

# 3

## The *Sehakt*

### Empirical-Critical Realism and the Unified Christ

ADOLF SCHLATTER IS A theologian of unity.<sup>1</sup> Schlatter's pursuit of a coherent theological framework with an impetus towards the whole might well be termed one of his major methodological priorities. The careful reader of Schlatter's works soon realizes how Schlatter aims to overcome any tendencies towards segmentation and compartmentalization in theology.<sup>2</sup> Schlatter's affinity for unity, linked with his aversion to dualisms, has major implications for his Christology, as will be explored in this chapter. In short, he develops a unified account of Jesus Christ and rejects any theological attempts to differentiate, for example, between a historical Jesus and a Christ of faith, or between Jesus' actions and his convictions. Schlatter arrives at his portrayal of a holistic Jesus Christ through his empirical-realist reading of the New Testament. In what follows we shall, first, look at the empirical basis of Schlatter's theological method, before we move, secondly, to its implications for his New Testament studies, and the resultant picture of a unified Jesus Christ.

1. Irmgardt Kindt was certainly right when she identified "the notion of unity" as a central theme in Schlatter; see her *Gedanke der Einheit*, 13–28. In addition to Kindt's monograph, see Egg, *Schlatters Kritische Position*, 22, 33, 73–76, 83; Walldorf, *Realistische Philosophie*, 78–79, 111; Lessing, *Geschichte der Deutschsprachigen Evangelischen Theologie*, 1:121; Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 493; see also von Lüpke, *Wahrnehmung der Gotteswirklichkeit*, 43–47.

2. See Schlatter, "Selbstdarstellungen," 157–58; cf. *Dogma*, 44, 370.

## A THEOLOGY OF SEEING

Adolf Schlatter was from an early age encouraged to relate very closely to nature—what he calls his “connection with nature” (*Anschluß an die Natur*).<sup>3</sup> Schlatter remembers that his interest in fauna and flora kept him from becoming a Kantian,<sup>4</sup> and throughout his works he calls attention to reality as the source for human knowledge of God. “God does not become credible to us if we do not have a great work before us that comes from him,” he insists, “and the first work of God we have to see is nature.”<sup>5</sup> (Reading assertions such as these, one must bear in mind that Schlatter did not pursue a natural *theology* as some have suggested,<sup>6</sup> rather, he intended to underline the reality of natural *revelation*.<sup>7</sup>) As mentioned earlier, Schlatter's realistic tendency was consolidated through his encounters with the Aristotelian Rudolf Eucken in Basel,<sup>8</sup> and with Johann T. Beck during his studies in Tübingen. In Aristotelian fashion, Schlatter thus advocates the “affirmation of that which is perceived” (*Bejahung des Wahrgenommenen*), which enables our human “consciousness to grasp the attributes of all being” (*die Merkmale alles Seins*).<sup>9</sup> The close perception of reality became thus an integral element of Schlatter's theological method. Schlatter writes: “I, for my part, consider the formula ‘perception’ [*Wahrnehmung*] as appropriate for my method and my goal; it characterizes what I have in mind . . . I would . . . not reject the label *empirical theology*.”<sup>10</sup> For Schlatter, observation is key

3. Schlatter, “Selbstdarstellungen,” 155.

4. “I guess that my familiarity with the plant,” writes Schlatter, “childlike as it was, had the effect that it saved me from any inclination towards Kantianism.” *Erlebtes*, 125.

5. Schlatter, *Erlebtes*, 126. “The certainty of God [*Gewißheit Gottes*],” Schlatter notes, “and the certainty of the world are presented to us conjointly.” Schlatter, “Idealismus und Erweckung,” 14.

6. See Bailer's summary in *Das systematische Prinzip*, 50–54.

7. As mentioned earlier in our discussion on Schlatter's evaluation of Barth's theology, Schlatter clearly highlights the significance of Scripture, history and creation as the media of God's revelation, without succumbing to a full-blown natural theology.

8. Eucken points out that “[w]hat we are offered by our senses, are, according to Aristotle, the real things [*wirklichen Dinge*], and that gives his epistemology a completely objective character.” Eucken, *Methode der aristotelischen Forschung*, 21. “Thus,” continues Eucken, Aristotle's “whole philosophy is pervaded by the conviction of the reality and objectivity of observation.” *Ibid.*, 24.

9. Schlatter, *Metaphysik*, 26. Werner Neuer concludes that for Schlatter metaphysics is therefore “an ontology of created reality which tries to identify the immovable and unchangeable basic structures of nature, humanity, and history.” Neuer, “Einführung,” 5.

