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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Adolf Schlatter on recasting theological anthropology

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Abstract

Adolf Schlatter claims that the Protestant Reformation bequeathed us a lopsided understanding of human personhood. In his view, the Reformers offered a limited definition of sin that neglected our creatureliness, and a passive understanding of grace that rendered the believer inactive. Seeking to correct what he considers misrepresentations of religious and christological anthropology in (post-)Reformation theology, Schlatter suggests a view of sin that takes our humanity as God's creatures seriously, and he puts forward a view of grace that leads to an organic transformation of our volition and leaves our God-given creatureliness intact. Schlatter's active-volitional understanding of divine grace offers much by way of promise as we rediscover our responsibilities as God's active agents in a fallen world.

Keywords: ethics; grace; Reformation; Adolf Schlatter; sin; theological anthropology

Swiss theologian Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) claims that the Protestant Reformation went too far in some respects but not far enough in others.[1] Schlatter, of course, acknowledges that the Reformation offered significant course correction in terms of theology and church life. Yet he feels that, with a view to theological anthropology, and in particular regarding the doctrine of sin, the Reformers and their successors went a little too far. What Schlatter considers their narrow definition of total depravity resulted in a distorted understanding of human personhood and rendered the human being rather passive. The doctrine of grace, on the other hand, had not been sufficiently developed during the Reformation, at least not to the extent that Schlatter would have preferred. Reformation and post-Reformation theology offer only a limited perspective on grace, Schlatter claims, since grace is portrayed merely as calming the sinner's heart and mind, which led to a passive church and a 'dull piety' (*träge Frömmigkeit*).[2] To Schlatter's dismay, the activating elements of divine grace were often overlooked, and this limited understanding of grace ultimately led to a 'separation of the gospel into

[1]This essay is a modified version of a paper originally presented at the Theology Connect Conference in Sydney, Australia, 9 July 2018.

[2]'Wer das Evangelium nur als die Anbietung der Rechtfertigung faßt, verleitet uns zu jener trägen Frömmigkeit, die nicht denken, nicht lieben, nicht handeln mag, sondern bloß in ihrem Glauben selig sein will und ihn dadurch verliert.' Adolf Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1923), pp. 468–9 (unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own).

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"dogmatics" and "ethics"'.[3] Schlatter dedicated his career toward highlighting the active effects of divine grace, seeking to unite the disciplines of dogmatics and ethics, which he considered estranged.[4] Nothing less than a 'completion of the Reformation' (*Vollendung der Reformation*) was his ambitious goal.[5]

While Schlatter's reputation as a skilled New Testament theologian is unwavering, the fact that he also penned a Christian dogmatics (*Das christliche Dogma*, 1911/1923) and ethics (*Die christliche Ethik*, 1914/1929) has faded somewhat into the background.[6] In this essay I introduce Adolf Schlatter as a scholar who pursued theology with an 'impetus toward the whole' (*Richtung auf das Ganze*),[7] taking the whole endeavour of the theological enterprise seriously, from reading and understanding the New Testament documents, to dogmatics and ethics. More specifically, I intend to focus on Schlatter's critique of the (post-)Reformation understanding of theological anthropology, in particular with a view to the doctrines of sin and grace and his creative reinterpretation of these doctrines. We will proceed according to the following road map: First, we turn to Schlatter's goal of correcting central aspects of the doctrine of sin, especially the Reformed teaching on total depravity. In a second step, we explore his imaginative recasting of the doctrine of grace, which has concrete implications for our vocation as God's active agents in this world. The first part is more an exercise in what Schlatter calls religious anthropology, whereas the focus of the conversation in the second part moves more toward christological anthropology,[8] as it explicitly addresses the believer who enjoys 'union with Christ' (*Anschluss an Christus*).[9]

Schlatter on sin: Recasting religious anthropology

Questions of anthropology take up considerable space in Schlatter's theological opus.[10] He considers 'religious anthropology [to play] a key part in every doctrine of God (*religiöse Anthropologie ein Hauptstück in jeder Gotteslehre*)'.[11] It is not surprising then, to note that what he calls religious anthropology covers the largest part of his

[3]'Zerspaltung des Evangeliums in "Dogmatik" und "Ethik"': Adolf Schlatter, 'Der Dienst des Christen in der älteren Dogmatik', *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 1/1 (1897), p. 56.

