

## Martin Kähler's 'Historic Biblical Christ'

### Part II

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As we fully enter our discussion of the 'historic biblical Christ', we must tread carefully. Much has been said and debated about Kähler's proposal. In particular, the terms he uses, the concepts he seems to attach to them, and the consequences he draws, have been a source of intrigue and frustration for scholars. The waters have been muddied further by how the terms have inconsistently been defined and appropriated not only by those who came after Kähler, but by those who preceded him. Accordingly, while we will necessarily take some time to discuss the somewhat murky issues of terminology, definition, and translation, it is Kähler's ideas and reasoning which will be our focus.

The problem of terminology starts at the very beginning with the title of the book itself. In the title, and then throughout the book, Kähler seems to distinguish between two kinds of 'history' through the use of two different German words, *historie* and *geschichte*. These two words, usually in their adjectival form, then tend to be infused with distinct meanings by Kähler that yield important theological implications that are vital to his Christology.<sup>1</sup> Given the seeming importance of these terms to Kähler's program, one might be surprised that arriving at stable definitions of the terms, and especially the best way to translate their meaning (at least the meaning Kähler seems to attach to them) into English, has proven to be a serious challenge.

At a top level, both terms refer to 'history'. But the distinction Kähler makes is approximately the following. *Historie* refers to the kind of raw history that is supposedly<sup>2</sup> obtainable and analyzable through historical investigation (the historical-critical method), but may or may not have any particular significance or

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<sup>1</sup> It's not by accident that I'm using qualifying words like 'seems' and 'tend' here. Kähler was not pure in how he used the terms, which is why I intend to focus more on his ideas than his use of terms in what follows.

<sup>2</sup> From our prior article, recall how thoroughly Kähler bemoaned how uncertain the interpretation of this kind of history is, and how it is constantly subject to revision by the vicissitudes of historical research. For Kähler, it is a source of doubt, not assurance. More on this below.

importance in its essence. Kähler tends to use this term negatively when referring to the 'historical' Jesus of theological liberalism. In contrast, *geschichte* refers to history in its significance; not just people and events located within history, but people and events that drive history. This is the term Kähler uses positively to refer to the 'historic' Christ. It's the kind of history that moves the needle on history due to its meaningful impact.<sup>3</sup> People and events in history can be more or less important; mundane or seismic, or somewhere in between.<sup>4</sup> These terms seem to be Kähler's attempt to capture this dynamic. He does not really use these words as technical terms of theological systematics the way those who followed him did.<sup>5</sup> Nor was Kähler the originator of using the terms to describe different gradations of history.<sup>6</sup> But the implications of the distinction he is making are enormous.

For Kähler, analyzing Jesus purely through the lens of *historie* was hopelessly flawed because it failed to capture Jesus' historic significance as proclaimed in the apostolic preaching. *Historie* alone is incapable of reckoning with the lasting (permanent?) dogmatic significance of Jesus presented in the Bible. The historical-critical method leaves no room for the supernatural, while the apostolic preaching about Jesus in the Bible thoroughly affirms his supernatural character. This approach focused on the wrong kind of history; the kind that wasn't that important. *Historie*, and its ever shifting sands, adds little, either positive or negative, to the picture of the real Jesus. Therefore, it is not significant. Moreover, it appears that for Kähler, when it comes to Jesus, there is no such thing as mere history anyway; or at the very least, most "purely historical events" about Jesus are "concealed from us".<sup>7</sup> There is no such thing as a Jesus of no

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<sup>3</sup> Braaten contrasts the terms this way: "*Historie* and *Geschichte* has been expressed in the following pairs of terms: objective history and existential history, outer history and inner history, or even writing history and making history." Kähler, 21. The terms 'historical' and 'historic' have become the mostly accepted shorthand translations of the terms into English, though notably not by Meier.

<sup>4</sup> Consider a hypothetical event of a tree falling down in a person's yard. It's a real historical event that happened in time and space. But if it's a small sapling, it may not even be worthy of noting. If, however, it's a much larger established tree that fell, that would likely be more memorable. And if that large tree fell on one's house rather than falling harmlessly in the yard, it would likely leave a strong imprint on the owner and have lasting significance. But then little or none of this would probably have any significance at all to someone living a few miles away. Such is the nature of history's 'significance' and the flexibility and perspectivism of it.

