

# Nineteenth-Century Lutheran Theologians



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Matthew L. Becker (ed.)

# **Nineteenth-Century Lutheran Theologians**

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## Contents

Matthew L. Becker	
Editor's Introduction . . . . .	7
Christine Helmer	
Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834) . . . . .	23
Mark Mattes	
Georg W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) . . . . .	41
Anders Holm	
Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) . . . . .	67
Mark A. Seifrid	
Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) . . . . .	87
Hans Schwarz	
Gottfried Thomasius (1802–1875) . . . . .	99
Roy A. Harrisville	
Johann Tobias Beck (1804–1878) . . . . .	121
Lutz Mohaupt	
Adolf von Harless (1806–1879) . . . . .	143
David Ratke	
Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872) . . . . .	177
Matthew L. Becker	
Johannes C.K. von Hofmann (1810–1877) . . . . .	189

Christoph Barnbrock	
Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (1811–1887) . . . . .	213
Carl S. Hughes	
Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) . . . . .	231
Christoffer H. Grundmann	
Theodosius Andreas Harnack (1817–1889) . . . . .	255
Darrell Jodock	
Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) . . . . .	275
Mark Oldenburg	
Charles Porterfield Krauth (1823–1883) . . . . .	295
Carl E. Braaten	
Martin Kähler (1835–1912) . . . . .	309
Dietz Lange	
Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) . . . . .	327
List of Contributors . . . . .	351
Index of Persons . . . . .	355

Matthew L. Becker

## Editor's Introduction

This is a book about Lutheran theology in the “long nineteenth century,” that period between the political revolutions of the late eighteenth century and the end of the First World War.<sup>1</sup> With respect to the history of Protestant theology, this era began with the publication of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches* (1799), written in the wake of Kant’s critical philosophy, and it ended with the rise of Dialectical Theology, which was inaugurated by Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans (1919) and directed against the liberal Protestant tradition begun by Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. The end of nineteenth-century Protestant theology could also be tied to the beginnings of the modern Ecumenical Movement, which gained momentum in the aftermath of “the Great War,” largely through the efforts of Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), who is the focus of book’s final chapter.

The book thus provides an introduction to fifteen Lutherans and one Reformed theologian who were active in this period. The one Reformed figure, Schleiermacher, has been so influential upon the development of Protestant theology, including its Lutheran stream, that his life and work are the focus of the initial chapter. Following the format of the essays in the companion volume on twentieth-century figures, each essay here covers the life, teachings, and abiding legacy of a given thinker.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the authors has not been merely to identify how a specific individual was important in his own time and place, but to indicate why aspects of that person’s thinking might have a continuing significance for contemporary theological reflection. Hopefully readers of the book will gain deeper insight into our current theological milieu through an examination of these key figures who were active in the immediate wake of the Enlightenment and at a time when many Europeans were beginning to move beyond Christianity in search of other alternatives.

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1 See David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

2 See Mark C. Mattes, ed., *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians*, Refo500 Academic Studies, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, vol. 10 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).



## Overview of the Project

The project as a whole was initiated by the journal *Lutheran Quarterly* and carried forward through conversations with Jörg Persch of Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, “in order to determine how our recent past can help us shape our bearings in a new century.”<sup>3</sup> Earlier versions of six of the essays (Schleiermacher, Hegel, Thomasius, Hofmann, Kähler, and Söderblom) were originally published in *Lutheran Quarterly*. In addition to Schleiermacher—who, along with Kant and Hegel, has to be included among those who have had the greatest influence upon the development of modern intellectual history—the thinkers who are examined here are ones who saw themselves as working within the Lutheran-Protestant tradition of theology. Nevertheless, the reader will quickly notice the remarkable differences among these individuals in how they understood Christian doctrine and applied it to their world.

Twelve of the theologians presented here were Germans (one of whom became a U.S. citizen), two were Danish, one was Swedish, and one was American. Given the path-breaking significance of German theology in this century, one should not be surprised by the large number of chapters devoted to this tradition.<sup>4</sup> No other English text provides an in-depth examination of these key figures and the implications of their theology for contemporary discussion. These are theologians who deserve to be better understood than they typically are, especially among English-speaking scholars. Each of the essays attempts to present its object in a new light and to show how that person not only gave shape to Lutheran theology at that time but also furthered the course of Christian thought itself.

## Intellectual Background

All of the theologians included here traced their theological heritage back to Martin Luther (1483–1546) and the reforms he initiated after 1517. Luther considered the apostolic gospel to be the heart of Christian doctrine since it announces the unconditional forgiveness of God in Christ for all sinners. Over against late-medieval theology, which taught that salvation is a cooperative process of human action and divine assistance, Luther became convinced that human beings lack the ability to do the good that his teachers had said was

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3 Mattes, “Editor’s Preface,” *Twentieth-Century Lutheran Theologians*, 7.