10. Schlatter, “Briefe über das Dogma,” 85, 11 (emphasis original).

as only through empirical observation do we gather relevant knowledge.<sup>11</sup> “There is no deduction,” Schlatter claims, “that can work with any other material than that which is perceived; even the most audacious apriorician [*Aprioriker*] has never merely skimmed through his material and the most assiduous spurner of seeing [*eifrigste Verächter des Sehens*] has never produced a thought other than by means of seeing.”<sup>12</sup>

In explanatory remarks on his systematic theology, the “Letters on Christian Dogmatics,” Schlatter asserts that it is only through objective observation that the theologian arrives at a suitable framework for theology.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Schlatter feels that he needs no elaborate epistemology as such; we “need neither a theory of seeing, in order to see,” he claims, “nor a theory of epistemology, in order to know.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, then, Schlatter basically argues for a common-sense approach to theology (not to be confused with Scottish common sense realism). He writes:

The suspicion that theology needs a specific preparation in order to arrive at an understanding and proof of its positions is destructive. The theologian proves the accuracy of his intellectual work in that he does not insist on a special logic, but instead thinks according to the same logical laws as everyone else.<sup>15</sup>

For Schlatter, then, clearly echoing his teacher Beck, “every true theologian is first and foremost an observer.”<sup>16</sup> It is exactly such an empirical-realist act of seeing that renders theology a science, a *Wissenschaft*,<sup>17</sup> and

11. See Schlatter, *Ethik*, 252; cf. *Metaphysik*, 18–25; “Selbstdarstellungen,” 164. On Schlatter’s empirical-realist framework, see Walldorf, *Realistische Philosophie*, 51–146. Herman Bavinck pursues a similar empirical-realist trajectory; he writes that “the starting point of all human knowledge is sense perception. . . . Truth must not be drawn from books but from the real world. Observation is the source of all real science.” *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:226. Bavinck also asserts, much like Schlatter, that “[n]atural certainty is the indispensable foundation of science. . . . Prior to all reflection and reasoning, everyone is in fact fully assured of the real existence of the world. This certainty is not born out of a syllogism, nor is it supported by proof; it is immediate, originating spontaneously within us along with perception itself.” *Ibid.*, 223.

12. Schlatter, *Jesu Gottheit und das Kreuz*, 37.

13. Schlatter, “Briefe über das Dogma,” 17.

14. Schlatter, *Dogma*, 42.

15. *Ibid.*, 558n15.

16. Schlatter, *Philosophische Arbeit*, 12.

17. We here use the term “science” in the broad sense of *Wissenschaft*, as Schlatter understood it (i.e., as also including the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities). Wilfried Härle notes that “*Wissenschaft*’s function is to expand knowledge in a revisable manner.” Härle, *Dogmatik*, 4. In this sense, Schlatter argues that theology can indeed count itself among the sciences. See in particular Schlatter’s “Atheistische

which at the same time justifies theology's rightful place among the other sciences within the academic setting.<sup>18</sup> When, at the celebrations on his seventy-fifth birthday, a colleague described him as a "religious genius [but] scientific nobody" (*religiöses Genie, eine wissenschaftliche Null*), Schlatter retorted, "There is no religious genius in this room, such a person does not exist!—A scientific nil, well, we will have to see about that."<sup>19</sup> Schlatter was emphatic that virtually all areas of science use the same empirical method of observation; this applies to both the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and to the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), and thus also to theology. "The first and foremost task of the dogmatist," writes Schlatter, "as in every scientific profession, is observation, which shows him on the basis of reality the processes that bring us into relation with God and mediate the divine work through which God reveals himself to us."<sup>20</sup> This statement is significant insofar as it points to Schlatter's fundamental conviction that observation—whether it be observation of plants, animals, or the New Testament—always brings us in "relation with God," as it is God's own work that we observe. The process of observing God's work in creation, in history, and in the Scriptures Schlatter calls the seeing-act (*Sehakt*).<sup>21</sup> To Schlatter's mind, this empirical-realist approach of seeing rendered his theological method unique among other contemporary approaches.<sup>22</sup> We shall next take a closer look at how the theologian conducts this seeing-act when it comes to the observation of the New Testament documents.

## NEW TESTAMENT RESEARCH

In terms of New Testament research, Schlatter distinguishes between two different tasks that are closely related: the historical task of New Testament *history* and the dogmatic task of New Testament *theology*.<sup>23</sup> New Testament

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Methoden," 228–50.

18. This view was, and still is, subject to controversy. I have dealt with this problem in more detail elsewhere, see my "Seeing, Thinking, and Living," 177–88, and, in collaboration with James Eglinton, "Scientific Theology?" 27–50.

19. Kittel, "Adolf Schlatter: Gedenkrede," 8.

20. Schlatter, *Dogma*, 12.

21. *Ibid.*, 23; see also *Rückblick*, 208; *Erlebtes*, 102; *Philosophische Arbeit*, 12; cf. Walldorf, *Realistische Philosophie*, 51–73.

22. See Schlatter, *Rückblick*, 159.

23. William Baird presents a succinct overview of Schlatter's approach to New Testament research; see Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 2:373–83. Whilst one must certainly applaud Baird for his attempt to relate Schlatter to historical-critical research, his treatment is at times in need of further refinement. Schlatter, for instance,

*history* deals with the events through which Christianity developed in the first place, and New Testament *theology* examines the convictions presented to us in the New Testament documents.<sup>24</sup> While both tasks are significant in and of themselves, they are closely related, since on the one hand, the New Testament does not know of any “timeless concepts,” and, on the other hand, convictions of the New Testament people undoubtedly influenced the course of history “with causal power.”<sup>25</sup> In the following sections, we shall look at each of these tasks in more detail.

