

Adolf Schlatter on scripture as *Gnadenmittel*: remedy for a hypertensive debate?

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Abstract

Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) found himself time and again caught in the crossfire between the opposing camps of fundamentalist Pietism and liberal historical-criticism. This article suggests that Schlatter, by avoiding the pitfalls of both extremes, provides a unique way of uniting faith and scientific criticism through his creative reinterpretation of classic attributes of scripture, namely, (1) inspiration as organic and historic-pneumatic, (2) unity as Christocentric, (3) scriptural authority as evoking discipleship, (4) infallibility as relational-volitional, and finally, (5) perspicuity as catholic. In times where there still seems to exist a big gap between ‘evangelical’ and ‘scientific’ approaches to scripture, Schlatter’s focus on scripture not only as a means to know God (*Erkenntnismittel*), but primarily as a means to receive God’s grace (*Gnadenmittel*), remains valuable, helping us to do away with possible misunderstandings and stereotypes and enabling us to recalibrate our perspective on scripture.

Keywords: Adolf Schlatter, attributes of scripture, biblical criticism, doctrine of scripture, faith, inspiration

Discussing the doctrine of scripture is surely nothing for the faint-hearted. Cues, such as biblical ‘inerrancy’ or ‘infallibility’, trigger many a theologian’s hypertension, both in Europe and (perhaps even more so) on the other side of the Atlantic. Yet fervid debates on the attributes of scripture are not a novelty. About a hundred years ago, Swiss theologian Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) was caught in the crossfire of the opposing camps of fundamentalist Pietism with their strict interpretation of inerrancy, and the higher criticism of theological liberalism. As Schlatter objected to being pigeonholed as a member of either of those movements, the (offended) Pietists called him a ‘faithless critic’ (*glaubenslosen Kritiker*), whereas the Liberals labelled him a ‘biblicist without criticism’ (*kritiklosen Biblizisten*),¹ ‘unfit for scientific work’

¹ Schlatter, ‘Die Entstehung der Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie und ihr Zusammenhang mit meiner theologischen Arbeit zum Beginn ihres fünfundzwanzigsten Bandes’, *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 25/1 (1920), p. 19.

(untüchtig zur wissenschaftlichen Arbeit).² While this situation was often personally painful for Schlatter back then, his unique position allowed him to develop his own irenic approach to the doctrine of scripture, which is stimulating for us today.

Scripture as means of grace

For our purpose, we need a representative but concise account of Schlatter's doctrine of scripture. The best place to go, then, is perhaps Schlatter's *Das christliche Dogma* (1911/1923).³ A quick glance at the table of contents reveals the first surprise: Schlatter decides against the classic way of presenting an introduction to scripture right at the outset. In fact, his doctrine is a long time coming; one needs to skim through 363 pages (of a total of 553 pages of the main text) before reaching the heading, 'Scripture', in the chapter titled 'Christianity as the Community Called to God, Soteriology' (*Die Christenheit als die zu Gott berufene Gemeinde, Soteriologie*). As Schlatter positions his treatment of scripture under the rubric of soteriology (and next to ecclesiology), he reveals the fundamental motive of his agenda.⁴ While Schlatter feels that scripture has been sufficiently acknowledged as a 'means of knowledge' (*Erkenntnismittel*), he thinks that theology has neglected its soteriological importance as 'means of grace' (*Gnadenmittel*), namely scripture's ability to make us 'wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3:15).⁵

For Schlatter's rejection of the label 'biblicist', as understood by many of his colleagues, see 'Briefe über das Christliche Dogma', *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 5/5 (1912), pp. 56–8. For his own, positive definition of 'biblicism' see *Rückblick auf meine [seine] Lebensarbeit*, ed. Theodor Schlatter, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1977), p. 124.

² *Rückblick*, p. 153. See also 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 80, and Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1996), pp. 280–4.

³ In what follows I use the 2nd edn of Schlatter's dogmatics, *Das Christliche Dogma* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1923).

⁴ Schlatter's decision with a view to the doctrine's locus is similar to that of Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher also positions his doctrine of scripture relatively late in his *Glaubenslehre* and roots it directly in ecclesiology, namely under the heading 'The Essential and Invariable Features of the Church' (*Die wesentlichen und unveränderlichen Grundzüge der Kirche*). *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, 2. Auflage (1830/31), ed. Rolf Schäfer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), vol. 2, §§127–147, pp. 309–426. For a fresh perspective on Schleiermacher's doctrine of scripture, see Paul T. Nimmo, 'Schleiermacher on Scripture and the Work of Jesus Christ', *Modern Theology* 31/1 (2015), pp. 60–90.

