

Martin Kähler's 'Historic Biblical Christ'

Part III

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Conclusion

Particularly in the scholarly world, Kähler has both admirers and detractors from across the theological spectrum.¹ This alone serves as a somewhat cautionary note on drawing hard and fast takeaways from Kähler. In my view, Kähler's book must first be seen in context. By any measure, his book meets the definition of an 'occasional writing'.² Kähler wrote the book in reaction to the impact historical criticism was having on contemporary views of Jesus in his day, as well as reacting to the Protestant orthodox reaction to historical criticism. Kähler saw both as flawed, which cried out for the need for a viable alternative.³ Therefore, while Kähler makes many pronouncements and arguments which reflect his overall theological orientation and method, he does so in a situational and localized way. Accordingly, I'm not sure it's fair to Kähler to expect the kind of complete normative consistency one might hope to find in a mature treatment of theological systematics. That's not what this book is, nor does that appear to be his intent.⁴ Our takeaways need to keep this in mind. Having said that, there are

¹ Reinhard von Bendemann and Colin Brown provide a recent condensed example of this. Bendemann sees Kähler's concept of 'supra-history' as "underrated" and that Kähler's overall orientation "begs for attention." *Jesus Handbook*, pp. 64-65. Brown, on the other hand, is considerably more skeptical about Kähler privileging the kerygmatic message. He suggests the skeptical reaction to the *kerygma* must also be explored, lest "we end up with the pious platitudes that characterize Kähler's pronouncements." *A History of the Quests for the Historical Jesus*, Vol 1, p.284. It is noteworthy that Brown is the evangelical and Bendemann is not. Evangelical scholars *tend* to be more positive about Kähler than their non-evangelical colleagues. But clearly that is not uniformly the case.

² 'Occasional' can refer to infrequency, or it can refer to something being prompted by an occurrence, or an occasion. The latter is what is meant here. Most of the New Testament epistles are categorized as 'occasional writings' because they were at least in part a reaction to a specific occasion that had occurred (usually the existence of false teaching and its fallout in the local church(es)).

³ His beginning assertion (quoted in n.2 above) constitutes his mission statement for the book, which is clearly motivated by his need to react to a specific occasion prevalent in his day.

⁴ In my view, Kähler readily acknowledges this: "My observations on the Gospels – which may seem overly disparaging – by no means express my evaluation of them; rather, these observations take the measure of the Gospels from the standpoint of a very specific approach to which they have been subjected." Kähler, 126-127.

still many takeaways that can be drawn from Kähler's book. I will highlight a few for consideration:

Kähler's views on the Bible have long been the low-hanging fruit for criticism. Kähler's repeated rejection of the doctrine of inerrancy is, on one level, understandable. It is no doubt easier at a top level to reject inerrancy than it is to affirm it. Those of us who subscribe to biblical inerrancy nonetheless have cause to sympathize with Kähler's rejection of it. It is indeed wearying to defend every jot and tittle of the Bible from accusations of error each time either a fresh or repeated assertion emerges that casts doubt on the doctrine. Moreover, it can indeed be a distraction from the 'main thing' to have to focus on seemingly lesser issues where accuracy, at least on the surface, doesn't seem to matter as much.⁵ But in Kähler's case, his objection to inerrancy is not only a concession to critical scholarship on verse-by-verse analysis. He also objects on systematic grounds. It is clear that Kähler locates the doctrine of inerrancy in the later church, rather than a doctrine taught by the Bible itself. For Kähler, inerrancy is a dogma that is foreign to the Bible which is forced onto the Bible to make it satisfy the need for assurance that its adherents believe only inerrancy can secure. I disagree.⁶

A strong doctrine of inerrancy can be extracted not only from the Bible, but from scholarly analysis.⁷ We have the famous passages of 2 Tim 3.15-17 and 2 Pet 1.21 affirming the detailed divine stewardship of the written Old Testament,⁸ as well as less famous but equally relevant passages affirming the normative relevance of the Old Testament (1 Cor 10; 1 Pet 1.10-12). The New Testament affirms the full authority of the Old Testament in the many reach-backs it makes to the Old Testament, most notably by Jesus himself. In addition, we have the famous passage in 2 Peter 3 affirming Paul's New Testament writings as Scripture. Also of note is the passage in 1 Tim 5 that brings Deut. 25.4 and Luke 10.7 together, putting Luke on a par with Deuteronomy from the standpoint of authority. The constant refrain of Hebrews is that the Old Testament itself knew that it was incomplete and anticipated future fulfillment through the new covenant ushered in by Jesus, which would necessitate a normative written deposit like the