[4]See Werner Neuer, *Der Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter: Eine Untersuchung zur Grundlegung christlicher Ethik* (Giessen: Brunnen, 1986).

[5]Adolf Schlatter, 'J. T. Becks theologische Arbeit', *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 8/4 (1904), pp. 34, 41–2; Schlatter, *Rückblick auf meine [seine] Lebensarbeit* (Gütersloh 1952), ed. Theodor Schlatter, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1977), pp. 67, 107.

[6]Adolf Schlatter, *Die christliche Ethik* (Stuttgart: Calw, 1914), 3rd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1929). For the context see Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996), pp. 498–508.

[7]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, 13, 19.

[8]This is because one can understand true humanity only in light of Jesus Christ's person and work. For some helpful definitions of christological anthropology, see Marc Cortez, *Christological Anthropology: In Historical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), pp. 218–26.

[9]*Anschluss* (or *Anschluß*) *an Christus* is a key concept in Schlatter's work; it refers to one's union, connection and allegiance with Jesus Christ. Since the National Socialists' appropriation of the term, it unfortunately carries a negative connotation.

[10]Albert Bailer offers an elaborate exposition of Schlatter's attempt at correcting the Reformation doctrine of sin in his *Das systematische Prinzip in der Theologie Adolf Schlatters* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1968), pp. 142–61. Bailer has shaped my thinking considerably and this section is informed by his work.

[11]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 15.

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'Christian dogmatics', almost half of the entire work (259 out of 624 pages).[12] Religious anthropology, in Schlatter's mind, explores the condition of the human being as God's work. The reason as to why Schlatter investigates this theme at great length lies in his insistence on the theological significance of the creaturely condition and thus the dignity of the human being. He also intends to offer an alternative to what he considered a missing appreciation of nature and an over-emphasis on God's transcendence in contemporary theology (one thinks of his disagreement with his student Karl Barth in this respect).[13]

Under the heading 'Sin and God's Judgement' (*Die Sünde und Gottes Gericht*), Schlatter explores our human constitution as God's creatures marred by the fall.[14] Schlatter defines sin as a 'negative judgement of the conscience' that is directed against our mind, our will and our actions.[15] This judgement is therefore a condemnation directed at our whole person. Sin has affected our cognitive, volitional and behavioural capacities; it has corrupted every single area of human life and experience.[16] Schlatter sees a direct relationship between our awareness of God and of sin. The weaker our God-consciousness the more likely we are to reject the judgement against our self as 'hyperbole' (*Übertreibung*).[17] With the presence of God-consciousness, however, comes the opportunity for 'self-negation' (*Selbstverneinung*) in that we recognise a contrast of will between ourselves and God.[18] Volition is in Schlatter's view a central feature of our human condition; it surfaces time and again in his works, and I refer to this important notion throughout this article.

According to Schlatter, we commit sin in relation to God, others and self.[19] At the heart of our human life lies our relationship with God. It is the 'source of life' (*Herd des Lebens*) and this applies both to the believer *and* the unbeliever (since the latter, too, is God's creature made in his image), and is therefore discussed under religious (and *not* specifically christological) anthropology.[20] From our decision to obey or disobey God result either healthy relationships with God, others and self or distortions of them.[21] Schlatter identifies original sin with 'hereditary sin' (*Erbsünde*),[22] and he claims that

[12]See Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: Ein Leben für Theologie und Kirche*, p. 491.

[13]See my discussion in *Union with Christ: Adolf Schlatter's Relational Christology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick/Wipf & Stock, 2015), pp. 84–104.

[14]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, 222.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., pp. 222–3.

[17]Ibid., p. 223.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., pp. 223–4.