⁵ Schlatter, *Dogma*, 365. For an overview of Schlatter's view on scripture see, in addition to the *Dogma*, his collection of essays in *Hülfe in Bibelnot: Neues und Altes zur Schriftfrage*, 3rd edn (Gladbeck: Freizeiten-Verlag, 1953). See also Clemens Hägele's monograph, *Die*

In what follows, I shall examine what Schlatter considers the central attributes of scripture, namely inspiration, unity, authority, infallibility and clarity. While some of these terms might look familiar to the Protestant orthodox eye – reminding us of the *affectiones scripturae* – the sense of *déjà vu* is short-lived; a closer look quickly reveals that Schlatter puts his own spin on these traditional concepts.

Before turning to a closer investigation of Schlatter's soteriological approach to scripture, one needs to bear in mind a Schlatterian peculiarity: Schlatter's treatment of scripture in the *Dogma* is designed to offer an alternative to what he considers to be unbalanced approaches of an 'old doctrine of inspiration' (*alte Inspirationslehre*).⁶ Unfortunately, Schlatter remains quite vague when it comes to explaining which concrete movements or individual theologians he has in mind here. (Of course, this might have been the safest strategy for someone sitting between the frontlines trying to avoid theological shrapnel.) Instead of engaging too much in speculation, the most promising tactic, it seems, is to focus more on Schlatter's alternative suggestions and to seek ways in which they might be applied to our situation today.

Historic-pneumatic organic inspiration

Schlatter opens by discussing 'Scripture's origin in the Spirit' (*Die Herkunft der Schrift aus dem Geist*).⁷ That scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit is for Schlatter undeniable, and he does not waste any ink dwelling on it. More contentious, and thus in need of clarification, Schlatter feels, is *how* the Spirit's inspiration works. For him, post-Reformation theology has produced lopsided answers, and he thus sees the need to offer a more balanced account, in particular with regard to the Holy Spirit's relation to anthropology and history.

With a view to the Holy Spirit's relation to anthropology, then, Schlatter complains that far too often the human authors have been depicted as passive actors in the play of inspiration; the author 'is being moved like the lyre by the musician and like the pen by the writer'.⁸ In this case, human cognition, volition and emotion are neglected: inspiration 'bypasses the human life-act' (*am persönlichen Lebensakt vorbei*),⁹ and the Holy Spirit turns out to be the

Schrift als Gnadenmittel: Adolf Schlatters Lehre von der Schrift in ihren Grundzügen (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 2007).

⁶ Schlatter, *Dogma*, p. 367.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 365. Schlatter speaks of the 'passivity of the inspired individual' (*Passivität des Inspirierten*).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

‘destroyer of our humanity’ (*Zerstörer des Menschlichen*).¹⁰ Over against any ‘dictation-theory’ tendencies (Schlatter probably has Philo of Alexandria in mind here, whose influence he still seems to observe in contemporary Protestantism),¹¹ Schlatter puts forward his own model of what one could call ‘organic inspiration’. In inspiration, Schlatter contends, God’s Spirit neither overpowers nor overwrites our humanity. Rather, ‘the Spirit engages our personal life in its unity’, he argues, ‘which does not suppress nor substitute our natural capacities, but the Spirit preserves, wills and uses the whole range of our natural vitality’.¹² ‘For this reason’, he concludes, ‘God’s messengers are – through the work of the Spirit – not stripped of their characteristic idiosyncrasies, but the Spirit creates and completes these and renders them humans in their wholeness (*aus einem Guß*), where thought and will, word and work arise from the same holy root and where they are steeped into God’s light and truth’.¹³

In order to illustrate this organic relationship between pneumatology and anthropology, Schlatter draws (and this is an interesting move) a distinct christological parallel. The Holy Spirit, Schlatter writes, creates in Jesus ‘his humanity in its entirety’; that is, through the Spirit’s work in Jesus Christ, the humanity of the Son of God is ‘enabled to act’ (*zur Tat befähigt*).¹⁴ Now, in a similar way, the Spirit is active in the human authors of scripture, so that their humanity remains intact: ‘[t]hey have life through the Spirit and are not used as will-less instruments’.¹⁵ In a highly creative way, Schlatter draws on his spirit-christology to elucidate the organic process of inspiration.