⁵ We will obviously not rehearse the many and varied objections to the Bible's 'errorlessness'. Nor will we rehearse the many often good responses to such objections. But evangelicals make a mistake when dismissing the power of these issues. An obvious example is the Ahimelech/Abiathar issue in Mark 2 compared with 1 Samuel 21. This 'problem' was famously recounted by Bart Ehrman as being pivotal in his journey away from Christianity.

⁶ In addition to what follows, I would add without exposition a base concern with Kähler's view: How and why is the Bible a 'unique' book without peer if it contains the same humanly problematic elements present in all other literature?

⁷ The best recent treatment of the inerrancy doctrine can be found in Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010), 167-176. Another predominately good recent resource is Carson (ed.), *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

⁸ These passages in particular also undercut Kähler's rejection of verbal inspiration and strongly affirm the doctrine of organic inspiration. For a lengthy treatment of this, see Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1948).

Old Testament.⁹ In addition, the several cases noted by scholars of New Testament authors drawing authoritatively from other New Testament authors speaks to Scripture affirming Scripture authoritatively.¹⁰ This is obviously a very abbreviated treatment of the topic. But even if one chooses to disagree with the doctrine of inerrancy, one is on shaky ground to suggest that no evidence for it can be found in the Bible.

But criticism of Kähler's views of the Bible don't just come from the inerrancy camp. More skeptical scholars likewise criticize Kähler for shielding the Bible from historical-critical inquiry and accuse him of giving in to an uncritical biblicism. This is not completely fair to Kähler, since he does say more than once that historical investigation has its place. But it is true that at bottom, Kähler is making a dogmatic argument against theological liberalism that exempts the apostolic preaching from critical dissection. And it is understandable that the historical investigator would take umbrage at Kähler's program of relegating historical investigation to the *historie* that is far secondary in importance while leaving the *geschichte* and the supra-historical nature of both the Bible and Jesus untouched and out of reach. It is hard to escape the impression that Kähler's distinction is both arbitrary and convenient for his purposes. And as I will discuss below, it is also a distinction that is not found in the Bible at all. Unlike the doctrine of inerrancy, Kähler's historical/historic construct is a true abstraction, which to some degree compromises the integrity of Kähler's entire program.

One last thing to be said about Kähler's view of the Bible concerns his contention that the Bible reflects the apostolic preaching which founded the church. While this is a compelling way of framing the biblical material, and while *kerygma* is certainly a part of what is presented, Kähler flattens the diversity of the biblical message by force-fitting the Bible into this interpretive grid. In point of fact, the Bible is much more than *kerygma* (as defined by 'proclamation'). There is witness testimony,¹¹ as well as teaching,¹² among other categories. Seeing the Bible nearly exclusively through the grid of *kerygma* frees it from the moorings the Bible itself presents. Perhaps that was Kähler's point, in that perhaps he thought such an approach would provide immunity from historical criticism. But ironically, downplaying its historical and doctrinal moorings destructively opened the *kerygma* up to historical criticism among those who came after him.¹³ Kähler greatly stressed the present power of the *kerygma* in producing a living faith in the living Christ, and he was correct to do so. But this emphasis, combined with a

⁹ Both Heb. 4 and 12 appear to link the author's own words to the word of God.

¹⁰ Matthew and Luke using Mark as a source, the obvious parallels between 2 Peter and Jude, etc. And in the Old Testament, one could cite the very strong affinities between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy as one example.

¹¹ This creates a problem for Kähler's view of the relative unimportance of 'history'.

¹² This creates a problem for Kähler's view that the Bible is not a set of doctrinal propositions. I agree that it isn't. But that doesn't mean doctrinal teaching is absent. It is clearly present, rather often.