## The Historical Task

Schlatter’s strong emphasis on history and historical research has already surfaced in our earlier discussion. The study of the New Testament is first and foremost “a historical task.”<sup>26</sup> Since “we receive God’s revelation in history . . . there is no knowledge that is independent from the observation of history.”<sup>27</sup> The context-relatedness of the New Testament documents is for Schlatter particularly important. In the historical task of the seeing-act, the theologian works as observing historian, who carefully explores the New Testament’s cultural and linguistic background.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Schlatter ventured into in-depth studies of the historical setting of the New Testament, pioneering in first-century Judaism and linguistic studies.<sup>29</sup> Through historical and linguistic research, Schlatter intends to sharpen

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was probably not as committed to the historical-critical method as defined by Schlatter’s peers (and by Baird) as Baird seems to suggest (ibid., 2:393).

24. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 67. By assuming a close link between historical research and theology, Schlatter distances himself from William Wrede who rejected the title “New Testament theology.” According to Wrede, “[t]he appropriate name for the subject-matter is: early Christian history of religion, or rather: the history of early Christian religion and theology.” Wrede, “The Task and Methods of ‘New Testament Theology,’” 116.

25. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 67.

26. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 17.

27. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 61; see also *Erlebtes*, 59; “Selbstdarstellungen,” 162. Martin Heidegger actually supports this position when he notes that “[t]he more historical theology is, the more immediately it captures the historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] of faith in word and concept, [and therefore] the more ‘systematic’ it is.” Heidegger, *Phänomenologie und Theologie*, 24. Interestingly, after witnessing Schlatter in the lecture hall, Martin Heidegger is said to have exclaimed, “Now that is theology!” Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, 607.

28. Schlatter, “Selbstdarstellungen,” 164–65. See also “Entstehung der Beiträge,” 76, and “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 71–73.

29. See Schlatter, “Selbstdarstellungen,” 162.

his view of the New Testament, in order to figure out “what was true for them [the New Testament people].”<sup>30</sup> In his view, the theologian’s agenda must be to expose what the text itself says, in order to find out what “actually happened.”<sup>31</sup> Proceeding in this way, Schlatter feels, underwrites the scientific character of the seeing-act, mentioned earlier. “The historical task of the Bible,” Schlatter claims, “can by no means be anything other than an intense hearing of what the Bible contains and what it renders visible; anything contrary to that is not ‘science.’”<sup>32</sup> Thus in order to grasp correctly the facts (*Erfassung des Tatbestands*),<sup>33</sup> Schlatter calls for serious, “prejudice-free” observation,<sup>34</sup> where one observes the historical facts with objectivity and an “impartial eye.”<sup>35</sup>

Up to this point, Schlatter’s method certainly corresponds with central elements of the historical criticism of many of his contemporaries. In our earlier comparison of the Greifswald school with the Ritschlians, it was pointed out that both schools clearly emphasize the importance of a scientific, critical-historical study of the New Testament. However, a closer look reveals that Schlatter’s understanding of critical-historical research differs considerably from that of his contemporaries. While Schlatter was obviously not opposed to rigorous *kritisch-historischen* New Testament research, he reacted strongly against what he considered an *exclusively* critical-historical method. He opposed any historicizing approach that was, in his view, detached from the New Testament content and which conducted its research independently, as it were, of the New Testament data, thus from a neutral or even critical atheist point of view.<sup>36</sup> It seems that objectivity, in Schlatter

30. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 9–10; cf. “Bedeutung der Methode,” 7.

31. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 17.

32. Schlatter, *Heilige Anliegen der Kirche*, 42; see also “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 56–57. When Schlatter stresses the hearing or the rendering visible of the Bible’s content, he is, beside historical studies, concerned with linguistics, with the relationship between language and cognition (“Selbstdarstellungen,” 164). “History means linguistics,” says Schlatter (“Erfolg und Mißerfolg,” 261). For a detailed discussion of Schlatter’s emphasis on language see Joachim Ringleben’s essay, “Exegese und Dogmatik bei Adolf Schlatter,” 350–85.

33. Schlatter, *Dogma*, 19, see also “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 35, 40.

34. Schlatter, “Selbstdarstellungen,” 159.

35. Schlatter, “Briefe über das Dogma,” 16. By the same token, Joachim Ringleben, who exhibits a clear Schlatter-affinity, argues, “Impartiality in observation and conceptual flexibility are indispensable in order to understand this human being Jesus.” Ringleben, *Jesus*, 7.