Secondly, Schlatter closely relates pneumatology to history. Scripture, he argues, was not inspired in a historical vacuum, but against the context of concrete history, a fact that he feels some of his contemporaries neglected. Schlatter sees a clear, historically effective continuity between the inspired original authors and our own historical setting today. That is, as the Holy Spirit called and inspired the authors back then, so he calls us now in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

¹¹ Schlatter refers to Philo in his unpublished lecture, ‘Wesen und Quellen der Gotteserkenntniß’ (Bern, summer semester 1883) Adolf Schlatter Archive, Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart (No. 191), 182.

¹² Schlatter, *Dogma*, p. 348. Schlatter’s approach reveals remarkable parallels to Herman Bavinck’s ‘organic view’ of inspiration. See Bavinck *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 431–2.

¹³ Schlatter, *Einleitung in die Bibel*, 5th edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1933), p. 480. See also *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament*, 6th edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1982), p. 191.

¹⁴ Schlatter, *Dogma*, pp. 365–6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

the present – through them – in scripture, as it were; and in this sense, '[t]he past experiences become our own experiences'.¹⁶ Perhaps one could phrase it like this: through the Spirit, scripture originated within concrete history, made history and still creates new histories.¹⁷ According to Schlatter, then, 'a right pneumatology and a correct [understanding of] history are indissolubly connected'.¹⁸ William Baird is certainly on the right track when he calls Schlatter's view of inspiration 'historic-pneumatic'.¹⁹ With a view to inspiration, then, Schlatter reminds us to consider the close relationship between pneuma(-chris)tology, anthropology and history.

Christological unity

Next, Schlatter deals with the 'unity of scripture' (*Die Einheit der Schrift*).²⁰ The unity of scripture is rooted in the unity of God,²¹ and scripture is God's means of creating unity in us (in our thinking and willing, and doing) and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Again, Schlatter's agenda shows similarities with Herman Bavinck, who writes: 'It [scripture] not only was inspired but is still "God-breathed" and "God-breathing" . . . The Holy Spirit does not, after the act of inspiration, withdraw from Holy Scripture and abandon it to its fate but sustains and animates it and in many ways brings its content to humanity, to its heart and conscience.' Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 439–440 (emphasis original).

¹⁸ Schlatter, *Dogma*, p. 367.

¹⁹ Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 375. On the same page Baird describes Schlatter's approach as a 'synthesis between authoritative tradition recorded by inspired apostles and the present activity of the Spirit in the life of the believer'.

²⁰ Schlatter, *Dogma*, pp. 369–72. Cf. Schlatter's emphasis on the unity of scripture in *Einleitung in die Bibel*, pp. 481–2. Unity as a theological 'impetus towards the whole' (*Richtung auf das Ganze*, see *Dogma*, p. 13) is in fact one of the central elements of Schlatter's theology. See Irmgardt Kindt's monograph, *Der Gedanke der Einheit: Adolf Schlatters Theologie und ihre historischen Voraussetzungen* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1978); cf. Paul Althaus, 'Adolf Schlatters Wort an die heutige Theologie. Gedenkrede zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages gehalten in der Stiftskirche zu Tübingen am 9. Mai 1948', *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 21 (1950/52), p. 106, and Johannes von Lüpke, 'Wahrnehmung der Gotteswirklichkeit: Impulse der Theologie Adolf Schlatters', in Heinzpeter Hempelmann, Johannes von Lüpke and Werner Neuer (eds), *Realistische Theologie: Eine Hinführung zu Adolf Schlatter* (Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 2006), pp. 43–7.