¹³ For more on this, see Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2nd Rev. Ed (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1988), 52-56.

severe deemphasis on the importance of the historicity of the contents of the *kerygma*, led to an erosion in the once-for-all historical character of Jesus' work of redemption by Bultmann and others.

Next, we should consider Kähler's equating the real Jesus with the biblical Christ. Evangelicals have obvious reasons to commend this aspect of Kähler's program. But we should step back and think about the implications of what, on the surface, sounds very good. As we saw above, once boiled down, Kähler gets here through a fairly straightforward formula: The Bible is the only record we have of Jesus; the faith of the biblical writers was based on the real Jesus; therefore, of course the real Jesus must be equated with the biblical presentation of him because there's nowhere else we can go to find the real Jesus other than the Bible. This is true, for as far as it goes. But I would suggest it's not the whole story. It's well understood by evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike that each biblical writer wrote what they did with a certain purpose or goal in mind. The aim of grammatical-historical investigation (the good kind) is to better understand these purposes in order to become more deeply familiar with the original situations of the authors. This yields better understanding of the material (and of Jesus himself) which can responsibly be applied to current people and situations.¹⁴

The New Testament writings, including the Gospels, are no different. The diversity of the Gospel accounts are often seen as a problem to be solved, including by Kähler. But I disagree. Diversity doesn't have to equal 'errors'. To the contrary, diversity means diversity in original purpose.¹⁵ The biblical writers wrote normative truth, but often did so in part to deal with situational issues and events. So when Kähler equates the real Christ with the biblical Christ, he's running the danger of localizing the totality of Jesus exclusively to the original purpose and situation of the writers. That's clearly not his intent, given his stress on advancing a living faith in the living Christ. But Kähler's steadfast refusal to get 'behind the texts' in any way at all carries a huge risk of limiting a fuller understanding of Jesus. What we should be striving for is fully accepting the biblical presentation of Jesus and enriching it with responsible inquiry into how the situational purposes of the authors shaped their presentations, including the details Kähler wants to downplay. The real Christ is unquestionably revealed without blemish in the biblical presentation. But an understanding of the real Christ is not exhausted exclusively in the biblical presentations (Rom. 1), given their situational components. I favor responsible investigation and inquiry that first and foremost takes the Bible itself and what it teaches as normative truth

¹⁴ Pratt puts it well, "Biblical revelation came through human authors whose circumstances, interests, and intentions gave each story its particular shape and content. If we fail to return to their original historical settings, we cut ourselves off from proper understanding." See his *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1993), 10-11.

¹⁵ Here, I would cite the well-known presentations of Manasseh in Kings and Chronicles. The differing purposes of the authors drive notable differences in their respective accounts of Manasseh. If we discard the idea of biblical authors possessing differing purposes, we have reconciliation problems in the Bible that are considerable.

while illuminating the purposes and motives the authors operated with which informed their accounts of Jesus, particularly through the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture.

What I suggest above can admittedly lead to a multitude of competing scholarly reconstructions of the historical situation of a particular author. This is the kind of 'speculation' Kähler opposed, and some, like Richard Hays, tend to also be skeptical. But it should be pointed out again that Kähler's opposition to what the Jesus biographers were doing was based in large part on the biographers dismissing the theology and faith of the authors. I completely agree with Kähler's opposition to that approach. My approach accepts the faith and theology of the authors as true and valid, and seeks to understand how (and even why) the authors got to where they did and how it informed what they said about Jesus and why. For example, if Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome during a time of persecution, that provides a powerful context to the contents of his account of Jesus, particularly the emphasis on spiritual warfare. The same can be said of Paul's so-called prison epistles. I will say below that Christians should not be afraid of history. I would add here that we should also not be afraid of historical investigation, taking what is of value from it, and critiquing what is not.¹⁶ I don't regard this as a litmus test for faith at all. I do regard it as a mainstream aspect of the Holy Spirit continuing to edify the church in truth and discernment.¹⁷