[20]Ibid., p. 165. Schlatter's religious anthropology works under the assumption that human existence is properly conceivable only in relation to God. Schlatter delineates the reasons for this approach in 'Briefe über das Christliche Dogma', *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 5/5 (1912), pp. 40–2. For a helpful discussion on Schlatter's religious anthropology, see Gerhard Maier's essay, 'Der anthropologische Ansatz der Gotteslehre Adolf Schlatters', in Helmut Burkhardt (ed.), *Wer ist das – Gott? Christliche Gotteserkenntnis in den Herausforderungen der Gegenwart* (Gießen: Brunnen, 1982), pp. 142–55; see also Paul Althaus's observations in 'Adolf Schlatters Gabe an die systematische Theologie', in *Adolf Schlatter: Gedächtnisheft der Deutschen Theologie* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938), pp. 29–30.

[21]'Wir haben Gott die Unterwerfung, dem Nächsten die Gleichheit, uns selbst die Beherrschung zu gewähren durch unsere freie Tat.' Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 164.

[22]Ibid., p. 254. On original/hereditary sin, see Schlatter's 'Die Erbsünde', in *Hülfe in Bibelnot: Neues und Altes zur Schriftfrage*, 3rd edn (Gladbeck: Freizeiten-Verlag, 1953), 59–62. For a comparison between Luther's and Schlatter's understanding of *peccatum originale*, see Werner Neuer, *Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter*, pp. 174–90.

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every concrete sinful act is a manifestation of hereditary sin.[23] Hereditary sin thus determines our concrete sinful 'individual actions' (*personhafte Akte*).[24] 'Without hereditary sin', he writes, 'there would be no [actual] sin at all; but if there is [actual] sin, it is hereditary sin'.[25] Still, this does not mean that 'everything in us is bad and every action is to be termed sin', Schlatter adds.[26] It is at this point that Schlatter offers his criticism of (post-)Reformation theology and suggests a way of correcting the traditional understanding of total depravity. The whole thrust of his argument goes against what he considers too strong an emphasis on total depravity paired with a disregard of human 'creatureliness' (*Geschöpftsein*).[27]

Schlatter laments that the Reformation teaching of 'total sinfulness' (*vollständige Sündhaftigkeit*) separated our life into 'two different halves': one that recognised the depravity and the other that was informed by faith.[28] Schlatter, for whom the idea of a harmonious experience of human personhood was paramount in theology, seeks to hold these two halves in tension.[29] He offers a correction of the total depravity view based on exegetical, theological and ethical arguments, and I will briefly look at each in turn.[30]

The exegetical argument: It is not found in St Paul

Based on his reading of the New Testament, and especially the letters of St Paul, Schlatter claims that there is a considerable gap between the apostle's teaching on total depravity and its interpretation by the Reformers and their successors. Schlatter's commentary on St Paul's epistle to the Romans offers important clues. Paul's argument in Romans 3:9, namely that 'the individual is under sin', needs to be exegeted with care: 'This statement gets distorted, if it is replaced by the assertion that sin is human existence', Schlatter claims. 'This latter statement renders the individual synonymous with sin; Paul, however, distinguished between the two.'[31] While Schlatter is happy to admit that sin has affected every area of human life, sin is *not*

[23]See Werner Neuer's helpful discussion in *Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter*, pp. 174–7.

[24]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 254. In this sense, Schlatter rejects an actualist interpretation of sin, as Werner Neuer argues, where sin is 'reduced to the sinful act'. Neuer, *Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter*, pp. 175–6.

[25]'Gibt es keine Erbsünde, so gibt es keine Sünde; gibt es Sünde, so ist sie Erbsünde.' Schlatter, *Hülfe in Bibelnot*, p. 59. Schlatter here rejects any attempts that try to distinguish between pre-volitional hereditary sin and concrete volitional sinful acts, as Schlatter scholar Werner Neuer argues. This distinction is absurd to Schlatter's mind, Neuer writes, since 'hereditary sin does not possess existence (*Dasein*) apart from the sinful act, rather, it is being realised in actual sins so that *every* volitional sin represents a manifestation of hereditary sin'. Neuer, *Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter*, p. 175.

[26]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 224.

[27]See Bailer, *Das systematische Prinzip*, pp. 142–6.

[28]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 225.