²¹ 'As it was God's work that I was supposed to observe', Schlatter writes, 'I was assured that my thinking would arrive at unity.' 'Entstehung der Beiträge', p. 63. Schlatter argues that as we are the creation of a God who works in unity, the drive for unity is therefore basically implanted in our consciousness. See *Die christliche Ethik*, 3rd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1929), p. 251.

among us as the united community of faith.²² The inner unity of scripture is for Schlatter the prerequisite for our intra-individual soteriological and inter-individual ecclesiological unity. To shed more light on his view of scripture's unity, Schlatter again refers to christology. 'The unity of Scripture arises', Schlatter maintains, 'because the history which created it and is witnessed in it has its unity in Christ'.²³ Having worked alongside his Lutheran friend Hermann Cremer (1834–1903) for some years in Greifswald, Schlatter is unashamed to quote Luther's dictum, 'whatever deals with Christ is canonical' (*was Christum treibe, sei kanonisch*).²⁴

This statement, however, has in Schlatter's view often been misinterpreted. Thus he clarifies that not only explicit references to Christ are to be considered canonical, but scripture as a whole is steeped in christology, and our task is then to figure out 'in which sense a part of scripture points to Christ' (*wiefen ein Teil der Schrift den Christus bezeuge*).²⁵ More precisely, there is a need to discern how a certain passage or concept relates to the 'work of Christ'.²⁶ The law then, for example, though it might not mention Christ explicitly, points to Christ as it shows us the necessity for his redeeming work on the cross. While some parts of scripture might be more (or less) clear in their witness to Christ, this does not mean that there are different 'levels of inspiration' (*Stufen der Inspiration*).²⁷ The process of inspiration, Schlatter reminds his readers, is a 'creative gift of God, an absolute act . . . Whether he gives less or more: God is the giver'.²⁸ On this basis then, Schlatter can affirm the inner unity of scripture: 'From whatever point we might grasp it [scripture]', he writes, 'we are being led into it as a unity'.²⁹

The beauty of this unity of scripture, however, is not clear to everyone. Scripture's unity, Schlatter insists, is only fully recognised by those who are soteriologically connected with it. Only when we enjoy a 'connection with it' (*Anschluß an sie*) by faith, are we 'led into the fullness of the divine grace'.³⁰ Similar to Schleiermacher, then, Schlatter argues for faith as a presupposition, which defines our 'regard' (*Ansehen*) of scripture.³¹

²² Schlatter, *Dogma*, p. 369. 'The Scripture's unity is necessary,' continues Schlatter, 'so that we could recognise it as God's word and be served by it.'

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

³¹ Schleiermacher argues that our 'regard' (*Ansehen*) for Holy Scripture cannot establish faith in Jesus Christ, rather, faith must be presupposed in order to ascribe a peculiar

Authority: biblical criticism and discipleship

Turning his attention next to the ‘authority of scripture’, Schlatter claims that scripture possesses authority simply because God is its author. While Schlatter declares this truth to be self-evident, he seeks to correct what he considers mistaken views of scripture’s authority as advocated by the ‘old Protestantism’.³²

In the aftermath of the Reformation, Schlatter complains, a passive-quietistic understanding of scripture’s authority crept into Protestant theology, namely where ‘God’s Spirit is [considered] to calm . . . both writer and reader’.³³ The successors of Luther and Calvin thus became ‘weaker’, and scripture was reduced to a ‘dead possession (*Besitz*) which does not create any [sense of] ownership (*Eigentum*), either in our knowledge or in our volition’.³⁴ Here, ‘the authority of scripture is broken as it is no longer effective in us as the author and architect of our movement of life (*Lebensbewegung*)’.³⁵ This indicates that for Schlatter, the authority of scripture consists very much in its effect upon us: scripture is authoritative as it generates and directs our ‘movement of life’. I will return to this significant aspect in a moment.

Furthermore, and still under the heading ‘The authority of scripture’, Schlatter turns to biblical criticism. While this location seems at first glance strange, a closer look reveals Schlatter’s insistence that biblical criticism and authority belong together in that the critique of scripture – understood in the literal, Greek sense (*kritikos*), which refers to our ability to judge and to discern – must always function within the boundaries of scriptural authority. Schlatter distinguishes two necessary levels of biblical criticism, namely the *historical critique* and the *dogmatic critique*.

Historical critique, as Schlatter understands it, ‘examines the relation of the biblical testimony to the course of history which forms it’.³⁶ Schlatter is convinced that a close scrutiny of the historical-linguist context of the biblical data is an absolute necessity. Textual criticism, questions of authorship, sources, readership, intention, purposes, etc. are all legitimate aspects of a historical critique to Schlatter’s mind, and he himself pioneered in the

regard (*ein besonderes Ansehen*) to Holy Scripture’. Schleiermacher, *Glaubenslehre*, vol. 2, §128, thesis, p. 316. For further parallels between Schlatter’s and Schleiermacher’s doctrine of scripture see Hägele, *Die Schrift als Gnadenmittel*, pp. 200–15.