As an aside, the issue of diversity touched on above also applies to Christology in the view of many scholars. Several prominent scholars after Kähler, such as Pannenberg, Cullman and Dunn, have argued that the New Testament does not present one singular uniform Christology. Instead, multiple christologies can be found, even within the Gospels.¹⁸ For all three (to different degrees), the attempt to find an underlying unity to the various pictures of Jesus supposedly presented in the New Testament requires the exact kind of scholarly digging that Kähler opposes.¹⁹ Though again, I would remark that Kähler's aim in this book does not appear to be the development of a full mature Christology. But Pannenberg specifically cites Kähler's view of the New Testament as preaching texts as an inhibitor to finding the inner unity of the New Testament.²⁰

¹⁶ Meier makes a good (albeit partisan tinged) observation here, saying, "It is...the staunch believer who often feels that the quest is at best a waste of time and at worst a threat to faith. In this camp one finds strange bedfellows: strict followers of Rudolf Bultmann and dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalists. For opposite reasons they come to the same conclusion..." Meier, 196.

¹⁷ WCF XXXIV.4.

¹⁸ See Pannenberg, *Jesus-God and Man*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London, SCM, 1957); Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977). Cullman goes about his analysis a bit differently than the others, focusing on categorizing the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament and ascribing a particular picture of Jesus to each category.

¹⁹ Although, it can be argued that Kähler provides some aid and comfort to this notion when opining that while the four Gospels disagree on details, they agree on the whole. (Kähler, 50).

²⁰ Pannenberg, 25.

Moving to the issue of faith/theology and history, Kähler is well aware that he is contrasting his dogmatic approach to an assured faith with the historical approach. For Kähler, if the Gospels are viewed through their dogmatic and religious significance, they are trustworthy and can be relied upon. If they are viewed as historical textbooks, they cannot be relied upon and do not point people to faith. But he is also well aware that his approach is vulnerable to the charge that the devaluing of historical verification of the *kerygma* brings the factual truthfulness of the content of the *kerygma* into question.²¹ His response is to provocatively suggest that a dogmatic approach is more factually reliable than the historical approach, because dogmatics takes historical research into account while the historical approach dismisses dogmatic facts in the pursuit of raw history that may not even be discoverable.²² I take his point, though I doubt it would persuade those who are skeptical of the truthfulness of the biblical accounts and demand more forensic investigative techniques be brought to bear before reconsidering their stance.²³ In my view, the deeper problem is that Kähler's *historie* vs *geschichte* construct to get to what is 'real' about the Bible and Jesus is contradicted by the Bible itself.²⁴ I'll conclude this discussion with a brief case study of the appointing of Matthias as Judas' replacement in Acts 1.12-26.

In brief summary, after the ascension of Jesus recorded earlier in Acts 1, a group of around 120 believers, including the remaining apostles, gathered in Jerusalem to fill the office of the twelfth apostle vacated by Judas. In the end, after a deliberative process, Matthias was chosen.

Historical details abound in this episode. Luke notes not only the place where the meeting occurred (Jerusalem), but also where the apostles had come from (the Mount of Olives) and the distance between the two locations (a Sabbath day's walk). He notes that the gathering room was 'upstairs'. He names all eleven apostles who were present by name, as well as noting the presence of Mary. He states that other women were also there, for a total of about 120 people. Once the meeting gets down to business, Peter is showcased as the leader of the gathering. He explains the purpose of the meeting and quotes from the Psalms.

²¹ Kähler, 69-74, 80-81.

²² Ibid, 67-69. Notice Kähler's sly accusation that it's the historical approach that engages in "embellishments" of the data, in contrast to Kähler trumpeting his fidelity to the "biblical picture of Christ."

²³ Kähler himself acknowledges this (Ibid, 68-69), and it echoes the main criticism made against 'Christology from above' by Pannenberg and others that this approach presumes the very thing that must be proved. Along those lines, it is most ironic that Kähler suggests establishing a "minimum" of what can be historically ascertained" as an evangelistic strategy for dialoguing with non-Christians about the truthfulness of the biblical accounts. (Ibid, 144) To his credit, Kähler does allude to the truth that surface-level objections can conceal deeper presuppositional objections that truly fuel unbelief. Based on all of this, I'm inclined to view Pannenberg's critique of Kähler as overly negative, even though I obviously have my own concerns with Kähler's approach.