<sup>5</sup> There has been ample literature devoted to the *historie* vs *geschichte* issue that we will not rehearse here. But for a must read on this, and how both Barth and Bultmann further developed what Kähler 'started' and how such development ultimately became a somewhat contentious point of departure between the two, see Ladd, "Faith and History", *BETS* 6.3 (1963): 86-91. Ladd rightly makes the point that Bultmann in particular strayed far from Kähler in using the *historie* vs *geschichte* distinction in the service of a radical skepticism that Kähler would have disavowed.

<sup>6</sup> Scholarly thrust has been on how Kähler's distinction manifested in later theologians, which is fine. But often unexplored is that 140 years before Kähler, Chladenius appropriated the same terms in his appraisal of history in the context of hermeneutics. Notably, Chladenius defined the terms exactly the opposite of Kähler and especially those who followed him. This adds to the difficult and dare I say tortured 'history' of the use of these terms.

<sup>7</sup> Kähler, 128. By "purely historical events", I understand Kähler to be saying there is little to no 'raw uninterpreted history' about Jesus that is discoverable.

significance, which means *historie* cannot yield the real Jesus. The history we know about Jesus through the Bible is all theologized history – history seen through the eyes of faith,<sup>8</sup> which Kähler cites as “the first characteristic of Christ’s enduring influence...”<sup>9</sup>

The lasting fame of Jesus, what makes him ‘historic’, is not *historie*. This is why Kähler rejected the ‘historical (*historie*) Jesus’ as a fiction of modern scholarship. When the faith-based grid of the biblical presentation of Jesus was set aside to supposedly get to the real Jesus hiding behind the texts, theological liberalism produced versions of Jesus so reduced from the biblical presentation and so devoid of significance that no serious argument could be made that a Jesus so small and unmeaningful could adequately account for the momentous rise of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Only the ‘historic (*geschichte*) Christ’ of the apostolic preaching causally explains the existence of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> This ‘historic Christ’ is therefore the ‘real’ Jesus who is the object of faith. It is in the historic Christ that the lasting significance of Jesus is found, and where the important dogmatic history about Jesus (contained in the *kerygma*) is discovered. The ‘storm-free area’ for assured faith that Kähler sought is found in the revealed dogmatic firmness of *geschichte*, not the mostly unrevealed to and fro of *historie*.

But there is a third concept that is crucial to understanding Kähler’s picture of Jesus. This is the concept of the ‘supra-historical’. It is in the supra-historical that Kähler conceptually grounds the ‘historic Christ’ in the Jesus of history. On several occasions, Kähler labels Jesus as ‘supra-historical’.<sup>12</sup> By this, he means that Jesus, both the earthly Jesus of history and the exalted Christ of faith, are one and the same person. But this person, while existing in history, also transcends history and stands above it, putting Jesus in his transcendent

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<sup>8</sup> Recall earlier Kähler’s belief that the Bible’s purpose is dogmatic rather than historical. When coupled with his insistence that the Bible provides the only picture of Jesus available to us, then everything Jesus was and did is presented in the Bible through the lens of faith. All historical material in the Bible is interpreted and sifted by the authors through the lens of faith. It is not raw history. (Ibid, 96) This is why Kähler repeatedly claims that while the Bible contains historical content, the Bible is not and does not contain historical documents in a scientific sense. As an aside, one can readily see the idea of the Bible presenting history through the eyes of faith as being pivotal in the later work of Cullman.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>10</sup> And recall from our previous article that Kähler’s skepticism of the historical Jesus pursuit went even deeper. His book title labels it the ‘so-called historical Jesus’ because in his view, the historical investigations that were undertaken discovered little in the way of bona fide history regarding the real Jesus. Instead, scholarly imaginations had resulted in “historiography by conjecture.” Ibid, 48.