³² Schlatter, *Dogma*, 373.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

field of New Testament research.³⁷ Up to this point, Schlatter's Pietist readers might perhaps only have experienced a light nervous twitch. This twitch, however, after reading Schlatter's subsequent statement in the *Dogma*, has the potential of developing into a full blown heart attack; for Schlatter writes: 'As we consider its [scripture's] place within history, we make clear how far its truth reaches and also where it ends, the extent to which we consider an assertion to be valid or not.'³⁸ At this stage, one wonders whether Schlatter has given up on his 'mediatorial' position and simply sided with historical-critical liberalism. Before prematurely labelling Schlatter an outright liberal critic, one is well advised to take a closer look.

It appears that Schlatter reveals here an inconsistency between his theory and practice. In theory, Schlatter seems to agree with a strict historical critique of scripture, where in fact historical evidence could contradict scripture. Yet while he is happy to apply this critique – albeit sparingly – to the Old Testament, Schlatter never puts this principle into practice when it comes to the New Testament.³⁹ Peter Stuhlmacher, consequently, though in general favourable towards Schlatter, complains that the latter 'seeks time and again strange loopholes in order to avoid such critical judgements';⁴⁰ and Markus Bockmuehl argues, likewise, that 'Schlatter's work did not consistently heed his own call for historical reading of the bible, but acquiesced in a good deal of harmonization'.⁴¹ This inconsistency clearly illustrates how Schlatter was still influenced by the biblicism of his Tübingen teacher Johann T. Beck (1804–78), while he also tried to do justice to what he considered a 'high view' of science, which (theoretically) involved a rigorous critique of scripture. In the end, it seems, the Beckian legacy trumped higher criticism,

³⁷ Schlatter was 'an historian who laid a firm foundation for the study of the background of New Testament literature by acquiring a first-hand knowledge of contemporary Jewish life and thought', remarks Paul P. Levertoff. 'Translator's Note', in Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period* (London: SPCK, 1955), p. xii. See also Peter Stuhlmacher's comments in 'Zum Neudruck von Adolf Schlatters *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament*', in Adolf Schlatter, *Der Glaube im Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1982), p. x. Leonhard Goppelt claims to be strongly influenced by Schlatter in this respect, praising the Swiss theologian's 'immense and superior history of religion/philological investigation of the New Testament'. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. John E. Alsup, ed. Jürgen Roloff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 278.

³⁸ Schlatter, *Dogma*, pp. 373–4; see also Rückblick, p. 82.

³⁹ See Hägele, *Die Schrift als Gnadenmittel*, pp. 185–6.

⁴⁰ Stuhlmacher, 'Adolf Schlatters Theologie des Neuen Testaments', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 100 (2003), p. 268.

⁴¹ Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 145, n. 29.

at least in practice.⁴² Obviously, Schlatter could have been more consistent had he abstained from this particular aspect of the historical critique in the first place.

Schlatter turns next to the *dogmatic critique*, which seems, in his eyes, to be the most crucial aspect of biblical criticism. In the dogmatic critique, we ‘apply the word of scripture to ourselves’, in such a way that we ‘clarify for ourselves when and why the word of scripture applies to us and when and why it does not apply to us’.⁴³ With a view to those practising speaking in tongues, for example, Schlatter claims that the dogmatic critique has not been exercised correctly: this practice merely imitates what Paul did, ‘but not what we are to do today’.⁴⁴ Instead of imitation, Schlatter advocates assimilation; that is, dogmatic critique helps us to avoid a blind, obedient imitation of what we find in scripture, and helps us instead to sharpen our capacity for assimilating scripture, so that it would have ‘divine authority’ over us.⁴⁵ Scripture has proper, divine authority over us when the ‘gift which is offered in scripture [is brought] into our possession’.⁴⁶ In a unique way, Schlatter here brings together scripture’s authority and biblical criticism (again, ‘criticism’ here being understood not as finding fault but literally, as expressing a personal judgement). As mentioned earlier, Schlatter is convinced that debates that focused exclusively on a propositional definition of scriptural authority lead to scholarly lethargy. As an alternative, Schlatter suggests an experiential, relational approach, where scripture exhibits authority over us as we ‘recognise and assimilate for ourselves what is given to us in scripture’.⁴⁷ Schlatter can thus write that scripture ‘has become the canon for the one to whom it shows God’s will’.⁴⁸ Ultimately, then, scripture possesses divine authority as it empowers us in Christian discipleship, that is, as it ‘helps us to our own good will through which we serve God and neighbour’.⁴⁹ From this perspective, one understands why Schlatter argues that ‘true and justified biblical criticism’ (*ächte und berechtigte Bibelkritik*) is only rightfully pursued from one’s existential standpoint as a ‘disciple’ (*Jünger*).⁵⁰

⁴² Schlatter himself admits that he was a ‘follower of Beck’. See *Rückblick*, p. 46, cf. p. 200.