36. Cf. Köstenberger, “Translator’s Preface,” 13–14. Schlatter complains of what he labelled the “opulent overgrowing of historicism” (*üppig überwachsende Historisieren*) of some of his contemporaries (perhaps he has F. C. Baur in mind, here. Schlatter,

ter's view, is not synonymous with neutrality—a position that, obviously, deserves closer scrutiny. Schlatter's plea for objectivity does not imply a neutral, "thoughtless empiricism,"<sup>37</sup> as some of his contemporaries demand. A closer reading of Schlatter suggests that he certainly does not require the exegete to suppress any subjective involvement. On the contrary: The seeing-act is, as the term indicates, still an *act* of a unique individual. And as such, subjective involvement is inevitable, for the exegete is never, and should never be, a "lifeless mirror,"<sup>38</sup> or an "observing machine."<sup>39</sup> Rather, the material is observed and processed by an individual who always possesses preconceived notions that are active during perception (what Schlatter calls *Vorstellungsmassen*).<sup>40</sup> In fact, Schlatter actually seems to allow for the infiltration of the seeing-process by the theologian's idiosyncrasies.<sup>41</sup> Yet how, one asks, can Schlatter then still pursue "prejudice-free" objectivity? How can he still call his empirical method "pure"? Schlatter claims that the purity of the seeing-act is not jeopardized if, and only if, the exegete is, as far as possible,<sup>42</sup> aware of his own presuppositions,<sup>43</sup> while also performing

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"Christologie und Soteriologie," viii. This approach, he claims, clouds the view of the New Testament history of Christ and results in a distorted picture of him. See Schlatter, *Glaube im Neuen Testament*, 286n1.

37. Schlatter, "Selbstdarstellungen," 9; *Dogma*, 91.

38. Schlatter, "Bedeutung der Methode," 8; see also "Erfolg und Mißerfolg," 268; "Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 19; "Briefe über das Dogma," 19.

39. Schlatter, "Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 20. Similarly to Schlatter, Herman Bavinck underscores that the theologian "is not only an intellectual but also a willing and feeling being; he is not a thinking machine but in addition to his head also has a heart, an [inner] world of feelings and passions. He brings these with him in his scientific research." Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:222.

40. Schlatter, "Selbstdarstellungen," 15; "Bedeutung der Methode," 6; "Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 20, 25.

41. One observes here a fascinating parallel between Schlatter's hermeneutical realism and the creative expressionism of his Dutch contemporary, the painter Vincent van Gogh (1853–90). Both employ, in their own field, a quasi-objective critical realism combined with an idiosyncratic expressionism. "I am still living off the real world," writes van Gogh in a letter in 1888, "I don't invent the whole of the painting; on the contrary, I find it ready-made—but to be untangled—in the real world." Van Gogh to Emile Bernard, Arles, on or about Friday, 5 October 1888. Schlatter's seeing-act could thus be described as an exegetical expressionist form of hermeneutics. Bruce L. McCormack also detects characteristic parallels between the expressionist art movement and theology at that time, in *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 33–34.

42. Schlatter acknowledges that there are many implicit influences that are not consciously accessible to the individual and therefore cannot be excluded from the judgment process. Schlatter, "Briefe über das Dogma," 29.

43. Schlatter, "Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 20–21; see also "Atheistische Methoden," 247; *Jesu Gottheit und das Kreuz*, 20.

the hermeneutical task devotedly, with “objective faithfulness.”<sup>44</sup> Objective faithfulness basically means that the exegete works a) with scientific objectivity, while being b) faithful to his subject matter as he attempts to approach it on its own terms. This brings us to the second aspect of Schlatter's method of New Testament research, the dogmatic task of New Testament theology.

### The Dogmatic Task

Regarding the dogmatic task of New Testament theology, the theologian deals with the convictions that are presented in the documents. These convictions, and this is crucial for our understanding of Schlatter's position, have a clear impact on the theologian, in that they determine the attitude in which he is to approach the text. For Schlatter, the single valid criterion for New Testament theology was *not* the allegedly neutral “scientific” viewpoint of the critical-historical method, but the “content” of the New Testament, namely “of what it is in itself” (*was es in sich selber ist*).<sup>45</sup> According to this agenda, the receptive theologian lets the text speak to himself and meets the New Testament on its own ground.<sup>46</sup> Theologians who interact with the New Testament documents in such a way “unite the content of their own consciousness with the assertions of the New Testament.”<sup>47</sup> Its subject matter requires the scientific theologian to approach it not only empirically but also from a faith perspective. Schlatter, then, clearly has a presupposition—his empirical method is not “objective,” “pure,” or “prejudice-free” in the strict sense of the word. Schlatter was clearly realist enough to acknowledge that there could be no such thing as a “presuppositionless exegesis,” an insight which his student Rudolf Bultmann picked up later.<sup>48</sup> Yet if presupposition was unavoidable, Schlatter clearly preferred it to be theistic rather than atheistic, since he considered only the former to be congruent with the material he observed. Gösta Lundström comments:

Schlatter by no means abandoned this believing attitude in his critical researches, but considered on the contrary that it provided a better and clearer insight into the deeper meaning of the problems than is ever achieved by scholars who

44. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 54, 20–21; “Briefe über das Dogma,” 21; *Dogma*, 94; *Metaphysik*, 76.

45. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 25.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 28.