[29]See Imgard Kindt, *Der Gedanke der Einheit: Adolf Schlatters Theologie und ihre historischen Voraussetzungen* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1978).

[30]The reflections on the hermeneutical and exegetical arguments in this section are based on Andreas Loos' research. See Loos, 'Divine Action, Christ and the Doctrine of God: the Trinitarian Grammar of Adolf Schlatter's Theology', PhD diss. (University of St Andrews, 2006), pp. 60–4.

[31]Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 84 (*Gottes Gerechtigkeit: ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1952), p. 125).

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part of our humanity in its totality, since, '[i]f being human is sin, everything the individual does is sin, for he is never able to separate volition and action from his being'.[32] Yet how then should one understand the Pauline notion 'under sin' according to Schlatter? Schlatter's reading of St Paul suggests that, even though we are sinners, we still acknowledge our dependence upon God in every area that renders us human and thus God's own creatures. Schlatter explains:

> [B]ecause the individual is 'under it', the *hamartia*, the reprehensible will, generates what the individual does and experiences. Yet the individual is not merely what he produces out of himself; rather he is, first of all and at the same time, God's work … He is able to be ungrateful only because he has received gifts, to lie only because he knows the truth, to refuse to honor God only because God revealed himself, to corrupt his body only because it has been given to him, and to destroy human community only because he has been born into it. For this reason sinning for him is not the primary and only thing that transpires in him; God's work always precedes the individual's volition and action.[33]

This line of argument already reveals the heart of Schlatter's theological position: an understanding of human sinfulness in terms of totality conceals the fact that we are still God's work and, as such, live – and even sin – in dependence upon him. It seems appropriate to note in this context that Schlatter does not at all downplay the gravity of sin. The medieval scholastic distinction between venial and mortal sins was in his view worthless, since it 'weakened our rejection of evil'.[34] On this basis, echoing Martin Luther, Schlatter claims that every sin is a mortal sin.[35] It is now time to turn to the dogmatic side of his argument against a narrow interpretation of total depravity.

The dogmatic argument: It neglects human creatureliness

On dogmatic grounds, Schlatter claims that the narrow version of the doctrine of depravity ignores the fact that we are still God's creatures.[36] Schlatter complains, for instance, about the wording of the Second Helvetic Confession, which declares that 'we are unable to do or even to think anything good out of ourselves'.[37] The phrase 'out of ourselves' is particularly unfortunate, Schlatter writes, 'since it renders God-abandonment as the mark of the human being'.[38] According to the Helvetic

[32]Schlatter, *Romans*, p. 85 (*Gottes Gerechtigkeit*, p. 126).

[33]Schlatter, *Romans*, p. 84 (*Gottes Gerechtigkeit*, p. 126).

[34]'[W]eil sie die Vollständigkeit der gegen das Böse gerichteten Verneinung schwankend macht.' Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 228.

[35]'Es gibt nichts Böses, das an sich verzeihlich wäre; alles, was der sittlichen Verurteilung verfällt, ist ganz verwerflich. Insofern ist jede Sünde Todsünde.' Ibid. Luther argues in his Heidelberg Disputation (1518) that in fact all sins are likely to be mortal sins. Even works that 'seem attractive and good' might actually be deadly sins. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American edn, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1957), vol. 31, p. 43. Schlatter can follow Luther here without hesitation.

[36]Neuer offers a careful exposition of this point in *Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter*, pp. 177–81.

[37]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 577, n. 125; The whole sentence in the original document reads: 'Full of all wickedness, distrust, contempt and hatred of God, we are unable to do or even to think anything good of ourselves'. *Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter 8; https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm.

[38]Ibid.

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definition (and this is Schlatter's main point of criticism), the 'concept of creation remains void and the religious appreciation of nature is completely hidden'.[39] In Schlatter's view, though, the human being remains, in its natural condition, God's creature and God's work.

