

Martin Kähler and the 'Historical Jesus'

By [Jason Foster](#)

What is worse? Not knowing, or not knowing how to know?

It is often remarked today that the Enlightenment-inspired era of theological liberalism¹ has run its course and should mostly be treated as a unique period of biblical studies.² While this is undoubtedly true in some respects, the impact of this period on theological method and formulation has hardly been time-capsuled. Much of what emerged theologically in 20th century Form and Redaction critical studies, as well as 20th and 21st century Narrative and Ideological criticism, has either furthered or otherwise reacted to the era in which theological liberalism reigned. Accordingly, it would perhaps be edifying that an appraisal be made from an evangelical perspective of one of the more theologically peculiar figures of this peculiar time, Martin Kähler. In particular, Kähler's view of the 'historical Jesus' will be our focus.

While widely observed that Kähler's writings did not exert a sizeable influence in his own era,³ the passage of time since his death in 1912 witnessed a gradual rise in attention paid to his program by both evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. Today, Kähler is seen as an important transitional figure that signaled, if not hastened, the 'end' of the so-called quest of the historical Jesus,⁴ while inspiring the *kerygma*-based theologies of Barth and Bultmann (and Tillich) that

¹ As will become clear, both terminology and definitions of technical terms are of vital importance in sifting through the theological programs built by scholars of all stripes. Accordingly, 'theological liberalism', as used here, refers to the mostly 19th century Life of Jesus movement that attempted to write biographies of Jesus primarily from the Gospel accounts, the Synoptic Gospels in particular. Kümmel's summation of putting the Gospel of John off to the side is typical. See his *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 22-23.

² In his *The Making of Modern German Christology: 1750-1990*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994), 9, Alister McGrath remarks, "The present volume...documents what is, in effect, a major single chapter in modern theology, which is now coming to its natural close."

³ There's a risk of overcooking this observation based on Schweitzer's omission of Kähler in his iconic *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, originally published in 1906. But Kähler was not ignored in his own time. Beyschlag, Otto Ritschl, Wobbermin, Kattenbusch and Troeltsch all engaged with Kähler. Kähler's debate with Herrmann on the ground and content of faith was lively. His views were also interacted with by evangelicals of his era like Warfield and especially Bavinck.

⁴ As students of this movement are well aware, the ending of the original quest did not actually end the pursuit of trying to find the 'historical Jesus' (to be defined shortly). Käsemann and others renewed the quest in the 1950s, and the self-celebrated Jesus Seminar tried again late in the 20th century. Contrary to the Hegelian 'inevitable progress' strand of scholarship, there are no 'dead horses' in theology that we seem to move completely beyond.

reigned over biblical scholarship for most of the 20th century. Kähler's influence continues to be felt today, which warrants this appraisal.

At the outset, the limitations of my critique should be acknowledged. Kähler was a rather prolific writer. Unfortunately, many of his works remain untranslated into English. This limits my appraisal in ways the reader should take into account when assessing the accuracy and especially completeness of this article. My presentation is based primarily on what many regard as Kähler's most influential work, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, originally published in German in 1892. It is in this work that Kähler's melding of Christology and Bibliology has most strongly been felt, and it is also where his most prominent critique of the 'historical Jesus' pursuit of theological liberalism can be found.

Kähler in Historical Context

Before proceeding to the specifics of Kähler's approach, we should summarize the milieu of theological liberalism he found himself in. Kähler was focused on interacting with, and ultimately combatting, what eventually became known as the quest of the 'historical Jesus'. Basing their approaches primarily on the constructs of Lessing/Kant and/or Hegel, and operating with the Enlightenment imperatives of the supremacy of human reason and the denial of supernatural acts in history,⁵ non-evangelical scholars, especially in Germany,⁶ attempted to find a 'historical Jesus' that was allegedly behind and underneath the Gospel accounts. Rejecting 'dogma' as a later accretion forced onto the original Jesus tradition by the Gospel authors, scholars attempted to identify and isolate the real Jesus of history from the later and supposedly unhistorical theological, ecclesiastical, and faith-motivated interests that the Gospel writers intermeshed into their accounts of Jesus. Thus, the 'historical Jesus' of this period was the Jesus constructed by modern theologians of the time.⁷ This is what Kähler

⁵ For a compact summary of Enlightenment assumptions and their impact on theological analysis and acceptability framework, see McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 214-226.

⁶ I mention this because the German *Aufklärung* differed in crucial ways from the mainline European Enlightenment, particularly in its struggle with natural law vs. particularist historicism that fueled the explosion of biblical scholarship in Germany during this period. For a very readable overview of the rise of 18th and 19th century German historicism, the crucial role played by Herder, its multiple streams of often competing underpinnings to history, and its nominalist-fueled nationalism that helped stimulate the impulse for 20th century war, see Davaney, *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 9-65.

⁷ Jesus biographies of the period ran the gamut from Jesus as God-consciousness (Schleiermacher), to Jesus the ethical teacher (A. Ritschl), to Jesus the theocratic hope (Strauss), to Jesus the embodiment of Hegel's universal moral Idea (Baur), to Jesus the apocalyptic preacher (Weiss), to Jesus the mistaken Messiah (Schweitzer), to Jesus the fictional person who didn't even exist in history (Bauer).

means by the 'historical Jesus' in the title of his book.⁸ It was the attempt to find the real Jesus of history by separating the 'kernels' of history about Jesus that can allegedly be found in the Gospels from the 'husk' of theological baggage presented in the Gospels that supposedly overlay, obscure, and distort the history.⁹

Important to this pursuit of the historical Jesus was the use of what became the 'historical-critical method', which was composed of a suite of analytical criterion applied to the Bible and theological creeds to supposedly get to the facts about Jesus. Treating historical study as a science¹⁰ subject to methods of investigation just like the physical sciences, albeit with *sui generis* rules,¹¹ these analytical tools were informed by Enlightenment-inspired imperatives which insisted that the Bible not be granted intrinsic authority that would put Scripture out of reach of critical examination. Instead, through critical study, the Bible should be read like any other book and made to comply with the modernist *weltanschauung*.¹² The analytical tools of the historical-critical method tended to fall into categories of analogy, correlation, and methodological and even Pyrrhonic doubt. The embrace of these tools led to a variety of scholarly proposals about who the historical Jesus was, but within an overall framework of what was plausible and acceptable to modern ears. Many liberal theologians of this period claimed to be sympathetic to Christianity and considered themselves to be Christian. They regarded their work as an attempt to reconcile an outdated premodern Christian faith to the modern world,¹³ so as to maintain Christianity's relevance and uphold Jesus as a legitimate option for modern people to still embrace.