48. See Bultmann's essay, “Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?,” 409–17.



believe themselves unprejudiced but are actually entirely bound by (to them) self-evident theological and philosophical preconceptions.<sup>49</sup>

New Testament theology is then always an existential task, Schlatter claims, as it confronts us with the question: “How does that which is written relate to our own, spiritual possession?”<sup>50</sup> Ideally, the past tense of New Testament history becomes the foundation of our own vitality in the present tense.<sup>51</sup> The New Testament itself exerts a significant impact on us as it introduces us to an “image of God that sets in motion our whole spiritual possession,” and which can either lead to a relation (*Anschluss*) with Jesus or a rejection of him.<sup>52</sup> Schlatter thus connects hermeneutics with an ethical imperative of faithful New Testament interpretation. Only the faithful exegete, who performs the seeing-act from a position of faith, is a truthful observer who listens to the text carefully and thereby secures the accurate reading of Scripture which is Schlatter’s ultimate goal.

However, the Swiss critical-empirical realist is eager to note that this almost paradoxical “subjective objectivity,” as Walldorf puts it, is not a stumbling-block in the way of proper science.<sup>53</sup> It is not subjectivity per se which can harm the purity of the seeing-act, but only a profane, a self-ish intention,<sup>54</sup> which is inimical to the subject matter.<sup>55</sup> Schlatter counters objections that this importing of faith into the theological task might obstruct his objective of scientific work (*scientifische Arbeit*).<sup>56</sup> In agreeing with Anselm’s dictum that theology is “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), he points out that faith is actually instrumental for accurate execution of theology, as only in the mode of faith does one achieve an elementary congruence between the God-given observed object (such as the Scriptures) and the God-made observing subject, the theologian.<sup>57</sup>

49. Lundström, *Kingdom of God*, 127.

50. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 29.

51. *Ibid.*, 30.

52. *Ibid.*, 64.

53. Walldorf, *Realistische Philosophie*, 70. In this context, see also Walldorf’s essay, “Aspekte einer realistischen Philosophie,” 62–85.

54. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 22–24.

55. Schlatter, *Metaphysik*, 25.

56. Schlatter to Hermann Cremer, 29 December 1894, in Stupperich, *Wort und Wahrnehmung*, 18.

57. See Schlatter, “Selbstdarstellungen,” 15 and *Glaube im Neuen Testament*, xxii–xxiii. This congruence is, for example, absent in the atheistic method, which renders theology absurd and harms the church. Schlatter, “Atheistische Methoden,” 235.

"Our object," Schlatter writes, "desires that we think of God."<sup>58</sup> Thus only as a coherent individual, with one's life-act intact, can the theologian, like the natural scientist, work properly and accurately.<sup>59</sup> Intellectual capacity and strenuous observation is obviously a precondition for adequate seeing, but the theologian is at the same time required to possess a pious connection with his subject. "Sure enough, the theologian must be a thinker," writes Schlatter, "someone who appreciates his knowledge [*Erkennen*] as a gift of God; however . . . it is equally essential for him to be pious."<sup>60</sup> Schlatter calls this mode of thinking faith-appropriate thinking (*glaubensgemäß denken*).<sup>61</sup> As a matter of fact, Schlatter goes so far as to say that the theologian's thinking is, through faith, in harmony with the "mind of Christ" (according to 1 Cor 2:16). Theology in conformity with God's will is possible as the theologian enjoys a spiritual fellowship (*Geistesgemeinschaft*) with Jesus Christ, "so that we might be able to say with Paul, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me! And it is no longer I who thinks but Christ who thinks in me."<sup>62</sup> Theology, from Schlatter's perspective, is therefore a deeply spiritual task.

In a way, then, Schlatter seems to suggest even stricter criteria for the science of theology than for any other science. One could obviously not expect an ornithologist to be transformed into a bird in order that he might be able to perform proper ornithology. Yet for theology, Schlatter claims, this metaphysical congruence between observer and the observed Word of God is not optional, but vital. Christian theology cannot be properly studied from a neutral point of view. The New Testament historian who inquires about Jesus Christ is not and must never become a *tabula rasa*. Rather, this task requires also the whole dogmatician, the whole person of faith with his own personality and his own life-story.<sup>63</sup> From this perspective then, it is evident that, for Schlatter, the historical task and the dogmatic task of New Testament research are not in a competitive relation but in fact complement each other, provided that there exists an analogy between the content of the New Testament and the "inner life" of the theologian. New Testament theology, in Schlatter's view, is thus not simply an intellectual exercise of objective observation, but primarily an "ethical struggle" about God and Christ.<sup>64</sup>

58. *Ibid.*, 248.