4 Karl Barth was largely correct when he once noted that German Protestant theology in the nineteenth century “was the signpost for theological endeavor elsewhere” (Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* [Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960], 11). See also Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), which analyzes only German theologians.

possible and necessary for salvation. From his reading of Paul, he concluded that a person is “justified” or “right” before God through grace, for Christ’s sake, by faith alone (*sola fide*), apart from good works. In contrast to the divine law, whose primary purpose is to reveal the human incapacity to please God, the gospel or “good news” reveals the righteousness of Christ that is external to human beings and is given by God as a gift (*sola gratia*) to the one who trusts in Christ alone (*solus Christus*). Since sinners have been freed by Christ from the need to justify themselves before God, Luther stressed that they have been called to serve others freely in love. As a result of his growing conflict with the Roman officials, especially the Pope, Luther laid more and more stress on the sole sufficiency of Holy Scripture as the single norm (*sola scriptura*) by which all church teaching and practices are to be evaluated. While the Bible is an historical book, lying within it is the living Word of God which can be found nowhere else. The church’s authority resides in its setting forth the evangelical sense of the words of Scripture that witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word. Luther thus rejected Roman tradition as an authority, yet he also criticized Protestant sectarianism since the church is the historical body of Christ through whom God has deigned to confer divine grace (via preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and confession/holy absolution).

If Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms (1529) have served as the principal compendia of evangelical faith, the first systematic presentation of evangelical doctrine was the *Loci communes* (1521) of Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), which became a standard textbook among Lutheran students of theology for the next 300 years.<sup>5</sup> It presents the “common places” or topics in a distinct order (God, creation, sin, the law, the gospel, etc.) and explicates them on the basis of Scripture and the gospel. This same gospel orientation is evident in the Augsburg Confession, which Melancthon largely wrote and which was read publicly before the Holy Roman Emperor on June 25, 1530. Of its twenty-eight articles, the fourth, on justification, articulates the “chief article of faith” that informs and shapes the others, including those on “abuses that have been corrected” (i. e., distribution of only the Eucharistic host, forced celibacy of priests, the mass as a human work and sacrifice, satisfactions, monastic vows, the exercise of ecclesial oversight). A central claim of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, which Melancthon published a year later in response to Roman criticism, is that “Evangelicals” teach the apostolic, catholic faith. The Apology further underscores the centrality of the doctrine of justification and defines it primarily (but not exclusively) as the forensic or declarative imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the sinner.

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<sup>5</sup> I am here using the term “evangelical” in the sense that Luther himself gave it, namely, being oriented toward the gospel or good news (Greek: “evangel”) about Jesus Christ.

Although Luther and Melanchthon never publicly disagreed with each other, their theologies differed in important respects, especially after 1530. These differences (e. g., regarding the authority of the Pope, the “bondage of the human will” before God, and the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper) led to serious doctrinal controversies that agitated the Lutheran Church, mostly in German lands. So-called “Gnesio-Lutherans” (“true Lutherans”) attacked Melanchthon and his students (“Philippists”) for their divergences from Luther’s teaching and the original version of the Augsburg Confession. (Melanchthon had made alterations to a few of its articles, which contributed to these theological disagreements.) After decades of conflict, unity was restored through the Formula of Concord, which had been authored by Jakob Andreae (1528–1590) and Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586). The latter’s other works, especially his dogmatics (the *Loci theologici*), his examination of the Council of Trent, and his monograph on the two natures in Christ, further defined the nature of Lutheran doctrine in this period and became classics in their own right for later thinkers, including those treated here.

In 1580 key Lutheran documents were published together as *The Book of Concord*.<sup>6</sup> Prefaced by the three ecumenical creeds, this book includes the unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology, Luther’s catechisms and Schmalcald Articles, Melanchthon’s treatise on the pope, and the Formula of Concord. While not every Lutheran church, such as the Scandinavian Folk Churches, is committed to all of the documents in *The Book of Concord*, most stress the centrality of the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s catechisms. Nearly all of the nineteenth-century theologians examined below emphasized their continuity with the “spirit of Luther” and the formulations of doctrine contained in these classic evangelical texts.

The use of Aristotelian terms and concepts in the Formula of Concord paved the way for the scholastic development of Lutheran theology in the seventeenth century. This movement came to be known as “Lutheran Orthodoxy,” whose principal proponents wrote several large dogmatic projects that attempted to sharpen evangelical Lutheran teaching over against Calvinism and Catholicism and to demonstrate its scriptural basis, especially regarding Christology, the Lord’s Supper, and salvation. These Lutheran theologians frequently appealed to neo-Aristotelian philosophy and to scholastic metaphysics that were then dominant among the scientifically-minded in Europe in order to make sense of the dogmatic material that had been handed down in the older Lutheran tradition. In addition to Holy Scripture, whose nature and attributes (e. g., its inspiration, perspicuity, and infallibility) were extensively defined over against the

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6 See *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

Catholic insistence on papal infallibility, these seventeenth-century theologians also appealed to the Lutheran Confessions and to Luther's own writings as dogmatic authorities. In the process these thinkers developed very intricate theological systems that frequently contained a seemingly endless number of artificial distinctions.

