.

But Schlatter saw things differently. In a memorable dispute involving the Berlin faculty where Schlatter was teaching in 1895, university theologians received criticism for their hostility to confessional Christian belief in a statement issued by churchmen at the annual Protestant assembly. Schlatter supported this measured but pointed protest statement. When attacked in print by university colleagues for his stance, the charge being that siding with conservative Christians against the university endangered the freedom of theological science, Schlatter replied quickly. At issue, he said, was not science's freedom but the open unbelief of the church's ostensible teachers. The question was simple: Who was Jesus? Schlatter expressed joy to be able to identify with common believers. "If colleagues force the decision between faith in Christ and their 'science,' between the faculty and the church, the church being those

who do not deny Christ, then in my view the apostolic word still applies today: 'I regard it all as refuse.'<sup>98</sup> Schlatter concluded, "As long as God's grace guides me, I will join the church in kneeling before the slumbering child in the manger and the God-forsaken figure on the cross, confessing: My Lord and my God."<sup>99</sup> To some this may sound like melodrama. But to any who lament the loss of gospel belief in the Western world, whether in the form of the desolating effects of scholarly movements producing the likes of Robert Funk's *Honest to Jesus*<sup>100</sup> or the insipid nominalism and traditionalism afflicting too many Bible-believing churches, Schlatter's determination to live out Christ's lordship precisely as an academician and churchman combined could serve both to challenge and reform.

The fact is that like few scholars since the Enlightenment, Schlatter's work holds promise at multiple levels and in several areas for the wide range of concerns that converge when the question of New Testament theology's methods, goals, and practice arise. When Don Carson lists "five stances essential to biblical theology," it is hard to imagine the publications of a single scholar who better fulfills these desiderata than Schlatter.<sup>101</sup> As New Testament theologians continue to review the scholarly ideals and theological promise of their discipline, many sense that it could and should yield more constructive fruit in the next century than in the somewhat muddled previous two. Schlatter might be of assistance in any reformation that gets underway.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Adolf Schlatter, *New Testament Theology, Volume 1: The History of the Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); and Schlatter, *New Testament Theology, Volume 2: The Theology of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, in press). Andreas J. Köstenberger translates both volumes.

<sup>2</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 4. Cf. D. A. Carson, "Current Issues in New Testament Theology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 21 n. 15. Carson claims that J. C. K. von Hofmann's "influence on Schlatter was significant." Hofmann (1810-1877) may be regarded as the founder of the so-called Erlangen school. Carson may be following a recurrent and ill-founded Barthian charge that thinkers like Cullmann, Schlatter, and Hofmann are tainted by an illicit philosophical idealism, a charge epitomized in K. G. Steck, *Die Idee der Heilsgeschichte: Hofmann — Schlatter — Cullmann*, *Theologische Studien* 56 (Zollikon 1959). For an example of an article that underscores the distance between Schlatter and Erlangen-style conceptions of *Heilsgeschichte*, see E. Güting, "Zu den Voraussetzungen des systematischen Denkens Adolf Schlatters," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 15 (1973) 132-147, esp. 147 n. 80. It is telling that "Hofmann" does not even occur in the index of the new and massive Schlatter biography by Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996). This fact underscores the lack of any

direct connection between Schlatter and Hofmann, even if features of their work *vis-à-vis* more secularly minded scholars are comparable. Schlatter evenhandedly criticizes both the (liberal) Ritschlian and (conservative) Erlangen theologies in *Rückblick auf meine Lebensarbeit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977) 158.

<sup>3</sup>Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament: Vol. 1*, trans. John E. Alsup, ed. Jürgen Roloff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 278-279.

<sup>4</sup>James Dunn and James Mackey, *New Testament Theology in Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 1987) 3.

<sup>5</sup>As Peter Stuhlmacher, among many others, has recognized; see *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Stephen F. Dintaman, *Creative Grace: Faith and History in the Theology of Adolf Schlatter* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) xii-xiii.

<sup>7</sup>Note the anecdote recounted by one-time Schlatter student Otto Michel, *Anpassung oder Widerstand* (Wuppertal/Zürich: R. Brockhaus, 1989) 25-26.