59. See Schlatter, "Selbstdarstellungen," 15 and *Glaube im Neuen Testament*, xxii.

60. Schlatter, *Dogma*, 22.

61. Schlatter, "Unterwerfung unter die Gotteswirklichkeit," 11, 47–48.

62. Schlatter, "Christologie und Soteriologie," xii–xiii.

63. Schlatter, "Atheistische Methoden," 234–35; cf. *Dogma*, 5–6.

64. Schlatter, "Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 62.

Any historian who abandons the notion of God—either in general or only in the field of scientific thinking—fails to recognize the central assertion of the New Testament.<sup>65</sup> Bearing in mind Schlatter’s particular approach of subjective objectivity and faith-appropriate thinking, we now turn to analyze more closely how Schlatter develops on this basis his Christology.<sup>66</sup>

## THE UNIFIED JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, his person and work is for Schlatter the focal point of the seeing-act. “In my view,” writes Schlatter, “there is no higher calling for the human eye than perception which apprehends what Jesus desires and claims.”<sup>67</sup> “Theology,” he contends, “remains forever Christology, perception [*Erfassung*] of Christ’s image, insight into his history.”<sup>68</sup> Perceiving Jesus’ words and works within the context of human history is for Schlatter the ultimate purpose of the seeing-act, since the appearance of Jesus Christ constitutes for Schlatter the goal of history.<sup>69</sup> From Schlatter’s study of the *History of the Christ* emerges, most notably, the notion of *unity*, a feature that surfaced in our earlier discussions and which deserves some closer exploration at this stage.

In Schlatter’s view, the New Testament exhibits a clear theological unity. According to Heikki Räisänen, Schlatter’s “insistence on the theological unity of the New Testament” mark him “unmistakably as a figure from a bygone era.”<sup>70</sup> Of course, Schlatter continued in the tradition of Baader and Beck, who, as we have seen earlier, emphasized the theological unity of the New Testament. In contrast to Räisänen, however, whose term “bygone era” suggests a negative connotation, we hold the view that it is sometimes worthwhile to go back to bygone eras in order to make progress in our theological questions today. Schlatter portrays a unified picture of Jesus Christ, who reveals himself as the God-human within the context of a concrete and coherent history, and whose being is in harmony with his actions.<sup>71</sup> The reason for Schlatter’s unified account lies, as already outlined, in his assumption of a close relationship between events and convictions, between

65. Ibid.

66. See Schlatter, *Dogma*, 369, 372.

67. Schlatter in his “Foreword” to *Das Wort Jesu* (in *History of the Christ*, 17).

68. Schlatter, *Gründe der christlichen Gewißheit*, 102–3.

69. As Peter Stuhlmacher correctly observes, in “Adolf Schlatter,” 233.

70. Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*, 25.

71. See Schlatter’s “Der Zweifel an der Messianität Jesu,” and his New Testament theology, *History of the Christ* and *Theology of the Apostles*.

history and dogmatics. This has special implications for Christology: in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the fields of history and dogmatics converge. Schlatter writes:

No division between history and doctrine does justice to Jesus' work and death. The events of his life do not simply get a particular colour from the ideas he wove with them. Their entire source and origin is to be found in his convictions. He acted on the basis of his mission in the certainty of being the Son and the Christ. So discussions of what happened through him which ignore his inner life are worthless.<sup>72</sup>

Jesus Christ is the prime example where history and *Dogma* meet, Schlatter argues, since the events of his life originate in his convictions. Jesus acted based on his convictions, namely that he was the Son who was sent by his Father and who appointed him to be the Christ.<sup>73</sup> To make a case for this account of a unified Jesus Christ was the purpose of Schlatter's two main New Testament works, *The History of the Christ* and *The Theology of the Apostles*. In these works, Schlatter argues for the unity of Jesus' life-act, carefully highlighting the harmony of his calling, his convictions, and his being in action, while also pointing to his continuing activity in the world through his presence in the apostles and in the early church. To Schlatter's mind, many of his contemporaries did not sufficiently emphasize the harmonious life-act of Jesus Christ. Schlatter is thus critical of approaches that assume a linear-chronological development both of Jesus' own convictions and of Christianity as a movement. In *The History of the Christ*, Schlatter lays out how Jesus Christ was from the very beginning of his earthly life convinced and assured of his messianic calling, having both perfect God-consciousness and perfect messianic self-consciousness.<sup>74</sup> Jesus neither gradually grew in his messianic self-awareness (as Heinrich Holtzmann, for instance, suggests),<sup>75</sup> nor was his messianic office ascribed to him by the early community of faith in

72. Schlatter, "Theology of the NT and Dogmatics," 156–57. Ward Gasque thus describes Schlatter's approach as follows: "[T]he focal point of his theology was simply the conviction that Jesus was 'the Christ of God' . . . and that Christ himself is the heart of the New Testament, indeed, of the Bible. . . . He was committed to the belief that Jesus was already in his earthly life Son of God and Messiah. . . . The Jesus of the New Testament was not the product of the church's faith but, rather, a historical given. To put it in other words, the church's faith was the product of Jesus, who himself was the Christ of God." Gasque, "Promise of Adolf Schlatter," 29.