⁴³ Schlatter, *Dogma*, p. 374.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 591, n. 218. Schlatter calls this an ‘uncritical faithfulness to Scripture which loses the content of Scripture’ (*kritiklose Schrifttreue, die den Schriftinhalt verliert*). *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 372–3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁵⁰ Schlatter, ‘Kritik und Glaube’, *Der Kirchenfreund* 15 (10 June 1881), p. 183.

Relational-volitional infallibility

Moving on, Schlatter focuses next on the attribute of ‘infallibility’ (*Unfehlbarkeit*). This attribute, he claims, has often been misinterpreted and is thus in serious need of clarification. First of all, Schlatter underlines that infallibility itself is a characteristic that is intrinsic only to God and can never be transferred to anyone or anything else, the Bible included. He writes:

Infallibility is God’s characteristic; yet it is exclusively God’s characteristic and it is not passed on to the human beings who stand in the service of God. Not scripture, but the God who gives scripture and calls us through it is infallible.⁵¹

Schlatter intends to correct what he considers a ‘rational interpretation of infallibility’ (*intellektualistische Fassung der Unfehlbarkeit*).⁵² He is apparently concerned about tendencies towards ‘bibliolatry’ in Protestantism where the ‘infallible book’ is worshipped at the altar of passive rational piety, while the God who inspired it and still intends to use it as an active ‘means of grace’ for us recedes into the background. A purely cognitive approach to infallibility could distract us from God’s purpose to use scripture to ‘create the certainty of God through Christ in us’.⁵³

Thus, instead of a establishing a *rational* argument for the intrinsic infallibility of scripture, Schlatter chooses again the *relational* argument, where the infallible God achieves his purposes in relation to us with the Bible. ‘God does not demonstrate his glory by proving to us that he can author an infallible book’, Schlatter writes, ‘but he does so by connecting human beings with himself in that they utter his words as humans’.⁵⁴ Scripture, he argues, ‘shows us its infallibility as it draws us to the infallible one, namely to God’.⁵⁵ Moreover, scripture is not only effective as it offers us a new relationship with God through Christ, but also as it brings about the ‘obedience of faith’ (Rom 16:26) as we are empowered with a new *volitional* impetus. The Bible’s ‘primary intention and action’, Schlatter writes, ‘is that it wages war with our will so that our will might give itself up to God’.⁵⁶ Again, one notices how closely Schlatter relates scripture to soteriology, and in particular to

⁵¹ Schlatter, *Dogma*, 375.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 378; cf. p. 376.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

his volitional emphasis.⁵⁷ According to Schlatter's view, then, scripture is 'authentic' (*glaubwürdig*), a term he seems to prefer over 'infallible',⁵⁸ as it connects us with the One who renews not only our thinking but also our volition and action.⁵⁹

Catholic clarity

Schlatter finally deals with the 'clarity of scripture' (*Verständlichkeit der Schrift*), the last but not the least of the attributes. Again, Schlatter takes up the challenge of the 'old Protestantism', where it was claimed that 'everyone can understand scripture; if it remains ineffective, it is one's own problem'.⁶⁰ Schlatter criticises here, it seems, the remnants of a post-Reformation radical Anabaptist tendency to interpret *sola scriptura* too restrictively, such that 'the individual is supposed to establish its relation with scripture alone, without the help of the community'⁶¹ – the situation, in Richard A. Muller's words, of 'the lonely exegete confronting the naked text'.⁶² Yet the 'historical character of the Bible', Schlatter objects, and our different levels of 'understanding' (*Sehvermögen*), make scripture somewhat less clear than this perspective seems to assume.⁶³ To achieve clarity, Schlatter argues, we need the help of others. 'In both our historical interpretation and in our assimilation of the

⁵⁷ I have highlighted the intrinsic importance of 'volition' to Schlatter's theological agenda elsewhere, see my 'Good Will Hunting: Adolf Schlatter on Organic Volitional Sanctification', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 55/1 (2012), pp. 125–43.