The greatest achievement in this period was the nine-volume *Loci theologici* (1609–1622) of Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), who used the dialectical method of scholasticism to build on the Reformation tradition (primarily in conversation with the work of Chemnitz) and to defend the catholicity and apostolicity of Lutheran teaching. According to Gerhard, the purpose of theology is to teach sinful human beings what they need to know and do from Holy Scripture “in order to attain true faith in Christ and holiness of life.”<sup>7</sup> Instructed by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God—who produces a salutary effect upon the theologian's heart and life and provides illumination about the divine mysteries—the theologian is thus equipped “to inform others concerning these divine mysteries and the way of salvation, and to vindicate heavenly truth from the aspersions of its foes, so that human beings, abounding in true faith and good works, are led to the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>8</sup>

Other important representatives of Lutheran Orthodoxy include Abraham Calov (1612–86), Johann Andreas Quenstedt (1617–88), who was Gerhard's nephew, and David Hollaz (1648–1713). Their textbooks were used for more than a century in German and Scandinavian universities and even in a few American seminaries. Although the classic period of Lutheran Orthodoxy came to an end in the early eighteenth century, several later theologians (e.g., Walther, Krauth) regularly took their bearings from these classic seventeenth-century thinkers, whose authority ranked only below the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of Luther. The *Compendium* of Johann Wilhelm Baier (1647–95), which organized and summarized the principal teachings of the older dogmatists, remained a classic educational resource for confessional Lutherans well into the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

The seeds for the next development in Lutheran theology were also sown during the seventeenth century. Gerhard and some of his contemporaries wrote many devotional texts that prepared the way for Pietism, a movement of spiritual renewal that was otherwise critical of the polemical and scholastic character of much of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Following Gerhard's lead, later Pietists stressed

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7 John Gerhard, as quoted in *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., ed. Heinrich Schmid, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1889), 15.

8 Gerhard, as quoted in *Doctrinal Theology*, 18. The multiple editions and frequent reprinting of Schmid's compendium are a further important indicator that seventeenth-century Lutheran dogmatics continued to be studied throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

the insufficiency of objective theological knowledge and the need for a living faith in God and a moral piety that issued from it. Inaugurated in 1675 when Philipp Spener (1635–1705) published his influential *Pia desideria* (“Heartfelt Longings”), Pietism also criticized the German territorial churches for their ties to political authority, their liturgical formalism, and their perceived clericalism. Lutheran Pietists emphasized a non-dogmatic, practical “theology of the heart” over against one of “the head,” although some of the differences between Orthodoxy and Pietism have occasionally been exaggerated.<sup>9</sup> For Spener, faith is not merely knowledge and confidence in God, but a living power that produces an actual experience of spiritual renewal. Thus Spener viewed regeneration as an inner transformation, an experience of “new birth.” According to him, the justification of the sinner is directly the result of the indwelling Christ, who lives in the heart of the individual believer.

Many Pietists reacted against the institutional church of their day by establishing small-group “conventicles” for prayer and Bible study (despite their illegal status). Heeding Spener’s insistence that reborn Christians must seek a higher degree of spiritual perfection, many Pietists examined their own and others’ “inner spiritual experiences” for signs of a living faith and a life that bore spiritual fruit. This introspection, however, led some to accuse Pietists of fostering a moralistic and anthropocentric piety, of watering down the doctrinal differences among Christians, and of tending to be legalistic and judgmental toward others. Nevertheless, many Pietists, especially August Francke (1663–1727), worked diligently to establish new congregations, alleviate social problems, and further the work of schools, hospitals, and missionaries.

But Pietism was not a monolithic phenomenon. Halle Pietism, which was shaped by Francke, tended to focus on ways of bringing about a distinct conversion experience through the effective preaching of the law, whereas Württemberg Pietism tended to stress study of the Bible as a way of strengthening faith and morals. This latter form of Pietism is perhaps best reflected in the biblical scholarship of Johann A. Bengel (1687–1752). Still another form of Pietism was located at Herrnhut, which had been established by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–60), and which had a decisive impact on Schleiermacher, who later described himself as a “Herrnhuter of a higher order.”

Just as Lutheran Orthodoxy served as an important resource for many nineteenth-century Lutherans, so, too, did Pietism. For example, the so-called “Religious Awakening” (*die Erweckungsbewegung*), which erupted in the early 1800s

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9 For example, Hollaz’s *Examen theologico-acroamaticum* (1707), which is “the last great doctrinal system produced by Lutheran Orthodoxy,” reflects in places emphases that are more often associated with Pietism (Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, 3rd ed., trans. Gene J. Lund [St. Louis: Concordia, 1968], 305).

—in concert with the cultural Romanticism of the time and the growing German nationalism that followed the defeat of Napoleon—clearly bore similarities to earlier forms of Lutheran Pietism. Both movements of piety emphasized the individual's living faith-relationship with Jesus Christ, the experience of spiritual rebirth and renewal, the need for study of the Bible, and the importance of social engagement and missionary outreach with the gospel.

During the eighteenth century—when J.S. Bach (1685–1750) was creatively juxtaposing theological elements in Lutheran Orthodoxy and aspects of Spener's "affective theology," and when Copernicus' conception of the solar system first gained widespread acceptance—the scientific and cultural revolutions that occurred had a profound effect upon how theology was undertaken. With the emergence of the modern period in the so-called "Age of Reason," philosophy, the natural sciences, jurisprudence, and politics became more and more liberated from the authority of Christian institutions and ways of thinking, and this emancipation had significant implications for theological reflection. Scholars now began to investigate nature on the basis of empirical observation and experimentation. No longer did educated people see themselves and their world as the center of the universe, and yet at the same time many turned their critical, rational faculties toward a deeper understanding of the reality that surrounded them in an effort to control and manipulate it. "*Sapere aude*," was how Kant defined the era's motto in 1798: "Dare to be wise! Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding..."<sup>10</sup> In other words, "Dare to be an autonomous individual."