73. Schlatter, "Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 68.

74. See Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 284.

75. See Holtzmann, *Die synoptischen Evangelien*, 484–85.

retrospect (as Hermann S. Reimarus believed).<sup>76</sup> Jesus, according to Schlatter, was from the outset assured of his mission, and, being convinced of his mission, he acted. Schlatter also rejected claims which argued for a chronological development from Jesus Christ to the Apostle Paul, and finally to the Apostle John, who is considered by some to be the “greatest representative” of early Christian history.<sup>77</sup> In Schlatter’s view, such approaches—and he has most likely Bernhard Weiss in mind here—were influenced by Hegelian dialectic and by the assumption of dogmatizing tendencies, which he considered implausible.<sup>78</sup> Schlatter also disagrees with Wrede’s and Bultmann’s position, which suggest a discord between the teachings of Jesus and of Paul the apostle.<sup>79</sup>

What Schlatter notices as he pursues his seeing-act is the remarkable “uniformity” of Jesus’ inner convictions and the “apostles’ inner life.”<sup>80</sup> Schlatter’s emphasis on Jesus’ “inner convictions” (*inwendiger Besitz*),<sup>81</sup> in this regard, shows distinct affinities with Wilhelm Herrmann’s focus on Jesus’ “inner life,” mentioned earlier. Still, while Schlatter welcomes Herrmann’s particular emphasis, he argues that his own approach offers more in that it establishes a vital link between Jesus’ inner convictions and concrete history, something that Herrmann, as he feels, neglects. In Schlatter’s view, Jesus’ convictions, his teachings, his word, and his creative deeds are closely united. “I hope,” writes Schlatter in the 1920 preface to *The History of the Christ*, “that the reader will succeed more readily in perceiving the unity binding everything that Jesus says and does when he pictures the interdependent activities of Jesus.”<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Schlatter’s method of New Testament research does not allow him to use critical-historical research as a means to go “behind” the New Testament sources in order to uncover some

76. See Spence, *Christology*, 90–93; cf. McGrath, *Making of Modern German Christology*, 34–35.

77. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 43.

78. According to Weiss, Johannean theology represents the “final result of Biblical theology in the deepest conception and the highest glory.” *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 2:315.

79. See Schlatter’s work, *Jesus und Paulus*. For Wrede, the Apostle Paul is the “second founder of Christianity,” who developed a Hellenistic theology that was very different from Jesus’ own teaching. In Wrede’s view, this “second founder of Christianity has even, compared with the first, exercised beyond all doubt the stronger—not the better—influence.” Wrede, *Paul*, 179–80. Bultmann even goes so far as to stress that “Jesus’ teaching is—to all its intents and purposes—irrelevant for Paul.” Bultmann, “Significance of the Historical Jesus,” 223.

80. Schlatter, “Theologie des NT und Dogmatik,” 37.

81. *Ibid.*

82. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 21–22.

form of "hidden" information. Schlatter could thus not "demythologize" the New Testament data in order to rediscover the *kerygma* according to the method of his student Rudolf Bultmann, or isolate the christological kernel from the historical husk as his friend Adolf von Harnack envisioned.<sup>83</sup>

Instead of going *behind* the New Testament, it is Schlatter's declared intention to go *into* the New Testament and to discover "what is there." And what he discovers is a harmony between Jesus' person and his work in history. According to Schlatter, it is thus impossible to drive a wedge between the different gospel accounts; it is always the same Jesus Christ in his organic life-act to whom the evangelists bear witness. Schlatter could therefore not scrutinize the gospel accounts expecting to extract an underlying Christ-principle (*Christusprinzip*),<sup>84</sup> or a certain "messianic secret," as William Wrede attempted.<sup>85</sup> Schlatter could also not subtract alleged myths from the gospel story on the basis of an anti-supernatural presupposition in the manner of D. F. Strauss. For Schlatter, the miracles recorded in the New Testament are not products of the evangelists' imagination but are key elements of Jesus' mission and vocation. "The more we reinterpret the miracle record or seek to distance it from the course of history," Schlatter writes, "the farther we distance ourselves from the real events."<sup>86</sup> There was and is only this one history of Christ, only this one message, only this one person of Jesus Christ who displays an organic union of being and action, of his "inner life" and his creative action in concrete history. Schlatter explains:

My attempt to concretize my theology for the church was based on the fact that I saw the history of Christ as a unity before me. I did not have next to a synoptic Christ a Johannine Christ, or next to a prophet who preached the Sermon on the Mount a Christ who carried the cross . . . I saw him before me pursuing *one* goal and *one* mission [*Sendung*] that generated the whole abundance of his word and work . . . I had the impression that I was entitled to this attempt, to show him to others like this as well.<sup>87</sup>

83. See Schlatter's criticism of Harnack in "Christus und Christentum, Person und Prinzip," 9.

84. See Schlatter, "Princip des Protestantismus," 241–47. Schlatter has in mind presumably here his Swiss contemporary Alois E. Biedermann (1819–85), who differentiated between a "religious principle" and the person of Christ. See Biedermann, *Christliche Dogmatik*, 1:331.

85. See Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*.

86. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 191. For further reading on Schlatter's view on miracles see his lexicon entry on "Wunder," and his essay on "Die Wunder der Bibel," in *Hilfe in Bibelnot*, 63–69.