> The possibility that we nevertheless keep on finding, alongside our wicked actions and conditions, some good in ourselves arises from the fact that we, despite our sinful behaviour, do not cease to be God's work and to live in his presence. The power of the corrupt will is not strong enough to demolish our relationship with God and completely destroy his work in us.[40]

While taking seriously the destructive and all-encompassing effects of sin, Schlatter highlights the receptive nature of the human being as God's own work. Although a sinner, the human remains God's work and creature, and is therefore not totally cut off from him. This explains why Schlatter titled his whole chapter on religious anthropology: 'The Human Being as the Work of God' (*Der Mensch das Werk Gottes*).[41]

Werner Neuer observes in this context that 'no other Protestant (*evangelische*) dogmatics since Schleiermacher – measured in their totality – treat God's work of creation in such detail'.[42] In fact, the parallels between Schleiermacher and Schlatter are fascinating – but that is for another essay. Schlatter concludes that we find in ourselves a 'mixed state' (*gemischten Zustand*),[43] such that we are both sinners and God's creatures at the same time, and we thus 'have in the midst of our sinfulness both right and good' (*haben mitten in unserer Sündhaftigkeit auch Gutes*).[44] Andreas Loos aptly describes Schlatter's view of human personhood (in its unregenerate condition) as *simul creatus et peccator*.[45] This mixed condition, argues Schlatter, attributes to the human being a responsibility, and perhaps even a dignity, that it does not have under the narrow total depravity view. For if we are indeed God's work, made in God's image, and if God's law is truly written on our (even unregenerate) hearts, the commandment to distinguish right from wrong and to choose the right and reject the wrong is even more plausible.[46] Loos speaks in this context of Schlatter's anthropology as an '*applied doctrine of the imago Dei*'.[47] But, as we will see, Schlatter also criticises the narrow position of total depravity on ethical grounds.

[39]'[D]er Schöpfungsbegriff [bleibt] leer und die religiöse Würdigung der Natur völlig bedeckt.' Ibid.

[40]'Die Möglichkeit, daß sich zusammen mit unseren verwerflichen Handlungen und Zuständen dennoch immer wieder Gutes in uns findet, entsteht dadurch, daß wir durch unser sündliches Verhalten nicht aufhören, Gottes Werk zu sein und in seiner Gegenwart zu leben. Die Vollmacht des verderblichen Willens reicht nicht so weit, daß er unsere Beziehung zu Gott vernichten und sein Werk in uns vollständig zerstören könnte.' Ibid., p. 226; see also p. 263.

[41]Ibid., p. 20.

[42]Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, p. 492.

[43]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 227; cf. pp. 263-4. Andreas Loos offers a careful discussion of Schlatter's exegetical and theological arguments for this mixed state in 'Divine Action, Christ and the Doctrine of God', pp. 60–4.

[44]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 227.

[45]Loos, 'Divine Action, Christ and the Doctrine of God', p. 64.

[46]Schlatter writes: 'This [mixed condition] does not move over and above us, so that we would, in everything that we do, commit sin, but it goes through us in such a way that we would have to distinguish in our own behaviour what is either objectionable (*verwerflich*) or right (*recht*).' Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 227.

[47]Loos, 'Divine Action, Christ and the Doctrine of God', p. 17.

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The argument from ethics: It renders us passive

A position of total depravity that overemphasises the 'total' in Schlatter's view ultimately leads to a lopsided understanding of repentance that leaves the human being passive. This was vividly expressed, he feels, in the 'ascetic attitude of Pietism'.[48] Post-Reformation Lutheranism, and, especially, its Pietistic branch, has carried Augustine's teaching on sin too far, Schlatter laments. The whole 'natural life-act' (*natürliche Lebensakt*) is here considered sinful and thus brought to peace through ascetics.[49] This renders the person lethargic and unable to change his course of life.[50] Schlatter detects here a reduced, synthetic understanding of God's grace that ruptured the person's 'life-act' (*Lebensakt*). There is our sinful humanness on the one hand and then there is the infusion of God's supernatural grace on the other. Or, to say it in Schlatter's words: our human life 'disintegrates into two halves' (*in zwei Hälften zerlegt*); it is separated into the human life-act, which is considered corrupt, and the alien effects of God's grace, which are good, but not human – 'not the possession and action of the human being' (*nicht der Besitz und Akt des Menschen*).[51] Schlatter, however, is keen to highlight the organic and comprehensive way in which God's grace works in us and renders us active. Yet, as we are moving to the effects of God's grace, these reflections deserve to be treated under the heading of christological anthropology. It is therefore appropriate to move to the second stage of our explorations.