Already in the seventeenth century René Descartes (1596–1650) had set forth a method of inquiry that cast doubt upon all metaphysical assertions. He defended his method of radical doubt (rejecting everything that can be doubted in the least) so as to arrive at an unshakeable philosophical foundation, namely, himself as a doubter. As a result of this "turn-to-the-subject," the traditional, pre-modern Christian way of relating natural reason to supernatural revelation, wherein "faith" is prior to "understanding," became gradually reversed. Now the thinking person's reason, as it strove to be certain about actual knowledge, was prior to and above divine revelation and faith. Only by first establishing himself as a thinker, as a "thinking I," could Descartes then take the next step of asking how he could have knowledge of that which is outside of him, the world and God. Descartes was himself convinced that the idea of God was innate, that "God is no deceiver," and that in fact the concept of God—which he thought must be pro-

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10 Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17. The following paragraphs are adapted from my book, *Fundamental Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 169 ff.

duced by the perfect, eternal, and almighty Supreme Being—is the inherent principle of all philosophical certainty, including the certainty that the world itself exists and that it can be understood rationally. Nevertheless, while Descartes held that the concept of God is the normative basis for the structure of human thought—and that the nonexistence of God is an impossible thought—later thinkers became less and less certain of the conceivability of God.

Whereas Lutheran Orthodox theologians at least had tried to maintain the medieval unity between “the Book of Nature” and “the Book of Scripture,” Deists in England, France, and Germany made a sharp separation between the two and insisted that human reason is always the normative criterion of truth, also with respect to any supposed divine revelation. The desire to find a universal, rational criterion of religious truth was, in part, meant to move the various actual, historical religions and their adherents away from their religious differences—and the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that resulted in part from those contradictory religious claims—toward that upon which all rational people could agree. Over time outright hostility toward all “positive” religions, especially Christianity, would appear among the leading figures in the French Enlightenment and fuel some of the passions that became manifest in the French Revolution. That same anti-religious sentiment would later surface in various forms of nineteenth-century German ideology (e.g., Ludwig Feuerbach [1804–72], Karl Marx [1818–83], Friedrich Nietzsche [1844–1900]).

Bearing some affinities to emphases within Protestant Pietism (e.g., the critique of abstract Aristotelian metaphysics, the concern about individual experience, and criticism of institutional dogmas and liturgical forms) eighteenth-century rationalist theologians attacked traditional Christian doctrines and sought to articulate a reasonable, moral theology free of metaphysical illusion. Through their radical criticism of accepted Christian dogma, particularly regarding the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, rationalists demonstrated their similarity not only to late-sixteenth-century Socinianism, a Polish anti-trinitarian movement that was named after its chief figure, Faustus Socinus (1539–1604), but also to seventeenth-century Deism.

The chief proponents of eighteenth-century German Protestant Rationalism were Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Christian Wolff (1679–1754), who argued that theology must be guided by clear and distinct concepts that accord with human reason. More and more, theology had to be guided by philosophy and rational thought. Wolffian theology thus centered on elaborate “rational proofs” for the existence of God. Theologians of this stripe also pointed to the emancipation of the sciences, including theology, from ecclesiastical control as an important consequence of the Reformation. In addition, they stressed that the real purpose of theology is a moral one, that is, to promote good behavior, improve human welfare, and increase “this-worldly” happiness.

Wolff's "proofs" for the reality of God were later critiqued by another Pietist-turned-rationalist, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), whose critical philosophy marked the high point of the German Enlightenment. Kant placed sharp limits on human knowing, wherein all knowledge arises from a synthesis of sense experience of reality and the mind's own ability to shape that experience into the form in which all experiences are received and understood. According to him, human reason is incapable of knowing reality as such, the "thing in itself" (*Ding an sich*), and can only speak about how it appears phenomenologically to the human knower. A major outcome of Kant's metaphysics—which also included strong criticism of the traditional arguments for the reality of God as they had been articulated in western philosophical theology—was his rejection of the possibility of establishing any metaphysical truths. He thus prevented human access to ultimate reality as an object of knowledge, although he did "posit" God, freedom, and immortality as postulates of "practical," moral reason, that is, as necessary for the conduct of one's life in this evil world. In his book, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) Kant thus largely reduced the content of Christianity to a matter of moral teaching that is given through Jesus. Contrary to other philosophers of his day, however, Kant acknowledged the presence of "radical evil" in human beings—our tendency to be self-centered and incapable of doing the right thing on a consistent basis—and thus he conceded the need for a kind of repentance that would overcome evil in one's moral life. If there was one philosopher with whom each of the nineteenth-century theologians had to wrestle, it was Kant.<sup>11</sup>

Still another former Pietist, Johann Semler (1725–1791), used historical criticism to treat the Bible merely as an historical text which the church must acknowledge as such. In this regard he furthered the work begun by the radical German Deist, H.S. Reimarus (1694–1768), whose controversial writings were partly published first by Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), another key figure in the German Enlightenment. Reimarus was the first to apply the historical-critical method to the canonical Gospels and to Jesus and thus he began the so-called "quest for the historical Jesus," to use the phrase that Albert Schweitzer's English translator had given to the Schweitzer's classic work, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*.<sup>12</sup> Reimarus set in motion a way of investigating the Scriptures that would shake the foundations of all subsequent orthodox understandings of Jesus and the Scriptures. Every nineteenth-century theologian had to deal with the scholarly

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11 Claude Welch makes this same point. See Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 1985), 1:47.