²⁴ For an able critique of the *historie* vs. *geschichte* dynamic of Kähler and the subsequent morphing of it, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 26-31.

Luke provides historical details on the death of Judas, and then describes in detail how Matthias rather than Barsabbas (note the additional detail that Barsabbas was also known as Justus) was added to the Twelve. Not even critical commentaries on Acts question the basic historicity of this event, and that is wise.²⁵ The abundance of historical details grounds the historical authenticity of the account, since such details could easily be debunked if untrue. The more detailed and more abundant the historical details, the more easily disprovable the account becomes if either the event itself didn't happen, or its description in Acts was inaccurate. In short, there is no evidential reason to doubt the accuracy or historicity of the account.

For our purposes, the section of greatest importance is verses 21-22. It is here that two requirements for this specific office are enumerated.²⁶ First, the twelfth apostle needed to be someone who was 'with us' throughout the duration of Jesus' earthly ministry from baptism to ascension.²⁷ Second, the twelfth apostle needed to be someone who could personally testify to the reality of the resurrection, presumably by witnessing Jesus in his post-resurrection state through his numerous appearances prior to the ascension (and afterwards, in the case of Paul).²⁸ It seems clear that in satisfying these two requirements, the twelfth apostle would be qualified to provide witness that the pre-resurrected and post-resurrected Jesus was the same person. Given this, it is clear the 'church', from its very inception, placed great significance on the earthly Jesus they knew prior to Easter. This event in Acts 1 happened well before any of the Gospel accounts were committed to papyrus. The 120 people in the room didn't know at the time what kind of Jesus material would end up in the Gospels, nor how that material would be presented. What they did know was that the historical content of Jesus' earthly life mattered so much that personal knowledge of it was essential to fulfill this apostolic office.²⁹ History, not just theologized history, was seen as highly significant from the very beginning.

²⁵ I will qualify this somewhat by noting that both Conzelmann and Barrett make much of the supposed disconnect between Acts 1 and Mt. 27 concerning the fate of Judas.

²⁶ I'm using this terminology because Paul did not meet the first criteria. Yet, he was clearly considered an apostle by the mothership Jerusalem church and enjoyed its full endorsement (Gal. 2.6-10). Much has been written on the issue of apostleship in the New Testament. Though somewhat dated, I would still commend the extensive treatment of *apostolos* given by Rengstorf, "apostolos," *TDNT* I: 407-445. See also Kruse, "Apostle, Apostleship," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 76-82 which includes a good bibliography for further research.

²⁷ There is reason to think this requirement was unique to this specific position. Not only did Paul not meet this requirement, but technically, several of the existing apostles didn't either. The Apostle Matthew, for example, was called by Jesus and became a follower/disciple much later than Jesus' baptism (Mt. 9.9; Mk. 2.14; Lk. 5.27-28).

²⁸ Paul cites his fulfillment of this second requirement in contrasting himself with his opponents in 1C 9.1. This leads me to think it reasonable to infer that those in Corinth who were questioning his authority by questioning his apostleship may have been citing the requirements in Acts 1.21-22 against him. If so, that would provide further authentication of the historicity of the Acts account.

²⁹ To echo Kähler from earlier, one might suggest that the stress on direct knowledge of Jesus' earthly ministry as a requirement for this apostolic office may have come from Jesus himself

And yet, there is also no denying that the Acts 1 account is filled with theological meaning as well. Commentators on Acts have made much of the strategic placement of this account in the narrative. The location of this event after the ascension but prior to Pentecost in Acts is seen as highly significant theologically.³⁰ The portrayal of Peter here and in subsequent chapters of Acts is seen as theologically congruent with the (debated) ecclesiology of Matthew 16. The emphasis on God's direct involvement in the choosing of Matthias continues the theological emphasis present throughout Luke-Acts of the sovereign directing of the rise of Christianity by all three persons of the Trinity. And Peter's appeal to scriptural fulfillment provided theological legitimacy to the purpose of the historical gathering.