⁸ For clarity, similar to Kähler, I will be using 'historical Jesus', 'life of Jesus', and 'Jesus biography' interchangeably throughout this article.

⁹ The 'kernel' vs 'husk' imagery is obviously drawn from Harnack's *What is Christianity?*. I am using the imagery a bit differently than Harnack did, though not inconsistently with him.

¹⁰ Historiography was not the only discipline that was attempted to be patterned off science during this era. Theology was as well. A magisterial example of this was Hodge's 3 volume *Systematic Theology*, originally published in 1871. Hodge led off his opus with an extended and even clinical discourse on how theology should be conducted as a science.

¹¹ Although, within the historicist movement, even this was debated (wrongly, in my view).

¹² For example, borrowing from Ranke and Droysen, the Bible was subjected to a suite of questions regarding authenticity, such as: Is the text original or has it been altered over the years? How does the text compare with other texts written during the same era? Has the author borrowed from others or is it truly original and/or the result of first-hand testimony? What political or religious beliefs did the author hold that may slant the document's contents? Obviously, the answers to such questions can easily (inevitably?) be shaped by the presuppositions and prior belief commitments of the inquirer. Subjectivism was thus not eliminated despite the stress on 'science'.

¹³ For example, Strauss's 'myth' proposal in his *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, published in 1835, set a trajectory that ripped through biblical scholarship like a roaring freight train. Strauss contended that the supernatural 'myths' and 'legends' contained in the Bible, though unhistorical, nonetheless accurately reflected how the primitive people of that time thought about and saw the world. This fueled all subsequent attempts by theological liberalism to 'update', 'revise' and 'cleanse' the Christian faith of such supposedly antiquated and unscientific notions.

Indeed, the rise of the emphasis on history in Germany that penetrated many fields of study, including theology, arguably gave the theological liberal program its legs. German historicism was quite diverse.¹⁴ It created a very uneasy relationship between stressing the particulars of history as determinative of things as they really were/are, while mostly rejecting general laws of history as forced abstractions that obscure reality.¹⁵ But then in contra, scholars often also made Idealist appeals to universal categories like God, Spirit or Idea as an organizing purpose for history that warded off relativism.¹⁶ In the field of theology, this resulted in a compulsion to find the historical facts about Jesus to build a historical picture of Jesus as he really was that would accentuate his unique religious personality and fit within and uphold God's (placebic) control of history while avoiding a chaotic 'anarchy of values' that comes with historical relativism. As we'll see, Kähler saw these attempts to find a truce between theology and history as highly unstable and insufficient for faith.¹⁷

The rise and dominance of German historicism and its oscillating and even protean tendencies¹⁸ had fertilized German theology for over a century before Kähler's most important publication.¹⁹ As we proceed with examining Kähler's appraisal of the historical Jesus pursuit, we should say upfront that the issue of history and the related application of the historical-critical method to biblical

¹⁴ Historicism in general, and the German version in particular, is a sizeable field to traverse and is beyond our focus here. Two representative treatments are Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, Rev. Ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), and Frederick Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2015). Those familiar with these works will notice I tend to side with Beiser in cases where he and Iggers diverge on key elements of the relevant historicist tradition. That said, Iggers does provide a helpful summary of the morass one will encounter in trying to find a stable definition of 'historicism' (295-298).

¹⁵ A chief goal of historicism was to make history purely horizontal, linking all reality within the cause and effect of history itself. Appeals to vertical concepts outside of history, such as God, to provide purpose, trajectory and timeless values were theoretically banished. But as the rest of the above paragraph indicates, theologians (and historians, ironically), couldn't live with this rule.

¹⁶ For Hegel, the result was a lurch toward determinism. For a helpful flushing out of these diverse streams of thought and how even Ranke, the supposed Father of Historicism (according to Meinecke), exhibited these countervailing tendencies, see Heringer, *Uniting History and Theology* (New York: Fortress Academic, 2018), 9-19.

¹⁷ It should be noted that the historical-critical method itself can ironically be viewed as a deep crisis point for German historicism. The method applies what its practitioners believe are normative criterion of authenticity to judge the historicity of past events. This not only assumes but forces 'universal' ideas (of what counts as historically authentic) onto particular events, in direct opposition to historicism's stated objection to such universal principles erroneously flattening history and not respecting historical epochs on their own terms. In doing so, it reveals the great dilemma of historicism and fails to resolve it: the imposition of potentially artificial concepts onto the data, versus the simple recording of datum absent a view of their larger significance or interconnectedness.

¹⁸ Moser, Herder, Savigny and Humboldt, just to name a few major figures of the German historicist movement, each exhibited sizable shifts, inconsistencies, and outright reversals in their views on history during their careers.

¹⁹ In my view, it is not coincidental that the heyday of German historicism occurred during the same period as the heyday of the Life of Jesus movement.

studies was a chief concern of his, though his appraisal of critical scholarship was a bit nuanced. This nuance greatly informed Kähler's approach in matters of Christology, the Bible, and both the ground and content of faith for the Christian.