12 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press in association with The Albert Schweitzer Institute, 1998). The German original was published in 1906.



results that were produced by the use of historical criticism on the Christian Bible and to wrestle with the growing assumption that truth could only stand on reason and history. Only the most conservative of nineteenth-century theologians still saw no real distinction between “the Jesus of history” and “the Christ of faith” or any significant problem with the gospels as historical sources for reconstructing “a life of Jesus.”

## Forward to Luther

Beyond the historical investigation of Jesus, the nineteenth century also witnessed a renewed interest in the thinking of Luther. This was partly the result of the tricentennial celebration of the German Lutheran Reformation (1817), which followed the wars of liberation and the Congress of Vienna (1815). At that time, Luther was hailed as a German folk hero, the key forerunner of German nationalism. On the other hand, Claus Harms (1778–1855) used Luther’s example as an opportunity to publish his own updated “95 Theses” in 1817, which attacked human reason as “the pope of our time.” Later in the century, other Lutherans would also appeal to the writings of Luther over against aspects of Orthodoxy, Pietism, and Rationalism. For example, Hofmann at Erlangen pitted Luther against Lutheran Orthodoxy, whereas other neo-Lutheran Erlangers (and some conservative Lutherans elsewhere) leveled Luther against Hofmann. That conflict thus marked the beginning of the modern “quest for the historical Luther,” a scholarly endeavor that was also propelled by the publication of the initial volumes in the critical edition of Luther’s works, the so-called Weimar Ausgabe (1883--), and furthered in the twentieth century through the important work of Karl Holl, Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, Gerhard Ebeling, and others.

## A Vista of Nineteenth-Century Lutheran Theology

While Lutheran Orthodoxy, Pietism, and Rationalism persisted beyond the eighteenth century, new movements emerged in the nineteenth that also raised questions about Lutheran identity. None of the Lutherans at that time could avoid the ground-breaking work of Schleiermacher, even when they fiercely opposed his theological method and dogmatic conclusions (as did most of the theologians presented here, from Hegel to Theodosius Harnack) or failed to fully acknowledge their debts to him (e. g., Hofmann). Even Harms admitted that he would occasionally sneak in to the *Dreifaltigkeitkirche* to hear the famous Berliner preach!

The Protestant Tübingen school of Ferdinand Baur (1792–1860), influenced by the ideas of Hegel, utilized the historical method to question conventional views about the New Testament canon and to provide a strictly historical reconstruction of Christian origins. Yet both Hegel and Baur would come under fierce criticism by more conservative Lutherans, such as Ernst Hengstenberg (1802–1869), who sought to defend seventeenth-century dogmatic forms and ahistorical “proof-texting” of the Bible. Hengstenberg’s approach was also adopted by others, such as C.F.W. Walther (1811–87), who uncritically treated the Bible as an “objective norm,” even in scientific matters, and who merely sought to protect the confessional and dogmatic heritage of Lutheran Orthodoxy over against perceived modern errors. Nevertheless, Walther, too, was capable of setting forth a creative understanding of Christian doctrine, as he did in his lectures on the proper distinction between law and gospel, which is perhaps the most important document to come out of nineteenth-century American Lutheranism. Like Walther, Charles Porterfield Krauth (1823–83)—the only figure here who was born in the United States—opposed “the American Lutheran” movement of Samuel S. Schmucker (1799–1873), whose “American recension” of the Augsburg Confession departed from some of the basic teachings in Lutheran Orthodoxy (e. g., baptismal regeneration, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper). As editor of *The Lutheran* and *The Missionary* and as author of *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (1871), Krauth had a profound influence upon confessional American Lutheranism in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth.

In Denmark, Nikolai F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) also attacked what he saw as the errors of rationalist clergy. He emphasized the necessity of a vibrant faith based on the living word of God, which is made effective by the Holy Spirit who acts through the church’s means of grace. For Grundtvig the “living word” is fundamentally an oral proclamation that is distinct from the written words in the Bible. At best the latter is the mere vehicle that can convey this “living word.” While Grundtvig’s position on the nature of the Bible was troubling to those Lutherans who firmly held to the seventeenth-century position on verbal inspiration, his theological understanding allowed him to move beyond the impasse between Lutheran Orthodoxy and Rationalism. A gifted hymn writer, Grundtvig brought about a great spiritual and cultural revival throughout his native land, despite the conservative criticism that was later leveled against him and his followers.