What we find in this episode is theology and history being complementary, not oppositional. The history of Jesus is given great importance. There is no distinction between two kinds of history, much less the kind of sharp point of departure Kähler makes.³¹ All history experienced by humans becomes interpreted history once it is processed by humans through their reasoning, sense perception and emotions. This does not invalidate or diminish the history or necessarily how it is interpreted. Nor does it make history completely subjective. It makes it subject to the kind of testing, reevaluation, and reconsideration that Kähler so strongly opposes when applied to the Bible. That is why in the end, Christians regard the Bible as the divinely inspired revelation it claims to be, making its interpreted history the infallible interpretation which commands authority. Why? Because it incorporates the infinite perspective of the Author of truth, in contrast to the exclusively finite perspectives of flawed creatures. This authority deals with investigative testing not by trying to escape it as Kähler does, but through following 2C 10.5.³² We should not fear history. We should celebrate it. It is our friend. God brought it into existence and

either directly or indirectly. Acts 1.3-8 says Jesus appeared to the apostles for 40 days post-resurrection and taught them about the kingdom of God, among other things. This, of course, was a major emphasis of his pre-resurrection teachings, primarily through the Kingdom parables recorded in the Synoptics. The Farewell Discourse in John 15-17 also contains numerous statements and teachings by Jesus that bear directly on what is recorded by Luke in Acts 1-2.³⁰ Many could be cited here. But for a very succinct and readable treatment, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, Rev. Ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 237-8. See also Dennis Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), 20-21.

³¹ Regarding this dynamic in Mark, Hengel seems to have Kähler in mind when he says, "The fatal error in the interpretation of the Gospels in general and of Mark in particular has been that scholars have thought that they had to decide between preaching and historical narration, that here there could only be an either-or. In reality the 'theological' contribution of the evangelist lies in the fact that he combines both these things inseparably: he preaches by narrating; he writes history and in so doing proclaims." See his *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene: Wipf, 2003), 41.

³² "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

providentially acts within it.³³ As observed by Evans in regards to Jesus, the historical and historic “distinction is appealing because it represents an attempt to isolate what is religiously significant about Jesus from the difficulties that arise from entanglement with history. However, much of what is religiously significant about Jesus lies precisely in the historicity of his story, and much is lost when the story is emptied of that historicity.”³⁴

We will conclude with a discussion of Kähler’s stress on significance as it relates to Christ as the object of faith, untouchable by historical investigation. The obvious question to be asked is ‘significance’ according to whom? Not even Kähler dares suggest that Jesus himself would have agreed that the historical details of his earthly work weren’t ‘historic’ just because there was no immediate cosmic renovation. Kähler is defining ‘significance’ on human terms, which in the end, has him roaming more in the realm of subjective anthropocentrism rather than Christo or theo-centrism.³⁵ If the ‘whole Bible’ speaks of Jesus, and if Jesus is the unique Savior of sinners and sole Reconciler of God to humanity,³⁶ then everything about Jesus and everything the Bible says about him is in some sense ‘historic’ and should not be diminished. Just as we should reject the idea of a canon within the canon, we should likewise reject the notion of a Jesus within the Christ. It all matters. It’s all important. It’s all there because God wants it there, which is an obvious indicator of what *God* thinks is significant. By definition, that makes all of it the focus of initial as well as sanctifying faith.

Kähler is right to criticize the relentless speculative historicizing of Jesus through the flawed application of slanted investigative techniques fueled by skeptical presuppositions that were not only unwarranted but inaccurate as a matter of history. But that doesn’t mean the earthly Jesus is insignificant or not ‘historic’. He seems to acknowledge this at the outset,³⁷ but then minimizes it and even undercuts it from then on, perhaps because he views that realm as the playground for historical investigation while wanting to preserve a Christ immune from such investigation as the object of faith. But this gets him caught in a tight spot of his own making by simultaneously saying the Bible shouldn’t be read like any other book, while then allowing it to be read like any other book (including by him himself) within a subjectively fenced space. Lessing’s ditch is thus re-dug.

³³ *WCF* IV-V. For those wishing to swim in the deep end of the pool regarding creation, providence, and Sabbath rest as a Christian model of eschatological history, see Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 53-75.