⁵⁸ Schlatter writes: 'One has often considered that the authenticity (*Glaubwürdigkeit*) of Scripture implies that it is in every word completely correct, that there is nowhere an oversight (*Versehen*), nowhere any darkness, nowhere a discrepancy between the facts and the presentation. The Bible does not possess this [kind of] inerrancy (*Fehllosigkeit*), neither in its historiography nor in its prophecy . . . For as God speaks through human beings, he makes them as humans – with all their weaknesses – his messengers. The foundation of faith is thereby not harmed. If the error-free correctness of the Bible were a masterpiece of the divine power in our eyes, we would thereby not yet have been empowered and called to faith.' *Einleitung in die Bibel*, p. 483. This statement is also to be found in 'Was ist uns nun die Bibel?', in *Hülfe in Bibelnot: Neues und Altes zur Schriftfrage*, 3rd edn (Gladbeck: Freizeiten-Verlag, 1953), p. 302. Andrew McGowan, likewise, prefers 'authenticity' over 'infallibility', see *The Divine Spiritation of Scripture* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), p. 213.

⁵⁹ Schlatter would thus probably agree with McGowan's definition of infallibility: 'The Bible infallibly achieves the purposes for which God gave it and we can depend on the voice of God speaking by his Spirit through the Scriptures, which are his Word.' *Divine Spiritation*, p. 211.

⁶⁰ Schlatter, *Dogma*, pp. 378–9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁶² Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 63.

⁶³ Schlatter, *Dogma*, 379.

Bible', Schlatter contends, 'as they awaken our faith and our love, we are dependent upon the help of others, and indeed, we receive it.'⁶⁴ Schlatter thus encourages his Pietist contemporaries to embrace a more catholic (with a small 'c'!) perspective. He writes:

It would be an illusion if we were tantalised by the belief that we read the Bible alone. The church reads it and through its collaborative work it achieves the ability to understand it and to use it. This is what defines the truth of the catholic sentence: The Bible is the possession of the church.⁶⁵

With brave sentences such as these, Schlatter clearly wants to do away with any dualistic views of scripture and church/tradition, where the humanness of the church is pitted against the divinity of scripture, according to the credo: in church we 'learn from human beings', whereas in scripture, 'only God speaks'.⁶⁶ Encouraging his Protestant readers to discard their suspicion of the church, Schlatter suggests an organic relation between scripture and church, as both are, in fact, 'means of grace'. Our teachers and preachers in church stand in God's service and become for us 'carriers of a divine gift' (*Träger einer göttlichen Gabe*), while 'Scripture connects us with God in a way that makes us listen to the human beings he has called to teach us'.⁶⁷ Of course, Schlatter is still a Protestant, and he is thus keen to add that 'the word of scripture possesses supremacy over the word of the church', and without a doubt, the 'church's service' does not make our own, personal study of scripture superfluous, for 'a theological science that leads us away from scripture is a disaster for the church and a liability'.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, in his move to recognise scripture as the 'common possession of the church', Schlatter emphasises the church's significant 'exegetical work', which happens during 'Sunday worship,' where the 'word of scripture enlightens us and connects with our own life'.⁶⁹

Having briefly considered how Schlatter adds his own qualifying adjectives to what he considers the decisive attributes of scripture – *inspiration* as organic and historic-pneumatic, *unity* as Christocentric, *authority* as evoking discipleship, *infallibility* as relational-volitional and *clarity* as catholic – I shall now turn to some concluding observations on the contemporary relevance of Schlatter's approach.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 380.

⁶⁹ Schlatter, 'Der Weg zur Bibel,' in *Hülfe in Bibelnot*, p. 206 (emphasis added).

Conclusion

Three aspects are worth of our consideration: first, Schlatter's special focus on the effects of scripture, secondly, his holistic definition of the nature of scripture and, thirdly, his catholic emphasis.