Back in German-speaking territory, Johann T. Beck (1804–78) developed his own unique position vis-à-vis Rationalism and Lutheran Orthodoxy. Indeed, he leveled criticism against both those to his “left” and those to his “right” and argued that the Bible is the sole objective basis for Christian doctrine. All true Christian knowledge, he held, is grounded in the perfect knowledge revealed in

Holy Scripture, which can only be received through “spiritual” exegesis. Beck’s powerful rhetoric swayed large numbers of students to his brand of “biblical realism.”

Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872), pastor in Neuendettelsau, organized influential missionary activity on three continents. He coupled a strong sense of “church” with a commitment to “the whole person” and thus supported deaconesses and social ministry. His views on “church and ministry,” one of the principal areas of doctrinal disagreement among nineteenth-century Lutherans, were quite influential, both at home and abroad.

In contrast to Hengstenberg’s repristinationalist theology, scholars at Erlangen (e.g., Gottfried Thomasius [1802–75], Adolf von Harless [1806–79], Johannes von Hofmann [1810–77]), despite their individual differences from each other, developed distinctive forms of theology that were based on the experience of baptismal regeneration, the certainty of personal faith, a critical appropriation of the Lutheran Confessions, and an organic-historical understanding of the Bible and the church. The most impressive “Erlanger” was Hofmann, who creatively restated Trinitarian theology in terms of salvation history even as he rejected traditional understandings of vicarious satisfaction in favor of a kenotic Christology—a move that created conflict between himself and most other Lutheran theologians at the time (e.g., Theodosius Harnack [1817–89]).

Like Hofmann, Isaak Dorner (1809–1884), too, was significantly influenced by Schleiermacher and thus developed a form of “mediating theology” that sought to reconcile Christian doctrine and modern forms of thought. Toward that end, he did not want to exclude natural theology from a scholarly understanding of the Christian faith, but hoped that the latter would give due consideration to divine revelation in both nature and history. As a student of Baur, Dorner soon saw Christology as the central problem for modern theology. His greatest work, the four-volume *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (2d ed., 1846–56), is a classic example of wrestling with this problem through a combination of careful, critical scholarship, creative theological reflection, and a deep concern for the church and its abiding faith.

This kind of mediating theology underwent further development in the thought of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), another student of Baur’s and the most important Protestant theologian in the final third of the century. Ritschl utilized Kant’s critical philosophy to repudiate all metaphysics and pietistic experience and emphasized the ethical and communal character of the Christian church. His distinctive form of “liberal” theology sought to hold together a living faith in Christ, a scholarly, critical understanding of the Bible, and a moral vision of the kingdom of God. Through this synthesis he hoped to make Christianity intelligible and persuasive to modern, cultured Europeans. This form of Protestant theology was later furthered by Ritschl’s most significant students, Wilhelm

Herrmann (1846–1922), Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), and, in America, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Another mediating theologian from this period, Martin Kähler (1835–1912), leveled strong criticism against any who tried to develop a “life of Jesus” on the basis of the Gospels and argued that faith is not based on the results of historical-critical research but on the living voice of the gospel through contemporary preaching in the church. Kähler’s theology would have a lasting impact on several key theologians in the next century, particularly Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann.

In contrast to Ritschl, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) rejected all attempts to mediate between Christ and culture. He differentiated faith and reason, attacked the Danish Church, and prepared the way for the dialectical theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968). As a result of the crisis that the First World War created for modern European culture and civilization, many post-war individuals identified with Kierkegaard’s protest against modernity and his attack on cultural Christendom. His meditations on sin, evil, suffering, and redemption found greater acceptance in that later age than they did in his own.

The Great War also stimulated individuals like Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) to work toward religious unity, especially among Christian denominations. He is to be particularly singled out for his ecumenism and his scholarly efforts to understand the nature of the world’s religions. In his office as the Archbishop of Uppsala he continually stressed that the call of Christ is a call to be responsible in and for the world and to work for reconciliation and peace among the nations.

Within even a large volume like this, it has not been possible to examine every important Lutheran theologian from the nineteenth century. Those who are familiar with Lutheranism in this period will quickly spot the lacunae: e.g., no chapters on August Tholuck (1799–1877), Richard Rothe (1799–1867), Ernst Hengstenberg, Johann H. Wichern (1808–81), Isaak Dorner, Wilhelm Herrmann, and many others. Instead of seeking a comprehensive, and necessarily cursory, survey of numerous Lutheran theologians, the goal has been to select several exemplary figures. It has also not been possible to deal at any length with the non-intellectual, socio-political factors that conditioned the course of Lutheran theology in this period. While theology never occurs in a vacuum, the focus here has been on the central ideas of these Lutheran thinkers.

## Key Issues

What issues relevant for contemporary theologians surface from an examination of these specific nineteenth-century Lutheran theologians? Were there certain basic concerns that attracted the interests of these thinkers that might still be of importance today? It seems to me that there are three such matters.