<sup>11</sup> On this, Kähler is eloquently followed by Moule: “[W]hoever tries to account for the beginnings of Christianity by some purely historical, non-transcendental event, runs up against the difficulty that there seems to be no such event of sufficient magnitude...to fulfill the need...Whoever tries to interpret Jesus as only an individual of past history, instead of as a somehow inclusive being, is confronted by phenomena of language and experience whose origin then defies explanation.” Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1967), 77.

<sup>12</sup> Kähler, 47, 62, 65, 95, 138.

significance beyond the reach of historical investigation. Kähler is refreshingly clear about what he means by 'supra-historical':

This is a term coined to designate what, to be sure, would not even exist apart from history but whose significance is not exhausted in the historical effects of a particular link in the chain of history or in the beginnings of a new historical movement, because in the supra-historical what is universally valid is joined to the historical to become an effective presence.<sup>13</sup>

As noted previously, Kähler did not subscribe to either a partial or total divorce of personhood between the earthly Jesus of history and the exalted Christ of faith. They are not only the same person, but are in congruity with each other.<sup>14</sup> The Jesus that lived, breathed and walked in first century Galilee is the same person resurrected and glorified who is the object of faith. The exalted Christ of the apostolic preaching is also the Jesus of history.<sup>15</sup>

But, just because Kähler seems to say that the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Christ are one and the same doesn't mean he sees both as equally important or significant in the salvific sense. He rather emphatically does not. Similarly to his scholarly colleagues, including those he critiqued, there is indeed a wedge between the earthly Jesus and the exalted Christ in Kähler, despite his concept of the supra-historical. And this gets to the crux of his contrast between the 'historical Jesus' of theological liberalism and his 'historic Christ'.

We, as individuals, may look upon our own personal history and see particular events or seasons as more consequential and memorable in shaping our story than other times which were more prosaic and even forgettable. Something like this appears to be how Kähler views the 'history' of Jesus. Kähler gives off a strong air that at least from the standpoint of faith, Jesus didn't make that much of a splash during his earthly life. Neither Jewish nor Roman histories of the time say very much about Jesus or his followers.<sup>16</sup> Not everything Jesus said and did was unique.<sup>17</sup> And even among his closest followers, Kähler contends that Jesus "did not win from his disciples a faith with power to witness to him, but only a very

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 47. He goes on to say that for him, "the connection between the earthly and the exalted Christ is expressed in the term 'supra-historical'..." Ibid, 62.

<sup>14</sup> See n.56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 61, 83-84. In addition to drawing this conclusion from what Kähler himself said, we might also appeal indirectly to the strong affinities that have been recognized between Kähler and Adolf Schlatter, who was even more direct in fusing the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith. It is notable that in Barth's survey of Protestant theology, each time Kähler is mentioned, he also mentions Schlatter. See his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, New Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 505, 608, 640. Barth's book was originally published in German in 1947.

<sup>16</sup> Kähler, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 59.

shaky loyalty susceptible to panic and betrayal.”<sup>18</sup> The strong implication is that the historical details of Jesus’ earthly life, while real, contribute little to the cause of faith, either of the disciples then, or us now. It is not the kind of history that vitally matters, nor is it history that is certain and complete. It is *historie*, rather than what Kähler thinks is the sturdy *geschichte*.<sup>19</sup> Because the purpose of the Gospels is to elicit faith,<sup>20</sup> and because theological liberalism’s ‘historical Jesus’ program tried to focus on the *historie* aspect of Jesus, Kähler says “[t]he historical approach is no longer connected with safeguarding and interpreting a solid core of the content of faith.”<sup>21</sup>

What is the solid core of the content of faith for Kähler? It is the dogmatic and religious significance of Jesus that lies in the *geschichte* and is the basis for the theological message about the supra-historic Jesus proclaimed in the apostolic preaching. While Kähler says the “whole Bible” speaks of Jesus, there is a specific core of information about Jesus that Kähler seems to regard as supremely significant.<sup>22</sup> Jesus was not “a mere man...of no more importance to us than any other significant figure of the past.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus was without sin.<sup>24</sup> He is the revelation of the invisible God whom the Christian seeks.<sup>25</sup> Through his blood, he has secured forgiveness of sin. On this, Kähler notably says, “If I have...this I do not need additional information on the precise details of Jesus’ life and death.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus is “true God and true Man”.<sup>27</sup> So-called “dormant

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 65. It has to be pointed out that doubt persisted even post-resurrection. The Doubting Thomas story is the obvious example (John 20.24-29), but references to doubt or hesitation appear elsewhere (Mt. 28.17; Lk 24.37). To my mind, this complicates Kähler’s reasoning a bit.