<sup>8</sup>Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 331, 339.

<sup>9</sup>Schlatter makes his distance from Beck clear in *Rückblick auf meine Lebensarbeit*, 44ff. He concedes (*ibid.*, 46) that he resembled Beck, but only in that he lived openly as a Christian in the university setting. See also Schlatter, "J. T. Becks theologische Arbeit," *Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie* 8/4 (1904) 25-46. Schlatter was in no

sense a follower of Cremer. As colleagues at Greifswald (1888-93) they made common cause.

<sup>10</sup>"New Testament Theology," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, eds. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia/Atlanta: Fortress/Scholars Press, 1989) 575.

<sup>11</sup>References in this section are to Bultmann's *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, in which he comments explicitly on Schlatter. I cite the 8th edition (essentially unchanged from the first), ed. Otto Merk (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1980). The relevant pages are 585-599, especially 597-599. For the English translation see Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: Vol 2*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955) 237-251.

<sup>12</sup>The importance of Schlatter's conviction that Jesus was the Messiah is underscored in the opening pages of Peter Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth—Christ of Faith*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

<sup>13</sup>Schlatter well understood, and in fact anticipated, the point underscored generations later by Martin Hengel that Hellenism impinged on Judaism in Palestine long before the New Testament era. This point is palpable in numerous passages of both volumes of Schlatter's New Testament theology. See Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

<sup>14</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:250.

<sup>15</sup>Schlatter, "Der Zweifel an der

Messianität Jesu" in *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik*, ed. U. Luck (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1969) 158. Stuhlmacher expands on this point (*Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments*, 2nd ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986] 174): "Schlatter insisted that the earthly Jesus was already the messianic son of God and charged all opponents of his outlook with deficient capacity for historical perception. Since his opponents counter-charged that Schlatter lacked powers of critical discernment, and since no direct scientific discussion ensued, the dispute remained unsettled, as it remains to this day."

<sup>16</sup>Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:250.

<sup>17</sup>Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1990) xi.

<sup>18</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971).

<sup>19</sup>J. M. Robinson, "The Future of New Testament Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 2 (1976) 17-23.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Räisänen, xi.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, "Adolf Schlatter als Bibelausleger," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Beiheft 4 (1978) 104 fn. 37.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1973).

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>25</sup>Otto Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1972).

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>29</sup>Leonhard Goppelt, 1:278.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Morgan, *Nature of New Testament Theology*, 27.

<sup>32</sup>Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 44.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 44-48.

<sup>34</sup>Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments*, passim. While Stuhlmacher cites e.g. Luther, Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Barth, Fuchs, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and others extensively, the index of this book refers to Schlatter more times than to anyone else.

<sup>35</sup>Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Vol. 1, Grundlegung. Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992).

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, 11.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 238, 335.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 341, 379.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 157, 233.

<sup>42</sup>Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 24-25.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 24 fn. 11.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. e.g. Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

<sup>48</sup>Guthrie, 41.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 100 fn. 68.