First, as already noted, the influence of Kant assured that issues of epistemology—regarding the limits of reason and the nature of rationality—would be central to the task of theology in the century after his death. His “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy is evident in most of the individuals treated here. Reactions to his critique of rational theology varied greatly, as can be seen just by comparing the views of Schleiermacher, who grounded faith in the feeling of absolute dependence on God, and Hegel, who sought to overcome Kant by means of reflection on religious symbols in service to philosophical truth. Beyond these classic alternatives to Kant, there were those, like Hofmann, who appealed to the immediacy of their faith in Christ, which was itself grounded in the experience of baptismal rebirth and renewed through the living voice of the gospel. More conservative Lutherans, who rejected Kant’s views on individual autonomy, nevertheless welcomed his attack on Wolffian rationalism and classical metaphysics as an aid in their own defense of the divine authority of the Bible. Despite the rise of historical criticism and advances in the natural sciences, which further eroded the seventeenth-century Protestant notion of biblical inerrancy, many continued to appeal to the Bible as an absolute authority on all matters which it treats. At the other end of the theological spectrum and later in the century, Ritschlianism made fruitful use of Kant’s critique of metaphysics and his articulation of a moral theology. “Back to Kant!” was then the motto for rethinking the content of Protestant theology. The problems posed by his philosophy are still with us today.

Second, the question of the nature of religious truth was further complicated by the rise of historical-critical study of the Bible, which created fundamental problems for understanding both the nature of biblical authority and the person of Jesus. This two-fold issue is usually called “the problem of faith and history,” which was given classic expression by Lessing, who differentiated between “the accidental truths of history” and “the necessary truths of reason” and who leveled strong criticism against those who sought false assurances for their faith when menaced by historical criticism. On the one hand, the problem arises from doubts about the reliability of the Scriptures to provide accurate historical knowledge of Jesus as a figure of history. On the other hand, the problem arises from doubts about how the historical figure of Jesus could be an object of contemporary faith. Each of the theologians examined in this book wrestled with this problem and struggled to affirm the authority of the Scriptures and the full humanity of Jesus, but they did so in quite different ways and often for different ends, e.g., Schleiermacher’s Christocentric principle is quite different from Hegel’s philosophical explanation of the incarnation, just as Hofmann’s kenotic Christology is different from Walther’s Orthodox Christology and from Kierkegaard’s reflections on the paradox of the God-man and the absolute qualitative difference between time and eternity. The publication of the first edition of

Strauss' *Leben Jesu* (1835) only intensified efforts to articulate the proper basis for faith in Christ. While Kähler provided perhaps the strongest reminder that the Gospels are not really historical sources that will give us a "life" of Jesus, most of the other theologians in this book also acknowledged that Christian faith does not finally depend on the vagaries of historical scholarship. The witness of the Scriptures is to the living, risen Christ, who encounters us through the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments.

Finally, each of the theologians offered a theological anthropology that affirmed the classic Lutheran Orthodox teaching that human beings are creatures of God and, at the same time, fallen creatures who daily sin and are thus in need of divine forgiveness and salvation. Over against rationalist confidence in human capabilities, which were further supported by achievements in the sciences and by technological advances in an age of industry, the theologians surveyed here emphasized human limitations and weaknesses and stressed that human beings are far more complicated than mere "thinking beings" or "autonomous individuals." Purely humanistic and atheistic efforts to reinterpret human beings and their nature were met with theological skepticism. At stake for these Lutherans was the revelation of human beings as sinners under the divine law and the revelation of the gospel as the promise of divine pardon. The word of the gospel that conveys grace to troubled sinners not only frees one from one's sinful past, but it frees one to enjoy and be thankful for the gifts that God gives in the present, and to serve others in need.

## Conclusion

A case can be made that we are still living in the "modern" world that was inaugurated in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. If that is so, then a case can also be made that we today ought to pay attention to thinkers who wrestled with theological problems at the dawn of this modern age. Their reflections marked a watershed in the history of Christian thought that continues to have an influence upon contemporary thinking. Their responses to the challenges and crises of "modernity" are worthy of continued exploration, if only to avoid repeating their mistakes or following roads that lead to dead ends. Then again, at the very least, we ought to acknowledge that contemporary Lutheran theology would not be where it is today—for good or ill—without the contributions and influence of the theologians examined here. This, I believe, is a sufficient reason for our engaging them even today.

## Acknowledgements

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Christine Helmer

## Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834)

Contemporary Lutheran estimation of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher's thought can be summarized by what American Lutheran theologian George A. Lindbeck calls "experiential-expressivism."<sup>1</sup> Schleiermacher, according to the argument, sees religious experience as a pre-linguistic phenomenon. Language later "expresses" the primary experience, thereby linguistically determining the generic experience at a secondary level. Experience is primary; Christian discourse is only accidentally related to experience. In other words, experience is pitted in opposition to Scripture.

The problem with Schleiermacher is not new. Since the early twentieth century, Schleiermacher has been singled out for special attention. In the wake of World War I, theologians in Germany and Switzerland sought to articulate a theology that could counter the cultural-religious alliance with politics that fed Germany's nationalism. Emil Brunner, pastor and then later professor of theology, published a scathing criticism of Schleiermacher in 1924 (a second edition followed in 1928), articulating the growing concern among theologians that the "liberal" theology of their predecessors had led to the catastrophic casualties in the trenches of the Great War.<sup>2</sup> Schleiermacher emerged in Brunner's book as representative of what had gone wrong: a "nature" mysticism connected to a philosophy of identity that stood behind religion's conflation with politics. While Brunner's view contains serious interpretative errors—Schleiermacher's mysticism has to do with the experience of the *Christus praesens* in the church and his philosophy is better aligned with a Kantian critical epistemology than a philosophy of identity—the suspicion remains in Lutheran circles that Schleiermacher

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1 See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Theology and Religion in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1984), 21. Lindbeck's book was re-issued in 2009 in a 25th Anniversary Edition.