Schlatter on grace: Christological anthropology and active ethics

Having considered basic exegetical, theological and (very briefly) ethical reasons why Schlatter rejects a narrow definition of total depravity, we now proceed, positively so to speak, to explore his view of what Dintaman calls divine 'creative grace', which works organically in the believer and renders her active.[52] This transition to grace is, in fact, a crucial move in Schlatter's dogmatic framework. His brief yet very illuminating section, 'The Transition to the Christ' (*Der Übergang zum Christus*), provides the vital link between the two intricately connected parts of his dogmatics, namely between religious anthropology and christological anthropology. The topics discussed up to this point, predominantly based on the first section of Schlatter's *Dogma*, 'have their roots in the human condition and make up our human nature'.[53] They do *not* yet arise through our union with Christ.[54] However, notes Schlatter, what has been raised so far should encourage us to 'look around for the Christ, since it [religious anthropology] cannot be completed in and of itself'.[55] Schlatter's emphasis on our innate longing for divine grace reminds us of Augustine's expression that our hearts are restless until

[48]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 577, n. 126.

[49]Ibid., p. 225; p. 578, n. 126.

[50]Ibid., p. 225.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Stephen F. Dintaman, *Creative Grace: Faith and History in the Theology of Adolf Schlatter* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

[53]'Allein diese Vorgänge haben ihre Wurzeln im menschlichen Lebensstand und bilden unsere menschliche Art.' It is therefore, not an 'unconscious Christianity' (*unbewußtes Christentum*). Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 277.

[54]'Die bisher untersuchten Vorgänge entstehen nicht erst aus dem Christus.' Ibid.

[55]'[U]ns nach dem Christus umzusehen, weil sie für sich selbst nicht vollendet werden kann.' Ibid., p. 278.

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they find rest in God.[56] Without Jesus Christ, Schlatter is convinced, the human being lacks completion and fulfilment, since '[i]n and of himself, the human being is not a whole entity, he is not contained within himself and is not sufficient unto himself'.[57] The crux of the matter is what actually happens to us and in us through our 'union with Christ' (*Anschluß an Christus*). A comprehensive understanding of anthropology, according to Schlatter, is only achievable in the light of christology.

> Christology and anthropology are indispensable to each other. We do not understand Jesus' way unless we understand ourselves, and we do not understand ourselves unless we understand him. One illuminates the other. What being human means gives us the key to what Jesus was; what becomes visible to us in him illuminates our own consciousness and unlocks the mystery of being human.[58]

We thus explore next the question of what happens to the human being who is united with Jesus Christ as the recipient of divine grace.

Schlatter explores the nature of God's grace in his third section of the *Christliche Dogma*,[59] and here the person and work of Jesus Christ take centre stage. Christ determines who we become through our union with him. 'When we define our relation to Jesus', writes Schlatter, 'we are faced with a new question, namely: what is he? and what becomes of us through our union with him (*Anschluß an ihn*)?'[60] The recipients of God's grace experience nothing less than a 'divine act of creation' (*göttlichen Schöpferakt*).[61] Two key ideas capture the core of Schlatter's view of how divine 'creative grace' (Dintaman) works in us as we are being united with Christ. In what follows I will briefly look at Schlatter's understanding of organic transformation and ethical activation, and how this informs our self-understanding as moral agents.

Organic transformation

First, Schlatter seeks to achieve a balance between a high view of creatureliness while taking seriously the profound transformation we experience through our union with Christ. Schlatter explains, 'Jesus' gift comprises not only the attempt to shape the human being from the outside, but – and this is why Jesus spoke of the Spirit – [also] that human beings are gripped at the core of their personal life, at the core of their willing and thinking and thereby united with the divine thinking and willing.'[62]

[56]'*[E]t inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.*' Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessiones/Bekenntnisse*, 1.1.1 (p. 34), ed. and trans. Kurt Flasch and Burkhard Mojsisch (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2017).