Kähler's Burden

As we embark on our study of Kähler, some initial broader strokes are in order. As one reads his *So-called Historical Jesus*,²⁰ it quickly becomes apparent that Kähler was a scholar wrestling with a major burden. As succinctly summarized by Carl Braaten, Kähler sought to address two basic questions:

How can the Bible be a trustworthy and normative document of revelation when historical criticism has shattered our confidence in its historical reliability? And how can Jesus Christ be the authentic basis and content of Christian faith when historical science can never attain to indisputably certain knowledge of the historical Jesus?²¹

Setting aside for the moment the presuppositions fueling each question, Kähler's desire was to find a 'storm-free area' in which authentic faith could thrive,²² invulnerable both to the attacks of historical criticism embraced by theological liberalism, as well as the dogmatic 'certainties' of Protestant orthodoxy, particularly concerning the Bible, that Kähler regarded as most uncertain. Consistent with his strong Lutheranism, Kähler contrasted the faith of Christian believers with the 'works' of scholars, strongly opposing a *de facto* priesthood of 19th century academics creating their own Jesus as the proper object of faith for all.²³ But perhaps the most important Lutheran influence on Kähler for our purposes was the issue of 'certain faith'. While striving for certainty in faith was not unique to Lutheranism, it was a conspicuously dominant stress of Lutheran theology that squarely went back to its founder.²⁴ While a systematic theologian

²⁰ Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10. Kähler himself puts it this way, "How can Jesus Christ be the authentic object of the faith of all Christians if the questions [of] what and who he really was can be established only by ingenious investigation and if it is solely the scholarship of our time which proves itself equal to the task?" (p. 102) See also p. 103.

²² The goal of creating a 'safe space' for religion and faith predated Kähler. Various versions, often at odds with each other, were put forth by, among others, Kant, Schleiermacher, Herrmann and even Lessing. I think it also fair to regard this as the chief aim of Chladenius, whose echoes appear from time to time in Kähler, in my view.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61, 73, 109-110, 136. He also states, in solidarity with the strong Lutheran stress on faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone, that 'authentic Christianity' cannot be mediated by the "midwifery of historical research." (121). In clear dependence on Kähler, Bultmann voiced a nearly identical sentiment over a half century later which had heavily shaped his entire career, "There is no difference between security based on good works and security built on objectifying scholarship." See his *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 84.

²⁴ Martin Luther's desperate search for certainty emerging from his monk-era career has been well chronicled. His later theological writings and sermons are peppered with this concern. For the view that Luther's crisis of uncertainty, which ultimately led to his Reformational solution of

by trade and title, Kähler's ultimate concern was pastoral; the nurturing and protecting of the flock from enticing yet misguided blind alleys.²⁵

How did Kähler attempt to establish a safe harbor for faith? The remainder of this article will analyze his critique of theological liberalism's pursuit of the 'historical Jesus'; a pursuit he regarded as deleterious to faith. In a future article, I hope to explore Kähler's proposal of fusing Christology with Bibliology to arrive at his highly influential 'historic biblical Christ'.

Kähler's Rejection of the 'Historical Jesus'

In the book's introductory remarks, Kähler states his aims plainly: "[T]o criticize and reject the wrong aspects of [theological liberalism's] approach to the life of Jesus and...to establish the validity of an alternative approach."²⁶ He went on to say that he regarded the latter task as the more important of the two. But in retrospect, the former task turned out to be just as important.

Kähler leads off with a bomb. He declares, "[T]he historical Jesus of modern scholars conceals us from the living Christ."²⁷ He decries the arrogance of modern scholars who "paint images with as much lust for novelty and as much self-confidence" as speculative philosophers, and who "think pious thinking can dissect God as the anatomist can dissect a frog."²⁸ He regards the Life of Jesus theologians as each aspiring to be "that fifth evangelist"²⁹ trying to write a fifth Gospel. For Kähler, the competing and contradictory Jesus biographies that had been proposed by theologians of his era made plain that this vector of scholarship was flawed and created a breeding ground of uncertainty not only among scholars themselves, but the laity.³⁰ In short, the 19th century Jesus

Scripture as the rule of faith, was fueled in significant part by his exposure to hardcore nominalism in his educational upbringing, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 101ff.

²⁵ Kähler, 46-47. Here, Kähler uses the 'blind alley' metaphor to describe theological liberalism. But throughout his book, it becomes clear that he regards both liberalism and orthodoxy to be purveyors of false props for faith that need to be rejected.

²⁶ Ibid, 43.

²⁷ Ibid. Italics is Kähler's. The stress on the need for a 'living' faith in the 'living' Christ in contrast to mere historical fact-finding is a recurring theme throughout Kähler's book, and strongly reminiscences the famous statement of Melancthon in his *Loci Communes* (1521): "To know Christ means to know his benefits...For unless you know why Christ put on flesh and was nailed to the cross, what good will it do to know merely the history about him?"

²⁸ Ibid, 48.

²⁹ Ibid, 62. Expounding on Kähler's 'sage observation' here, Richard Hays piles on by asserting that historical Jesus reconstructions are about replacing one hermeneutical structure with another, and that doing so "does not attain some greater degree of objectivity or factual security." See his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 159.

³⁰ Ibid, 73-74. Echoing Kähler, Bauckham, in describing the historical Jesus reconstructions of liberalism, rightly observes, "The result of such work is inevitably not one historical Jesus, but many." See his *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 3. See n.7 above.

biographies produced by theological liberalism were mostly fictional reconstructions made by imaginative scholars, rather than accurate pictures of the actual bona fide Jesus who lived, breathed and walked in 1st century Galilee. The use of the historical-critical method had resulted in the worst kind of irony: the creation of one Jesus hypothesis after another with little connection to actual history, while the bona fide real-life Jesus of history got lost in the process.