87. Schlatter, *Rückblick*, 233 (emphasis original).

According to his reading of the New Testament, Schlatter concludes that it nowhere forces its readers to distinguish between a historical Jesus and a Christ of faith.<sup>88</sup> This distinction, Schlatter thinks, is an artificial and unhealthy dualism that is foreign to the biblical text. Rather, the New Testament describes in a coherent manner the words, the convictions and the acts of the one person of Jesus Christ, who, as the Son of God, calls sinners to repentance, dies on the cross and thereby creates the possibility for the new community of faith. Hence, Schlatter is convinced that Jesus' self-consciousness did not shift from optimism to a later pessimistic outlook. Jesus, he clarifies, was never unsure of his assignment and never deviated from his goal, the cross.<sup>89</sup> Death came not as a surprise to Jesus but was the consciously willed apex of his kingly office, the culmination of the revelation of his divinity.<sup>90</sup> According to Schlatter, and this will take center stage in the next chapters, Jesus' kingly will (*königlicher Wille*), his divine sonship, his call to repentance, his will to the cross (*Kreuzeswille*), his fellowship with the disciples, and his creation of the new community of believers are all significantly inter-related and dependent upon each other, forming one harmonious unity:

His sovereign will, his divine sonship, his witness to God's sovereignty, his call to repentance, his willing the cross [*Kreuzeswille*], his fellowship with the disciples—in short the whole sequence of his acts—are not just one item after another. We fail to do them justice if we simply note each one separately. His knowledge of himself as Lord of the community is grounded in his filial relationship to God, in his knowing himself empowered to call sinners and in his authority to bear his cross. Jesus will be comprehensible to us in proportion as these connections are perceived.<sup>91</sup>

When one understands the unity of Jesus' being in action in this way, Schlatter claims, it is impossible "to separate a 'message' from his actions, since, in

88. He writes: "The failure to believe that Jesus confirmed himself as the Christ can only be maintained with the destruction of his whole word and at best proceeds immediately to the negation of Jesus' existence. This is blatant rationalism, an inference from the alleged 'impossibility' to the destruction of the ability to see [*Sehfähigkeit*]." Schlatter, *Dogma*, 282.

89. See Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 266.

90. Schlatter writes: "A Christ on whom the imminent catastrophe began to dawn only gradually is not the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount." Schlatter, "Christologie der Bergpredigt," 323. We will return to this important aspect in the following chapter.

91. Schlatter, "Theology of the NT and Dogmatics," 138 ["Theologie des NT und Dogmatik," 38].

his case, the word and the work, the assurance and the will, form a closely connected unity.<sup>92</sup> The Jesus who appears before Schlatter's eyes is the subject of a holistic life-act. Schlatter writes:

According to my view, it is one unified goal that determines the whole path of Jesus, his earthly work, its completion, his heavenly efficacy through the Spirit. During his earthly work he draws from his kingly mission his word of repentance, his proclamation of the divine kingdom, his signs, [and] his cross. The same mission makes his goal unique and empowers him to establish his fellowship with the disciples anew, now as the one who lives eternally. The same mission he accomplished by granting those who are now connected with him through faith, justification, redemption and sanctification, and the same mission bestows on his community what it is hoping for.<sup>93</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Schlatter's contribution to New Testament studies is timeless. In light of the current doubts regarding Jesus' self-understanding—as recently expressed by Bart D. Ehrman, for instance, who claims that Jesus did not refer to himself as the “Son of Man”<sup>94</sup>—Schlatter's theology of the seeing-act, with its two-pronged strategy of combining the historical task and the dogmatic task, offer crucial assistance to those who engage with the F. C. Baurs of today. Key to a correct reading of the New Testament text is first of all an in-depth knowledge of its historical-cultural context, of its language and particular setting. For the historical task, rigorous empirical observation is paramount. In this respect, Schlatter shares common ground with many of his contemporaries who promoted the critical-historical study of the New Testament. However, for Schlatter, the historical task of New Testament history is closely linked with the dogmatic task of New Testament theology. The latter requires the theologian to evaluate carefully and faithfully the convictions of the New Testament people. We noted that for Schlatter, the *content* of the New Testament convictions present a crucial challenge to the researcher in that it calls him to assimilate it and to pursue an existential connection (what Schlatter calls *Anschluss*) with it. New Testament research is thus a dual task that requires the exegete to explore the facts empirically

92. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 21.

93. Schlatter, “Briefe über das Dogma,” 57.

94. See Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 106–9, 121.



and the content faithfully. If the seeing-act is executed in this way, Schlatter claims, a unified picture of Jesus Christ emerges. Schlatter's New Testament picture of Christ differs considerably from that of many of his contemporaries. According to Schlatter, Jesus is more than a "religious genius"<sup>95</sup> who proclaims the universal kingdom of ethical performance and heartfelt religious experience. Jesus, in Schlatter's view, is the one with perfect messianic self-consciousness, who issues his authoritative call to repentance and his invitation to sinners. At the same time, he is the Christ who embraces the cross upon which he performs the kingly deed of reconciliation and through which he creates the new community of faith. These are the major building-blocks of Schlatter's holistic account of Jesus Christ and they shall next be examined in more detail as we turn to the thinking-act (*Denkakt*), moving thus to a more systematic-theological treatment of Schlatter's thought.

SAMPLE

95. See Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der Neutestamentlichen Theologie*, 1:173–75.