[57]'Der Mensch ist in sich selber nichts Ganzes, ist nicht in sich geschlossen und genügt sich selbst nicht.' Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma,* p. 278.

[58]'Die Christologie und die Anthropologie sind einander unentbehrlich. Wir verstehen Jesu Weg nicht, es sei denn, wir verstehen uns selbst, und verstehen uns nicht, es sei denn, wir verstehen ihn. Eins beleuchtet hier das andere. Was Menschsein heißt, gibt uns den Schlüssel zu dem, was Jesus war; was an ihm uns sichtbar wird, bringt in unser eigenes Bewußtsein das Licht und löst uns das Rätsel des Menschseins auf.' Adolf Schlatter, *Jesu Gottheit und das Kreuz*, 2nd edn (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1913), p. 57.

[59]He distinguishes between the 'means of grace' (*Gnadenmittel*), such as the scriptures, the sacraments and the church; the 'gift of grace' (*Gnadengabe*), and here he lists justification, regeneration, sanctification, and other related themes; and the 'effects of grace', such as contrition, repentance, love of God and faith in Jesus, for instance. See Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 9.

[60]Ibid., p. 278.

[61]Ibid., p. 279.

[62]Schlatter, *Hülfe in Bibelnot*, p. 12.

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It is in particular our human faculty of volition that is touched by God's sanctifying grace. Our human willing is brought into harmony with the divine willing.[63] 'There is no greater gift for us', writes Schlatter, 'than the one in which our will is united with God's will.'[64] While this work of the Spirit certainly generates a profound internal change, Schlatter is keen to add that it leaves the basic elements of our creatureliness intact. God takes seriously our human personhood that he has created, Schlatter argues, and his grace does not destroy but it completes our humanity as we are being united with Jesus Christ.[65] 'What Christ makes of us can be something other than humanity, [he can] transform and complete it, but not destroy it.'[66] That is, God 'lifts everything up into a new, higher form' (*sondern alles in eine neue, höhere Gestalt erhebt*).[67] According to Schlatter, then, the divine grace works in us in an organic way, as our own thinking and willing are harmoniously united with the divine thinking and willing. Schlatter writes:

> Jesus addresses the human being, he mobilises the capacities that are available to him; it is with human thought we ought to think God's will, it is with the human will that we ought to obey; we do not arrive at a supranatural religion, but at a religion that puts the human being into God's service.[68]

This has very practical implications for our self-understanding as God's agents in this fallen world. What results from this is a self-understanding that shows a humble appreciation for our created humanness and a deep reverence for God's transforming grace in us.[69] When we come to Christ, we do not discard our humanness, but we experience its fulfilment and completion through the divine grace, and we witness how we are being shaped, step by step, into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). This organic understanding of God's grace is the essential building block of Schlatter's christological anthropology.

Ethical activation

Secondly, Schlatter is keen to note that the divine grace that transforms us in our humanity also renders us active. For Schlatter, the gifts and effects of grace we receive through our union with Christ are in fact themselves inspiring of our Christian ethos.[70] Schlatter feels though that this activating aspect of God's grace has not been sufficiently

[63]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 467; cf. Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), pp. 121–3.

[64]Schlatter, *Hülfe in Bibelnot*, p. 8; see also Schlatter, *Die christliche Ethik*, pp. 33–45.

[65]Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 278.

[66]'Was Christus aus uns macht, kann etwas anderes sein als die Humanität und sie umgestalten und vollenden, aber nicht zerstören.' Ibid., p. 279.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Adolf Schlatter, *Jesus und Paulus: Eine Vorlesung*, ed. Theodor Schlatter (Stuttgart and Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1940), p. 76.

[69]Schlatter explains that 'what Jesus grants us causes the unity that is implanted as a law in our personal life-act to persist and overcome all strife with which we dismember ourselves, causes us to rejoice in the creator that nature shows us . . . causes us to become obedient to the divine regiment that forms us through history and moves us . . . causes the certainty of God (*Gewißheit Gottes*) without which our whole thinking dies off to illuminate and organise the content of our consciousness . . . What Jesus grants us is not an addition to our being human (*menschlichen Wesen*) and does not lie alongside our human capacity and calling.' Schlatter, *Briefe über das Christliche Dogma*, pp. 41–2.