How did these scholars get themselves on the wrong track? Kähler loosed a cannonade of interrelated causes:

First, Kähler regarded the field of historiography as just another form of dogmatics, rather than the unbiased presuppositionless objective discipline it claimed to be.³¹ In mounting this line of attack, Kähler plunged into the 'faith and history' debate that the Enlightenment had roiled into open schism. Lessing's 'ugly great ditch' between the 'accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason'³² had crystallized a brewing crisis that the Jesus biographers had, in part, tried to bridge.³³ While Kähler had real issues with Lessing's fuller program, he squarely sided with Lessing that *history can only yield probabilities, not certainties*.³⁴ One reason for this is because history is being written (and re-written) by historians with agendas of their own. That made functional historicism a rather dissembled form of dogma, gaining traction under the cover of objectivity. Citing the 'party pamphlet' approach to history of certain non-theologians, Kähler bemoaned the same contagion in Christology:

Today everyone is on his guard when a dogma is frankly presented as such. But when Christology appears in the form of a 'Life of Jesus', there are not many who will perceive the stage manager behind the scenes, manipulating, according to his own dogmatic script, the fascinating spectacle of a colorful biography.³⁵

³¹ It should be noted that Kähler is painting with too broad a brush here. Droysen, for example, was a major historicist of Kähler's era who broke with Ranke's notions of objectivity in historiography.

³² Lessing's ditch (actually, there were three ditches 'dug' by Lessing) was a way of recasting the 'universals vs particulars' debate that long preceded the Enlightenment and which the Enlightenment ultimately proved unable to overcome. For the view that this vexing problem can be traced back in earnest to the late medieval nominalist revolution, see Gillespie. See especially pp. 280-285 for a good discussion on the Enlightenment 'contradictions' of history we've alluded to above that Gillespie mostly locates in Kant's third antinomy of causation vs. freedom.

³³ At times, Beiser portrays historicism as standing opposed to even the German Enlightenment (e.g., pp. 65-67). There is some warrant for taking this posture in several key respects. One could argue that either knowingly or not, the Jesus biographers were attempting to reconcile these tensions in their Jesus reconstructions. Beiser doesn't explore this in any detail, which in my view, is a regrettable omission.

³⁴ This is why Tillich can sum up Kähler's mission thusly, "[T]he necessity to make the certainty of faith independent of the unavoidable uncertainties [sic] of historical research." Kähler, viii.

³⁵ Ibid, 56.

Quite literally based on the idea that ‘it takes one to know one’, Kähler saw it as his prerogative as a dogmatist to expose the “hidden dogmatist” conducting “allegedly presuppositionless historical research that ceases to do real research and turns instead to a fanciful reshaping of the data.”³⁶

Second, and related to the first, was Kähler’s assessment of the lack of self-awareness coupled with a lack of intellectual modesty that defined the work of scholars. While the combination of such traits among the learned is hardly a groundbreaking observation, Kähler’s exploration of its consequences is. Over a decade before Schweitzer’s famous demolition of theological liberalism’s Jesus biographers, Kähler called attention to what amounted to the self-portraits scholars were painting under the guise of Jesus biography.³⁷ Whether oblivious or by design, scholarly proposals about who the historical Jesus was looked strikingly similar to the scholars themselves, often through their employment of the historical-critical principles of analogy and correlation. Fueled by the Newtonian-influenced view that the universe is a closed system of mechanistic cause and effect, that things are the way they’ve always been, and the doctrine of inevitable progress that whatever is new is automatically better and more sophisticated than what came before,³⁸ the historical Jesus was analogized to the 19th century situation.

This resulted in Jesus biographies that presented Jesus as an enlightened but non-divine human,³⁹ conveniently embodying the views and concerns of the 19th century scholar. The scholar, and their present experience and personal sense of what was plausible, was the final arbiter of what could and could not happen in history. Following Lessing (and Wolff), one should not surrender one’s own judgment by trusting what others who are now long dead claimed happened in the past which has no contemporary analogy.⁴⁰ There was no modern analogy to a divine, supernaturally powerful Jesus. Therefore, such attributes were seen as early church theologizing and were stripped away as part of building a modernist Jesus.

³⁶ Ibid, 56-57. See also p.73. As Warfield put it in his biting critique of the Life of Jesus movement, “[T]he investigator gets out as results only what he puts in as premises.” See his “The Historical Christ” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1950), 21. This article was originally published in 1910, and remains a must-read.

³⁷ Ibid, 57.

³⁸ One should recognize that this list of influences is a brew of contradictions at cross-purposes with each other. Such was the environment of the time; intellectually creative and competitive, but also intellectually chaotic and contradictory. This is arguably why the Jesus biographies of the time were so vulnerable to critique, and why none of them carried any lasting standalone staying power absent major revisional surgery.

³⁹ Ibid, 103.

⁴⁰ Lessing’s famous 18th century era litmus test that continues to find seed today is worth quoting, “How is it to be expected of me that the same inconceivable truths which sixteen to eighteen hundred years ago people believed on the strongest inducement should be believed by me on an infinitely less inducement?” *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 53.

Kähler had no patience for this ‘reading between the lines’ approach to Gospels study, including the principle of analogy that was often its methodological starting point.⁴¹ The various Jesus proposals put forth by scholars were not reliant on evidence, but were the products of unproven presuppositions ingrained in the historical-critical method. Scholars could not historically prove that Jesus was not divine. It was due to their anti-supernatural presuppositions that Jesus’ divinity was ruled out. The principles of analogy and correlation, themselves both based on presuppositions, were used as supports for pre-existing ideological imperatives that scholars brought with them into their quest for the historical Jesus. In seeking an ‘untheologized’ Jesus, the Jesus biographers substituted their own theologized Jesus instead.⁴² In short, the game was rigged; in part, because the rules were rigged.