2 Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort: Der Gegensatz zwischen moderner Religionsauffassung und christlichem Glauben dargestellt an der Theologie Schleiermachers*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J.C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1928).



advocates the mixing of God in human consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Lutherans committed to the externality of God's word are anxious with Schleiermacher's interiority of consciousness. At stake is the gospel and its communication, or God's external word in Scripture.

In this essay I focus on Schleiermacher's concept of the "feeling of absolute dependence" in order to clarify the basic misunderstanding concerning an alleged opposition between experience and word. I will use the phrase to access Schleiermacher's thinking about Christian religious experience and how he connects the reality of Christ to the language of proclamation and doctrine. Hence a clarification of the meaning of the feeling of absolute dependence will show why Schleiermacher required a concept of religion in order to work out his theology, and how theology can account for the experience of Christ in necessary relation to Scripture, preaching, and doctrine. The result will, I hope, inspire Lutherans to appropriate Schleiermacher as a conversation partner, one who challenges and inspires dynamic and constructive theological thinking.

In the first part of the essay I consider the description of religion that first introduced Schleiermacher as a major thinker on the world's stage. In 1799, between February and April, Schleiermacher wrote a set of five speeches: *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Religion is a necessary dimension of human existence, Schleiermacher asserts, and in order properly to make it the object of derision, one should understand what the term means. I frame Schleiermacher's contribution to the concept of religious feeling in the Moravian context of his family and education. Pietism is the historical key to understanding Schleiermacher's sense for religious experience.

In the second part, I clarify the relation between the feeling of absolute dependence that Schleiermacher outlines in the "Introduction" to his theological system, *The Christian Faith*, and its Christological determination. In the process I clarify the term of "immediate self-consciousness," and show how Schleiermacher's theory of religious consciousness is intimately related to his understanding that the redemption Jesus gives to believers is communicated through the preaching of the gospel. I connect Schleiermacher's understanding of theology to his participation in the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. It is significant for the history of modern theology that he assigns to theology a distinctive place among the other sciences (*Wissenschaften*) in the research university.

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3 See for example my analysis of two contemporary Lutheran theologians, Oswald Bayer and George Lindbeck, that focuses on their reading of Schleiermacher in the disjunctive terms of either external word or human experience: "Transformations of Luther's Theology in View of Schleiermacher," in *Transformations in Luther's Theology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm, *Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 32 (Leipzig: EVA-Leipzig, 2011), 104–121.

This is a good time in the trajectory of Schleiermacher scholarship to delve into his thought. Since 1989—the year in which the Berlin wall fell—a Schleiermacher “renaissance” has been taking place. His works are being critically edited in a complete edition, the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, published by de Gruyter in Berlin.<sup>4</sup> With new texts made public and older texts now available in a critical edition, scholars over the past three decades have carefully studied the basic concepts of Schleiermacher’s thought, analyzing his distinctive vocabulary and reading his works against a complicated background of post-Kantian, Romantic, and German Idealist thought. Careful work has clarified misconceptions that have accrued since Brunner’s polemical text, and has demonstrated the new directions of Schleiermacher’s thinking in the many areas of his expertise. Interpreters appreciate the interconnections between various disciplines, for example his psychology, his “dialectic” or philosophy, and religion. Furthermore, scholars are beginning to connect Schleiermacher’s contributions to broader discussions in religion, theology, and philosophy, and are thus translating Schleiermacher’s difficult language into more accessible terms.<sup>5</sup> Finding out what Schleiermacher is up to has never been easier!

## The Young Schleiermacher

Friedrich Schleiermacher was born on November 21, 1768, in Breslau, a town in Prussia. Crucial to the political dimension of his story is the geographical context. Schleiermacher spent most of his life in Prussia, one of the two most powerful of the roughly 350 German states in existence at that time. Friedrich Wilhelm had consolidated Prussia’s territory between 1640 and 1688. Friedrich II or the Great continued to align military power with the landed aristocracy. He ruled from 1740 to 1786 and it is after him that the theologian Schleiermacher was named.

Schleiermacher was born into a family of Reformed pastors. His mother, Elisabeth Maria Katharina Stubenrauch, was the daughter of a Reformed minister and elder sister to Samuel Ernst Timotheus Stubenrauch, who was instrumental in facilitating Friedrich’s studies in Halle and his eventual pastoral career. Gottlieb Schleiermacher, Friedrich’s father, was a second-generation Reformed minister and a military chaplain. He experienced a religious transformation in 1778 when camped with the Prussian army in Pless, near the Moravian colony of

4 The standard abbreviation for this work, used hereafter, is KGA.

5 In addition to Theodore Vial’s excellent introduction, *Schleiermacher* (London: T&T Clark, 2013), see the following two accessible works: Catherine L. Kelsey, *Thinking About Christ with Schleiermacher* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); and Terrence Tice, *Schleiermacher, Abingdon Pillars of Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).