<sup>19</sup> This contrast in Kähler can be seen conceptually in a revealing section about love. “We like to summarize our faith and the New Testament revelation in the words: ‘God is love.’ How did we learn to make this confession? It was not through the preaching which sounded from the Galilean hillside and was carried by messengers...it was not from the preaching of the kingdom of God...This obscure metaphor – ‘God is love’ – was first to acquire its full meaning through Christ’s deeds and life.” Kähler then cites Rom. 5.8 and 1J 4.10 which both stress Christ’s sacrificial death for the sake of sinners as God’s fullest expression of love. Ibid, 96. Here, we see that for Kähler, the theological significance of the atonement, more than Jesus’ earthly teachings, is the foundation of lasting significance.

<sup>20</sup> See n.35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>22</sup> This is where Kähler gets confusing, since not only does he profess that the “whole Bible” speaks of Jesus, but he also protests efforts to establish a “minimum or maximum” of reliable material that would return us to a “harmful dependence on theology.” Ibid, 121. It is unclear to me whether Kähler is just inconsistent on this point, or whether he sees a qualitative difference between establishing a core based on historical research versus seeing a core based on dogmatic significance. I tend to think the latter, but if so, it seems to me one is still in the ‘minimum or maximum’ business (Ibid, 144). Framing the issue in terms of ‘significance’ is potentially valid, but the way Kähler does it creates fissures in both content and method that muddy his argument. His contrast between historical research and dogmatics (Ibid, 62) doesn’t really help his cause on this issue, in my view.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 53, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 58, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 60. See also 73. Kähler seems to get at this again on pp.95-96.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 102. See also 103-4 where Kähler affirms the divinity of Christ.

material” in the Bible is dormant for a reason and should not “artificially” be forced to be equally significant to everyone.<sup>28</sup>

Most importantly, Kähler attaches preeminent significance to “the twofold ending of Jesus’ life”, namely the crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>29</sup> Kähler strongly asserts that the New Testament presentation of Jesus cannot be understood correctly absent a recognition that the biblical accounts were written by authors possessing post-resurrection faith, and that this post-resurrection faith enabled proper understanding of Jesus. He says, “[I]t is...certain that Jesus’ followers were capable of understanding his person and mission, his deeds and his word as the offer of God’s grace and faithfulness only after he appeared to them in his state of fulfillment...”<sup>30</sup> For Kähler, the resurrection is the indispensable ingredient of all proper understanding of Jesus and becomes a kind of prime mover of biblical hermeneutics.<sup>31</sup> But even here, the historicity of the resurrection is downplayed in favor of its religious significance.<sup>32</sup> And it is here that Kähler again draws what is now a familiar wedge between Jesus’ eternal significance versus his earthly significance, and cites Paul in doing so.<sup>33</sup>

For Kähler, the abiding and lasting significance of Jesus constitutes his ‘historic Christ’. It is the Jesus of “permanent influence” who “produces effects, and through these effects their influence persists”. His historic impact is ascertained by the “discernable personal influence which he exercises upon later generations”. In the case of Jesus, Kähler believes his “decisive influence...consisted in nothing else but the faith of his disciples, their conviction that in Jesus they had found the conqueror of guilt, sin, temptation, and death.”<sup>34</sup> For Kähler, this faith culminated in the New Testament affirmation that “Christ is Lord” which stoked the kerygmatic confession of the apostolic preaching. It is from here that Kähler famously thunders:

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 142-3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 66. See also 45.