Kähler focused specifically on the issue of Jesus’ sinlessness. For Kähler, the Bible’s depiction of Jesus creates a stark ‘Either/Or’ choice, either of acknowledging the sinless nature of Jesus (which makes the anthropic principle of analogy useless), or discard the biblical account and consider Jesus to be merely a human, in nature the same as us (and therefore charge Jesus with a catalog of sins).⁴³ For Kähler, the answer was obvious. In getting a true picture of the real Jesus:

We must not think we can...reproduce the general outlines of our own nature but with larger dimensions. The distinction between Jesus Christ and ourselves is not one of degree but of kind...We cannot deal with Jesus merely by removing the blemishes from our own nature...In the depths of our being we are different from him, so different in fact that we could become like him only through a new birth, a new creation.⁴⁴

For Kähler, the resulting hubris that is naturally conjured by a belief that Jesus is merely a better version of us led scholars to aimless curiosity-seeking in their Jesus proposals that had no basis in fact or history. Kähler frequently decries what was then the near obsession with trying to understand the inner thought life and messianic self-awareness of Jesus. The use of psychology to ruminate on pedestrian issues such as “how handsome or homely Jesus was, or about his

⁴¹ As an aside, the principle of analogy was also used to dismiss the miracle accounts recorded in the Gospels. The idea, most popularized by Hume and later Troeltsch, is that there are no miracles today, so there couldn’t have been any miracles in Jesus’ day. For a sustained refutation of Hume as well as the likely existence of contemporary miracles, see Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

⁴² Kähler, 56.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 53. See also p.82. To punctuate the point, Kähler drips with irony in saying the real motivating force driving scholarly Jesus reconstructions “is nothing other than the theologian’s imagination – an imagination that has been shaped and nourished by the analogy of his own life and of human life in general.” (p. 55) One can also see how this sentiment greatly influenced and became dominant in Barth’s theology, particularly the early Barth and his first edition commentary on Romans.

early life at home and at his work”⁴⁵ exposed a field of scholarship that had lost its way and become its own version of a discursive form of scholasticism.⁴⁶ In contrast, Kähler stressed that true scholarship leading to genuine insight is found through modesty.⁴⁷ Instead, the lack of modesty and the Enlightenment supports that had propped it up had resulted in flawed Jesus biographies that at worst were vanity projects.⁴⁸

Third, Kähler believed scholars were misunderstanding the nature and purpose of the Gospels and misusing the historical-critical method, resulting in the wrong method being applied to the wrong sources to arrive at a wrong picture of Jesus. In producing various historical Jesus biographies, scholars were applying the historical-critical method to Gospel documents that, according to Kähler, were not themselves biographies of Jesus.⁴⁹ Instead, the purpose of the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole was to present the preaching that founded the church, and “awaken[s] faith in Jesus through a clear proclamation of his saving activity.”⁵⁰ This is important, because Kähler lays great stress on this assertion and draws broad conclusions from it.

Kähler states his view plainly: “[W]e do not have any sources for a ‘Life of Jesus’ which a historian can accept as reliable and adequate. I repeat: we have no sources for a biography of Jesus of Nazareth which measure up to the standards of contemporary historical science.”⁵¹ To be clear, Kähler is not saying that we can know nothing historical about the real-life Jesus from the Gospels.⁵² What he is asserting is that the Gospel accounts were not designed to furnish 19th century scholars with the grist to erect modernist Jesus biographies using modernist tools

⁴⁵ Ibid, 50. See also pp.58, 70.

⁴⁶ This also gets to a periodic concern voiced by Kähler that the limitations of various disciplines like historiography and psychology were not being taken seriously when brought to bear on biblical studies, resulting in consequential misapplication and confusion. Ibid, 48, 50, 52, 61-63, 67, 70, 73.

⁴⁷ “For the cardinal virtue of genuine historical research is modesty. Modesty is born of knowledge, and he who knows historical facts and sources acquires modesty in knowledge as well as in understanding.” Ibid, 47.

⁴⁸ As Lee Keck famously put it, “The historical Jesus is the historian’s Jesus, not a Kantian *Ding an sich*.” Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 20, 35. But to be fair, Keck himself affirms the value of the ‘historical Jesus’ for preaching, theology and faith (which he is more inclined to equate with ‘trust’) while taking Bultmann, Jeremias, Herrmann and Kähler (to an extent) to task for prejudicing the rules of engagement.

⁴⁹ This is perhaps the appropriate place to address Kähler’s oft-cited statement that “the Gospels [are] passion narratives with extended introductions.” (Kähler, 80) In my view, this comment is irresponsibly overquoted by scholars of all stripes because such sourcing often ignores the context. Kähler said this as part of a specific criticism of the Jesus biographers. Whereas all four Gospels place great emphasis, not to mention considerable ink, on the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, the Jesus biographers reversed both, deemphasizing the significance of the Passion and spilling disproportionate ink elsewhere. To Kähler, this was yet another example of scholars firing their arrows in the wrong direction and minimizing the ‘work’ of Jesus in favor of a modernist constructed person of Jesus.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 94, 127-136.

⁵¹ Ibid, 48. See also pp.55, 127.

⁵² Ibid, 54, 124.

of examination. He leveled his most immediate criticisms at the various attempts of the Jesus biographers to erect elaborate proposals about Jesus' pre-ministry years in which the Gospels record virtually nothing,⁵³ as well as the development of Jesus' inner thought life and messianic self-awareness, which Kähler emphatically denied the Gospels speak of in any way.⁵⁴ But more universally, Kähler regarded the entire enterprise as a kind of methodological anachronism, saying, "From these fragments [about Jesus from the Gospel sources, the critic] is called upon to conjure up a new shape if his task is to compose, according to modern requirements, a biography of this figure who looms up out of the mist."⁵⁵ For Kähler, trying to extract a biography of Jesus from the non-biographical Gospel accounts is a taxonomical mismatch that subjectivizes and speculates about Jesus as a substitute for actual data.