<sup>50</sup>Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament The-*

- ology: *Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 69. On Schlatter and Erlangen, see n. 2 above.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid., 42.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., 43.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup>Note the works cited in Andreas Köstenberger, "Translator's Preface," in Schlatter, *The History of the Christ*, 12 fn. 9.
- <sup>55</sup>Note references to Schlatter in the index of N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). In addition, Wright's critical realism, which informs his work across the board, has more affinities with Schlatter's hermeneutic than Wright seems to realize. See also Markus Bockmühl, *This Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 218 fn. 1, who calls Schlatter "brilliant but widely ignored." Bockmühl's careful attention to Jesus' and the Gospels' setting within the first-century Jewish world is an extension of Schlatter's historical and hermeneutical focus.
- <sup>56</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 3.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid., 12.
- <sup>58</sup>Ibid., 15. Childs refers to Schlatter's landmark *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament* (Leiden: 1885).
- <sup>59</sup>Ibid., 708.
- <sup>60</sup>Hendrikus Boers, *What Is New Testament Theology?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 92.
- <sup>61</sup>Schlatter's impact on Holl is brought out in Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter* (see "Holl" in index). Cf. Goppelt, 262 fn. 14.
- <sup>62</sup>Boers, 73
- <sup>63</sup>Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament* (New York/Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).
- <sup>64</sup>Boers, 74.
- <sup>65</sup>Tillich wrote that his own theology emphasized "that God is related to the world and not only to the individual and his inner life and not only to the church as a sociological entity. God is related to the universe, and this includes nature, history, and personality. May I add that Martin Kähler and Adolf Schlatter were also in this line of thought. They stressed the freedom of God to act apart from the church in either its orthodox or pietistic form" (*A Complete History of Christian Thought: Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl E. Braaten [New York/Evanston/London: Harper & Row, 1967] 235).
- <sup>66</sup>Boers, 75.
- <sup>67</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup>Räisänen, xiv.
- <sup>69</sup>Ibid., 25.
- <sup>70</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup>Ibid., 25.
- <sup>72</sup>Ibid., 80.
- <sup>73</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>74</sup>Alfons Weiser, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments II* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne: Kohlhammer, 1993) 13f.
- <sup>75</sup>Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Vol. 1, Prolegomena* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990) 27f. fn. 60.
- <sup>76</sup>Robert Morgan, *Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume VI* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 483.
- <sup>77</sup>See e.g. Roland Deines, *Die Pharisäer, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 101 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 262-299. Deines points to Schlatter's significant contribution to Jewish studies in relation to New Testament times.
- <sup>78</sup>Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996).
- <sup>79</sup>Roy A. Harrisville, "Translator's Introduction," in *What Is Theology?*, eds. Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 13-17.
- <sup>80</sup>Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche*, 656, 658.
- <sup>81</sup>Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
- <sup>82</sup>Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). "Atheistic Methods in Theology," translated by David Bauer, appears in *ibid.*, 211-225.
- <sup>83</sup>Fritz Neugebauer, "Wer war Adolf Schlatter?" *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 122/9 (1997) 770-782.
- <sup>84</sup>The story is told in Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche*, 280-284.
- <sup>85</sup>No study on Schlatter's impressive philosophical works has ever been published, but a recent Marburg dissertation by Jochen Walldorf on Schlatter's philosophy is reportedly in press.
- <sup>86</sup>Schlatter receives considerable attention not only in Stuhlmacher's *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments* but also in Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).
- <sup>87</sup>See e.g. n. 77 above.

<sup>88</sup>Peter Belle, *Challenges to New Testament Theology*, WUNT 2/95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

<sup>89</sup>See Goppelt, 272ff.

<sup>90</sup>See n. 22 above.

<sup>91</sup>Robert Morgan, *ABD*, VI:477.

<sup>92</sup>Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche*, 167ff.

<sup>93</sup>Schlatter's most important reflections are his "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics," in Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. The same essay is reprinted in Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, n. 82 above, 169-210). For a briefer but still enlightening statement on exegetical and theological method see Robert Yarbrough, "Adolf Schlatter's 'The Significance of Method for Theological Work': Translation and Commentary," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1/2 (1997) 64-76.

<sup>94</sup>Robert Morgan, *ABD*, VI:475.

<sup>95</sup>Neugebauer, 778.

<sup>96</sup>Although Schlatter is not cited in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), the proposals of the essays resonate deeply with Schlatter's views on Jesus' primacy, and the function of apostolic traditions and eventually writings, in the early Christian communities.

<sup>97</sup>Neugebauer, 780.

<sup>98</sup>Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche*, 319.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup>Robert Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996).

<sup>101</sup>Carson, "Current Issues," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 27-32. Carson lists these essential features: Biblical theology (1) "is a discipline

necessarily dependent on reading the Bible as an historically developing collection of documents," (2) "must presuppose a coherent and agreed canon," (3) "presupposes a profound willingness to work inductively from the text—from individual books and from the canon as a whole," (4) "will not only work inductively in each of the biblical corpora but will seek to make clear the connections among the corpora," (5) "will transcend mere description and linking of the biblical documents, and call men and women to knowledge of the living God."