<sup>31</sup> This extends to the Old Testament because for Kähler, “Christ can never be evaluated apart from the Old Testament.” Ibid, 85. By definition, this would also have to extend to the New Testament writers’ frequent reach-backs to the Old Testament, since such citations were clearly shaped by the crucifixion and resurrection.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 95. For Kähler, the resurrection is supra-historic in nature, putting it beyond the reach of investigation. It is also very notable that on p.65, Kähler states that one of the two forms of evidence used by Christians for the messiahship of Jesus is “personal testimony to his resurrection, based on experience...” He’s stressing experiential history (*geschichte*) as what is meaningful and significant, not the historicity of the event itself.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 66. Kähler cites 2C 5.16. Kähler’s read of Paul is not good here. He connects ‘from a worldly perspective’ to the noun (Christ) rather than the verb (to know). Bultmann predictably amplified this even further. But this reading sets Paul against Paul, for Paul elsewhere had an out-front interest in the earthly Jesus and his relevance (Acts 13.38-39, Rom. 1.2-4, 9.5; 1C 15.3-8, etc).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 63.

The real Christ, that is, the Christ who has exercised an influence in history, with whom millions have communed in childlike faith, and with whom the great witnesses of faith have been in communion...*this real Christ is the Christ who is preached*. The Christ who is preached...is the Christ of faith. He is the Jesus whom the eyes of faith behold at every step he takes and through every syllable he utters – the Jesus whose image we impress upon our minds because we both would and do commune with him, our risen living Lord.<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, the final plank in Kähler's proposal is that Jesus isn't just the 'historic Christ', but also the 'biblical Christ'. This might seem obvious from what we've discussed above. But Kähler's specific emphasis on this point deserves mention, since it brings together the two main sections above which gets Kähler to his ultimate goal. Repeatedly, Kähler asserts that the Christ of faith, the preached Christ, is the Jesus presented in the Bible.<sup>36</sup> Kähler states that we need the Bible to know and even commune with Jesus.<sup>37</sup> But Kähler goes further by, in effect, fusing the authority of Jesus with the authority of the Bible "such that we are not able to separate Christ and the Bible."<sup>38</sup> Kähler contends that most Christians come to faith in Jesus through the Bible, and that faith in Christ and trust in the Bible are "inseparably intermeshed."<sup>39</sup> The Christian's development of their faith in Christ is "continually clarified and deepened by the witness of the Bible" such that its possession has no need to being subjected to "special testing."<sup>40</sup>

But for Kähler, the relationship of Jesus to the Bible as it relates to faith goes both ways. The Christian doesn't just come to believe in Christ through the Bible, but also believes the Bible because "he hears God through the Scriptures."<sup>41</sup> We understand the Bible "by going through Christ" and "put our trust in the Bible as the Word of our God for the sake of its Christ."<sup>42</sup> In the end, Kähler concludes his book by answering the question he asked at the beginning of the book, "The way in which we answer the question, 'What do you think of the Christ?' that is, the *historic Christ*, will also determine our whole attitude to the Bible."<sup>43</sup> Kähler equates the 'historic Christ' with the 'biblical Christ', and he does so to achieve

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 66. Notice how Kähler brings the earthly Jesus and the exalted Christ together here but stresses the Christ of significance as the Christ of faith. He goes on to contrast the dogmatic investigation he employs to reach this conclusion with "historical study" that claims to grasp true reality but often doesn't. He defines the goal of dogmatics as putting "what is genuine and indispensable in the past at the service of the present". Importantly, he believes the task of dogmatics includes studying historical research and history for insights that warrant consideration by the dogmatic enterprise. Ibid, 67-68.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 76, 79, 82, 86-7, 94, 122.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 76-79, 84, 96-97.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 86, 94

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 74-75.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 86. By 'special testing', Kähler almost certainly has 'historical research/investigation' in mind.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 104-105.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 148.

his preeminent purpose of establishing a safe harbor for authentic faith by keeping higher criticism at bay. Recall Kähler's assertion that the Bible should be free of historical criticism once it is read with its purpose of eliciting faith being front and center. And recall that the supra-historic Christ who transcends history can therefore not be subjected to historical examination. By fusing the two concepts so completely, Kähler believes he achieves a safe harbor for faith which is also not subject to 'special testing'.

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