Fourth and finally, and strongly related to the third, is the element of faith that scholars do not account for in their Jesus reconstructions. For Kähler, at root, the Gospels are faith documents more than historical documents. They were written not by "impartial observers who have been alerted to his presence, but, rather, the *testimonies* and *confessions* of believers in Christ."⁵⁶ From the standpoint of history, the primary importance of the Gospels is showing the real impact the real Jesus had on real people, particularly his disciples and the Gospel writers themselves.⁵⁷ Accordingly, the Gospel accounts of Jesus are concerned with recording his "religious significance"⁵⁸ instead of a meticulous recounting of historical details that are at best tangential to matters of faith.⁵⁹ For Kähler, "[T]he Scriptures have forgotten everything that was peripheral to and insignificant for the preaching which establishes faith."⁶⁰ Faith depends on the *kerygma*⁶¹ about Jesus and his salvific work, rather than the specifics of history that 19th century

⁵³ Ibid, 47, 55, 94. The birth narratives and the Luke 2 account of Jesus at the Temple when he was a boy are the extent of the Gospel material devoted to Jesus' pre-ministry life and activities.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 50-55. As evangelical readers are aware, Geerhardus Vos had plenty to say about this issue, and his treatment is still top drawer. See his *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1926; Reissued 2002), as well as his "Modern Dislike of the Messianic Consciousness in Jesus," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 324-332. This article was originally written in 1916.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 49.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 92. On this specific point (but notably not on others), Kähler predated and previews Wrede's 1901 work on the Gospel of Mark that is now often seen as the death blow to the original historical Jesus quest.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 81, 92.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 93. See also p.89 where Kähler characterizes Jesus' "dogmatic significance" as "the main thing" the authorial 'witnesses' cared about.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 94. Kähler refers to material that was simply (merely) historical as "chaff" that was sifted out by the Gospel authors.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *Kerygma* is a notoriously elastic word that scholars often define on their own terms. One succinct place to get a summary picture of this is Martin and Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 626-629. Kähler does not explicitly define what he means by *kerygma*, but his definition appears to be something like the preaching of the Good News of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

scholars crave.⁶² The Gospels are about advancing faith by presenting Jesus through the lens of faith. That is not the aim of the historian. History can only yield probabilities. Therefore, it cannot provide the invulnerable ground for faith that Kähler seeks.⁶³ The chasm in purpose and resultant scholarly methods of ascertaining what is important are stark.⁶⁴

In the end, the various reconstructions of the Jesus biographers all shared the fatal deficiency of producing a picture of Jesus that bore little resemblance to the significant historic figure that he clearly was (and is). For Kähler, a *Christusbild* (picture of Jesus) that neither explains nor even fully acknowledges the historical fact of his historic significance is, by definition, an inaccurate flawed portrait of Jesus that is, in part, located in the erroneous approach of stripping the cause and result of faith from the quest. For Kähler, faith appears to be both the presupposition and confirmation of a proper comprehension of theological knowledge.⁶⁵ Far from being something to apologize for, the influence of post-resurrection faith is essential in correctly grasping the reality of the real Jesus:

I must register my conviction that we can only understand the Christ who claims for himself the seat at the right hand of God (Mark 14:62) if we follow the lead of our Gospels and interpret his earthly life from the standpoint of its fulfillment. What people piece together from the Gospels in some other way...bears little relation to the Christ before whom generations have humbled themselves.⁶⁶

The Jesus biographers attempted to find a Jesus unwrapped in the cloak of faith. They seemed to believe that the eyes of faith through which the Gospel writers wrote their accounts distorted the true Jesus. But for Kähler, the opposite was the case. Only through the eyes of faith could the real Jesus rightly be seen and comprehended.⁶⁷ Moreover, the faith issue was perhaps the most severe methodological failure of the historical Jesus project. Kähler saw it as a

⁶² Kähler, 95. As an aside, just as Kähler was ahead of Schweitzer in his critique of theological liberalism, it can be argued that Shedd was ahead of Kähler in contrasting 'historical faith' with 'saving faith', and the insufficiency of the former. See his *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), 135-137 (originally published in 1888).

⁶³ "This is precisely what is wholly intolerable for me...I cannot find sure footing in probabilities or in a shifting mass of details the reliability of which is constantly changing." Ibid, 111.

⁶⁴ "The historical approach is no longer concerned with safeguarding and interpreting a solid core of the content of faith." Ibid, 103.

⁶⁵ This is Bavinck's take on Kähler's view of the faith-knowledge relationship. See his *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, Vol. One (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 530-1. This volume was first published in 1895.

⁶⁶ Kähler, 45. See also p.66. Put another way, one is reminded of Archbishop William Temple's famous quip: "Why anyone should have been troubled to crucify the Christ of Liberal Protestantism has always been a mystery."

⁶⁷ The Parable of the Sower in the Synoptics is a particularly dramatic example of Jesus teaching this concept, albeit the emphasis is on hearing rather than seeing (cf. Rom. 10.17).

fundamental impossibility to extract a 'faith-neutral' Jesus from Gospels that were faith documents through and through.⁶⁸ It was a hopeless undertaking.

Conclusion

Kähler's critique of theological liberalism and its historical Jesus proposals was cutting edge at the time the book was published and is still relevant today. He was not the only voice raising the concerns he did. But his exposing of the dogmatic biases that scholars were operating with was highly effective in turning the tables on those who supposedly rejected dogma. His critique remains valid today given the open rejection of consistency of thought (and of praxis) that now woefully dominates the Academy. Similar to much study today, the brightest lights of theological liberalism dated themselves by choosing self-subjugation to larger cultural intellectual moods like historicism and Enlightenment. Such reliance on passing fancies not only harkens to the lament of Ecclesiastes 1, but it also resulted in bringing the temple down on their own heads.⁶⁹ What follows are a few takeaways for consideration:

First, Kähler's insistence on proper genre recognition as essential for proper use and interpretation of the Gospels is categorically correct in principle, and still needs to be heeded today far more than it is. That said, Kähler's assertion that the Gospels are neither biographies of Jesus nor provide sufficient material for a biographical portrait of Jesus is incorrect. On this, Kähler has been lapped by subsequent scholarship. The Gospels most decidedly fit within the genre of Greco-Roman biography.⁷⁰ In my view, this provides an important perspective not only on the Gospel material itself, but also the intent of the authors to communicate a wider field of truth to their audience than Kähler allows. It also, in my view, provides a more optimistic potential of a faith and history harmonization than Kähler believed was possible. I say this even while mostly agreeing with Kähler's rejection of the historical Jesus project of his era, particularly its operating premises and how it was manifested by the Jesus biographers, despite their occasional insights.