³⁴ C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford, 1996), vi.

³⁵ I would suggest that ‘significance’ contains an irreducibly situational and subjective aspect to it. That doesn’t invalidate the concept or that it can’t be defined or even measured to some extent. But Kähler makes it a human phenomenon and gives it authority to measure the value of the biblical material. In this narrow sense, he is rather akin to the Jesus biographers he criticizes along much the same lines.

³⁶ Kähler, 77. The hypostatic union would be the perfect place for Kähler to affirm the value and necessity of its historical essence as well as its tremendous theological significance. Alas, he doesn’t go there (see p.102).

³⁷ *Ibid*, 46.

Kähler can spottily affirm the value of historical research and history, and protest that his real issue is with the speculative historicizing of biblical origins and its handling of the biblical data about the earthly Jesus by modern investigative techniques and scholarly imaginations.³⁸ That's fair enough. But his own view of what is 'historic' about Jesus (ie: his religious and dogmatic significance), and thus what conjures faith and forms the basis of the apostolic preaching, inevitably results in a diminishment of the historical details of the earthly Jesus in his program. Though he doesn't exactly say this, it's almost as if Kähler's negative appraisal of the 'historical Jesus' proposals reflect, for him, a less than fully positive assessment of the value of the biblical data such proposals were (kind of) focused on.³⁹

This is problematic all on its own, but it also doesn't follow from what Kähler rightly says about the Gospel accounts being written from the vantage point of post-resurrection faith. If the historical details of the earthly Jesus and his activities and teachings are not vital to the cause of faith, why is that material there if Kähler believes the Gospel writers had already sifted out everything immaterial to the cause of faith?⁴⁰ And why did the Gospel writers present this material through the lens of post-resurrection faith if it has little organic significance to a post-resurrection outlook of Christ that fueled the faith-filled apostolic preaching? Kähler can argue the raw uninterpreted history is largely inaccessible, thus making the data largely unimportant and attempts to discover it a 'blind alley'. But the interpretation of the significance of the historical details through the lens of faith by the Gospel writers would obviously be impossible if the historical details themselves didn't exist or didn't happen.⁴¹ It's far more solid to say the Gospel writers thought the historical details about the earthly Jesus were an integral part of the dogmatic Christ of faith; that the earthly Jesus and all

³⁸ I am mindful of what I said earlier that Kähler's book needs to be seen in context. I happen to think Kähler's biggest concern was the use of the historical-critical method to drive scholarly speculation about the historical details of Jesus' earthly life and claim that this is what mattered about Jesus. (e.g.: Ibid, 50-55) But in my view, in rightly combatting this movement, Kähler also gives repeated hints that the historical details themselves are not significant to the cause of faith. (e.g.: Ibid, 60-61) Admittedly, Kähler is rather murky on this point, since there is material in the book that seems to lend some significance to Jesus' earthly activities. But if this is the case, it then demonstrates the point made earlier that Kähler's construct is something he's inconsistently forcing onto the Bible, rather than something consistently extracted from it.

³⁹ Kähler might protest that when properly read through the lens of faith (which the Jesus biographers stripped out of their quest in order to get behind the texts), the value of the pre-Passion material is maintained. (e.g.: Ibid, 81) This would uphold his view that the dogmatic significance of Jesus is what the authors cared about. But I'm not sure that automatically means the material has no intrinsic value on its own if faith isn't supplying its significance. It seems to me that God's sovereign purposes have obvious relevance here when discussing 'significance'.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 94.

⁴¹ The alternative, of course, is to embrace total skepticism and assert that all New Testament faith content (however that is defined) is entirely unmoored from and unconnected to kinetic events. This would be ideological skepticism, not evidential. Even Huston Smith would object to it, "Christianity is basically a historical religion. That is to say, it is founded not on abstract principles but in concrete events, actual historical happenings." See his *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 317.

he said and did was religiously and dogmatically significant. The 'raw material' matters along with how that raw material is presented theologically in the Gospels. This grid is what truly gets us to a place of faith in the Christ of the whole Bible because no wedge then exists between the two concepts of Jesus or between dogmatics and history.

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