First of all, Schlatter encourages us to revisit afresh the Reformers' original emphasis on scripture as a 'means of grace'. His creative relational-actualist perspective on the attributes of scripture offers food for thought for theologians today: scripture is inspired not only because it imparts knowledge to us, but first and foremost as it creates faith and love in us through the Spirit, taking hold of us in our whole 'life-act' (*Lebensakt*); scripture exhibits unity as it is united in the unity of Christ's being and action who creates through it the unified community of faith; scripture possesses authority as it represents the divine 'means of grace', whereby we are animated to assimilate scripture, thus receiving an experiential 'connection with God' (*Anschluß an Gott*); scripture is infallible as it achieves this end with efficacious ease, creating in us a new volition to do God's will; and, finally, scripture possesses perspicuity as we read it together, in teaching and preaching, speaking and listening and studying, as a community of faith. Ultimately, then, Schlatter understands scripture as the powerful means of God's grace, who creates, through it, the 'new human being'. Schlatter writes:

The ultimate, highest goal of scripture . . . is that it wants to create God's human being. Scripture does not just want to whisper us a doctrine or merely lay upon us a law or a custom; its purpose lies much deeper. It creates the human being which is of God.⁷⁰

Secondly, Adolf Schlatter suggests a holistic definition of the nature of scripture. The doctrine of scripture in Schlatter's opus is not an isolated *prolegomenon*; rather, it constitutes an organic part of his whole project. In a harmonious way, Schlatter weaves together the doctrine of scripture with other central doctrines, such as the person and work of Christ, pneumatology, anthropology and soteriology. Only in recent years, it seems, have theologians begun to acknowledge the importance of relating the doctrine of scripture organically with other central doctrines in this way instead of treating it merely as a *prolegomenon* to dogmatics. Telford Work, for example, calls us to locate our doctrine of scripture more in 'the economy of salvation',

⁷⁰ Adolf Schlatter, *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 8, *Die Briefe an die Thessalonicher, Philipper, Timotheus und Titus, Ausgelegt für Bibelleser* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1953), p. 201. This statement is found in his commentary on 2 Tim 3:16 where one looks in vain for an elaborate discussion of the nature of *theopneustos*; instead, one finds this clear emphasis on the effects of *theopneustos*.

advocating ‘an economic Trinitarian theology of Scripture’.⁷¹ John Webster recommends a ‘Christological-pneumatological clarification of the nature of Scripture’,⁷² and Timothy Ward describes his own goal of presenting a doctrine of scripture as ‘shaped from the bottom up by the character and actions of God . . . yet without the inert book coming to eclipse the living Savior’.⁷³ Schlatter would certainly be happy with these suggestions, and as this article intends to show, he himself has much to offer in this respect. There is undoubtedly great potential in studying more closely how, for example, Schlatter, relates scripture to soteriology and ecclesiology, and how he uses his spirit-christology to elucidate an organic inspiration that neither venerates nor denigrates anthropology.

Finally, Schlatter makes a strong case for the communal use of scripture, offering here much by way of ecumenical promise. The Protestant hermit in his closet, isolated from the community, is unable to fully understand scripture; this is in Schlatter’s view a caricature of the Reformation understanding of *sola scriptura* – and more like what Keith A. Mathison calls *solo scriptura*.⁷⁴ For Schlatter, community and text are organically interrelated, while, of course, scripture remains solely authoritative and authentic. For our debate today, it seems particularly promising to study how Schlatter relates pneumatology to the concept of history and tradition. The Spirit who inspired the apostles and evangelists still guides us and works in us as we read inspired scripture together as a community. Theology thus needs to revisit the ‘concept of the Spirit’ (*Geistgedanken*), if we are to understand how God works his gifts among us as scripture is proclaimed.⁷⁵ Schlatter’s repeated suggestion to reconsider the Reformers is, particularly in this respect, good advice; John Calvin, for example, has much to say about the Spirit’s role.⁷⁶ Taken together, Schlatter’s balanced understanding of the attributes of scripture might work to both temper and stimulate our contemporary discussion. Schlatter might be a voice from the past, yet our theological community would do well to listen to him today.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 9.

⁷² John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 40.

⁷³ Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 17.

⁷⁴ See Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001), p. 162.

⁷⁵ Schlatter, *Dogma*, p. 346.

⁷⁶ See Calvin’s comments on 1 Cor 3:7; 2 Cor 3:6, 1 Pet 1:25, Institutes 4.1.6 (I owe these references to Ward, *Words of Life*, p. 160).

⁷⁷ This article is a modified version of a paper presented at the 15th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, ‘The Doctrine of Scripture’, 3 Sept. 2013. I am very grateful to Paul T. Nimmo for his helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.