As we've also seen, the historical-critical method's principle of analogy comes in for harsh criticism by Kähler. In my view, Kähler's negative view of analogy is quite justified at least as it relates to how it was being deployed by the Jesus

⁶⁸ Ladd summarizes Kähler on this point thusly, "[The Gospels] are kerygma, not 'history'; and it is impossible to get behind the kerygma." See his *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 8.

⁶⁹ Kähler, 109.

⁷⁰ There has truly been a sea-change on this issue in the last 30 years among scholars. Burrige and Byrskog were among those who led the way, and now evangelical and non-evangelical scholars alike have largely normed on what should have been the norm all along - the Gospels squarely fit within the genre of biography. For more on this, and what it means and doesn't mean, see my "Did the Author of the Fourth Gospel Intend to Write History?" *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 11, no. 25 (June 21-27, 2009).

biographers. The use of the principle of analogy to bring Jesus down to size and reduce him to merely an extraordinary human being was an inappropriate application of the principle that Kähler rightly rejected as producing a highly distorted *christusbild* that was unsupported by the sources. However, this does not mean that analogy has no constructive use in Jesus studies. The principle of analogy cuts both ways, for when fairly applied, it emphatically recognizes the unique, *sui generis* nature of the real Jesus. When the Jesus of the Gospels is examined through the lens of analogy, the inescapable conclusion is that Jesus is one of a kind.⁷¹ His uniqueness is not just in comparison to humanity, but also when compared to the deities and preeminent religious figures of other religions, contra hints in the later Troeltsch. The completely unique nature of Jesus has always been the orthodox position, even prior to Chalcedon.⁷² The principle of analogy rightly yields this conclusion when it is applied in a way that neither artificially forces homogeneity nor compares different categories as if they are not different. Therefore, while Kähler's rejection of the way in which analogy was being used in his day was decidedly correct, and while Kähler also stressed the difference between Jesus and us,⁷³ he did not expressly do so via a more balanced and less facile use of the principle of analogy. This is not necessarily a mark against Kähler, but it does render his treatment of analogy a bit imbalanced, which is notable given the stress he places on it.

This matters in current debates within evangelicalism, among scholars who know Kähler well, about the level of acceptance that should be given to the historical-critical method in Jesus scholarship.⁷⁴ It is right to insist, in my view, that scholars themselves should be subjected to criteria akin to the historical-critical method to ensure that they themselves are not naively and uncritically embracing criticism.⁷⁵ The limitations of historical-critical inquiry are far greater than its practitioners often want to realize. This creates an irresponsible overconfidence in what critical inquiry can accomplish, particularly when applied to ancient history when the available record of data and sources is often sparse and fragmented. While it is true that the complete Gospels and the rather extensive manuscript encyclopedia provide extraordinary visibility into the person and work of Jesus, it should not be forgotten that even these accounts do not claim to present the entire life of Jesus nor all that he did (John 21.25). Much of the folly rightly highlighted by Kähler that marked the quest of the historical Jesus

⁷¹ Even Wrede reached something approximating this conclusion. That his response was to road-test an elaborate 'messianic secret' theory devoid of evidence and full of eisegesis to try and escape the ramifications of the initial truth he (sort of) found was unfortunate. Much the same could also be said of Schweitzer.

⁷² I do not deny the many Christological controversies that predated Chalcedon. I simply affirm that Chalcedon accurately summarizes what the first century New Testament presents regarding the nature of Jesus the Person. See also *WCF VIII.2*.

⁷³ See n.44.

⁷⁴ See especially Bock and Komoszewski (eds), *Jesus, Skepticism & the Problem of History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019). See also Heringer. For a recent and more popular-level treatment of history and how to analyze it, see Poythress, *Redeeming our Thinking about History* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022).

⁷⁵ Kähler, 110.

occurred because critical examination of the Gospels was erroneously conflated with history itself. Method became an end unto itself. Kähler's critique provided a needed corrective to this warping, and it is supremely relevant to us as we find ourselves in an era where questions of truth are being supplanted by questions of procedure.

Next, Kähler's distrust of history as comprehensively discoverable in the case of Jesus, as well as its unstable basis for faith, contributed to a permanent wound to the scholarly historical Jesus project that continues to this day. As stated above, I tend to be more optimistic about the discoverability and value of history than Kähler. This is why I tend to dissent from Kähler in affirming that I think historical events do contribute to the content of faith. But I agree with Kähler that Jesus, not history, is the *basis* for faith. That said, this Jesus is not an empty shell devoid of content and form. Nor can he be divorced from his earthly words or actions, both of which occurred in time and space.⁷⁶ The Bible recognizes neither Lessing's ditch, nor Kähler's nearly dualistic exaltation of faith and degradation of history.⁷⁷ In the Bible, the who, what, where and when of history helps explain the why of theology, and vice versa. They are complementary, not oppositional.⁷⁸ But for those stuck in the contradictions of historicism, the obsession with history as the near exclusive theater of all reality, devastatingly combined with history's lack of certainty and even its lack of accessibility due to the (incorrect) use of the historical-critical method to dismantle historical sources and founding documents, has left its loyal adherents lost at sea, particularly in mainline Protestantism.⁷⁹ In the end, the questions raised by theological liberalism have been far more compelling than the answers they have offered.

Lastly, Kähler's positive affirmation of post-resurrection faith as a proper vantage point for the Gospel writers to present a reliable picture of Jesus was a hard and necessary break from the Jesus biographers. In doing this, Kähler was, of course, echoing the creedal statement of faith in 1 Corinthians 15. The Gospel

⁷⁶ In the foreword to the well-regarded Sources of Early Christian Thought series, William Rusch makes this contribution, "Christianity has always been attentive to historical fact. Its motivation and focus have been, and continue to be, the span of life of one historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, seen to be a unique historical act of God's self-communication. The New Testament declares that this Jesus placed himself within the context of the history of the people of Israel and perceived himself as the culmination of the revelation of the God of Israel, ushering into history a new chapter. The first followers of Jesus and their succeeding generations saw themselves a part of this new history. Far more than a collection of teachings or a timeless philosophy, Christianity has been a movement in, and of, history, acknowledging its historical condition and not attempting to escape it."

⁷⁷ "Christian faith and a history of Jesus repel each other like oil and water..." Kähler, 74.

⁷⁸ The best succinct critique of the lopsided approaches of both theological liberalism and the 'bare kerygma' emphasis of the Crisis theologians (of which Kähler is often lumped in with) continues to be Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1981). See in particular pp. 77-81. As an aside, a treatment of Christian apologetics that does not interact with Moule has instantly relegated itself to lesser status.

⁷⁹ Edgar Krentz's comment from 1975 is perhaps even more correct today, "The results of critical scholarship have made the Bible a strange, unused, and even silent book." See his *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 3.

accounts openly portray the faith of the disciples during Jesus' earthly life as rather tenuous, not to mention incomplete and often even inaccurate. The resurrection not only fortified their faith, but dramatically provided a demonstrated context that made Jesus' earthly words and actions comprehensible and rightly understood by the disciples where confusion and offense had previously reigned.⁸⁰ So while it is true that the Gospel writers wrote their presentations of Jesus possessing a post-resurrection faith, this should be seen as a correct rounding out of perspective rather than a stain on their accuracy.⁸¹ If one disputes this, I would simply ask: Since when has proper reflection and the incorporation of additional relevant data been the enemy of correctly interpreting the full data set?⁸² Should we not instead postulate that the lack of such things is a much greater threat to proper understanding? Moreover, this approach remains hermeneutically sound today for those of us who embrace the Anselmian dictum of faith seeking understanding.⁸³

But to be fair, it was precisely at this point that Herrmann, and later Pannenberg, sharply criticized Kähler.⁸⁴ By so devaluing history and distrusting its ability to provide any meaningful verification of who Jesus was as well as the accuracy of the New Testament witness, Herrmann and Pannenberg accused Kähler of essentially having faith in the disciples' faith. For Pannenberg in particular, *kerygma* alone was no more a stable basis for faith than the vicissitudes of historical research were for Kähler. For Pannenberg, the proclamation about Jesus must be grounded in something external to the proclamation that is verifiable and trustworthy in order to know that our faith is well placed. While

⁸⁰ This also helps moderate the all-too-common depiction of the disciples as hapless dullards. Yes, they often misunderstood what Jesus said and did. But wouldn't we as well if we were in the presence of Jesus the stranger (Mt 25.35-43) whom the world did not recognize (John 1.10), absent the event of the resurrection crystallizing our faith and providing context to his purpose, teaching, work, and being? Wouldn't we also tend to default to bewilderment instead of belief in the face of the unprecedented, like the disciples often did?

⁸¹ This is why the resurrection must be defended at all costs. If the resurrection didn't actually happen, or was fundamentally different than what the disciples understood it to be, the nightmare scenario of 1 Corinthians 15 is actually made worse by the Gospel writers utilizing an erroneous grid to build their Gospel accounts. Then, nothing is certain about Jesus, and everything is in doubt. This, whether stated or not, was and is the starting point for theological liberalism and its spiritual offspring. It is noteworthy that Kähler, while appearing to believe in the resurrection as traditionally understood, is quite low-key in his affirmation. He appears to believe it by logical deduction (Faith is the main thing; The resurrection is highlighted as a linchpin of faith; Therefore, the resurrection must have happened), rather than plainly stating that it was a definitive event in history.

⁸² If one were to counter that this is exactly what theological liberalism embraced, I would disagree. Theological liberalism embraced new *techniques* of analysis (based mostly on worldview imperatives) far more than incorporating new data itself to reach the unorthodox conclusions it did. There's a big difference between the two.

⁸³ In particular, see Anselm's *Proslogian*, Chapter 2. For a good brief survey of Anselm's sometimes challenging writings that touch on this epistemological ordering, see Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015), 129-134.

⁸⁴ See Pannenberg, *Jesus-God and Man*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 22-27.

hardly a disciple of Pannenberg, I largely agree with this basic point. It is certainly one reason why I part company with Kähler on the value of history.

That said, while I agree that our faith should not be placed in the faith of the disciples, there's no evidential reason to doubt the testimony of the apostolic witness. Our faith is in Jesus. But that faith, in my view, should be buttressed by the available external evidence we have,⁸⁵ the reliability of the Bible's testimony about Jesus, and our own inner experience of God through prayer and the work of the Spirit. A full orbed faith better informs the trustworthiness of our faith and strengthens its sturdiness and power in our lives. Many modern theologians, including Kähler and Pannenberg, overemphasize one favored aspect and underemphasize the rest. While they have reasons, even legitimate reasons, for doing this, it highlights the need for the kind of challenging, holistic faith Jesus calls us to embrace.⁸⁶

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⁸⁵ Two prominent facts of history that are relevant here are the empty tomb and the rise and existence of the Christian church. Lots of assorted theories have been proffered to try and explain the two. But the orthodox Christian account is far and away the best explanation of these historical realities. On this, see Moule, among others.

⁸⁶ Mark 12.30