[70]Neuer, *Zusammenhang von Dogmatik und Ethik bei Adolf Schlatter*, p. 297.

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highlighted in Reformation and (especially) post-Reformation theology. Post-Reformation theology focused on the calming effects of God's grace, whereas it neglected its activating power. Schlatter writes, 'The question of the ancients (*der Alten*) is always whether a thought is suitable to comfort our frightened conscience and lead us into God's peace, or, whether it disturbs or impedes serenity. Their view is not directed at the moving, thought-providing, will-creating, empowering side of the truth.'[71]

Schlatter of course acknowledges the calming effects of God's grace on our conscience. Certainly, God's grace frees us from thoughts of condemnation and invites us into the life-giving realm of the Spirit (Rom 8:1–2), but in Schlatter's view the Reformers did not sufficiently explore how grace also moves us into action.[72] He complains that, in this regard, 'a critique of the Reformation, and therefore, a critique of Luther is indispensable'.[73] 'My critique', he argues, 'is directed against [the attempt] to establish faith through the consideration of sin and against the limitation of ethics to the impulse that is derived from mercy.'[74] Schlatter therefore suggests a balanced understanding of grace as both receptive and activating.[75] He writes:

> The gaze upon God and his grace works in our volition both calming and moving; calming, as it satisfies our quest, for in God's grace, gift and deed lies everything that we need … yet, at the same time also moving, arousing our aspiration, because God's grace, gift and deed grants our will the goal and the power … and enables us to [accomplish] the deed. In that faith works both in equal measure to calm and to move … lies the health of our Christian life.[76]

As we enjoy union with Jesus Christ, Schlatter is convinced, we are also empowered to become active agents, since God's grace in us is always activating. This activating understanding of divine grace is, in fact, vital for our own self-understanding as ethical agents in God's world, and it is thus promising to take a closer look at Schlatter's view of our Christian vocation.

Active Christian vocation

Complaining about what he considered a one-sided Pietistic quietism, Schlatter developed his ideas of the divine, activating grace in us and as it applies to our Christian vocation in more detail around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1897, he issued a treatise on 'The Christian's Vocation in the Older Dogmatics';[77] in 1905 he published 'Another Word on the Christian Vocation';[78] and in 1914, he published his *Christian Ethics*, which opens with an extensive section on 'Our Vocation' (*Unser Beruf*, pp. 13–63). The common thread running

[71]Schlatter, 'Dienst des Christen', p. 51.

[72]Ibid., pp. 59–61.

[73]Adolf Schlatter, 'Adolf Schlatter', in *Die Religionswissenschaft in Selbstdarstellungen*, ed. Erich Stange (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1925), p. 165.

[74]'Meine Kritik richtet sich gegen die Begründung des Glaubens durch die Betrachtung der Sünde und gegen die Beschränkung der Ethik auf den von der Barmherzigkeit ausgehenden Impuls.' Ibid., p. 166.

[75]For a closer inspection on these themes, see my essay, 'Good Will Hunting: Adolf Schlatter on Organic Volitional Sanctification', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 55/1 (2012), pp. 125–43.

[76]Schlatter, 'Dienst des Christen', p. 4.

[77]Schlatter, 'Dienst des Christen'.

[78]Schlatter, 'Noch ein Wort über den christlichen Dienst', *Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie* 9/6 (1905), pp. 47–83.

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through all these works is Schlatter's clear emphasis on the active nature of Christian vocation. What he observed in contemporary church life, and what he time and again critiques in his publications, is a lethargic, passive view of the believer. A major problem, in his view, was too strong a focus on the office of the minister (*Pastorat*), which rendered the lay believer a negligible commodity in the church. He laments that post-Reformation church practice tended to regard the pastoral office as indispensable, whereas the church was almost superfluous, since one 'could believe and also love without the church'.[79] What resulted was an '[a]ctive pastoral office and passive churches, or, rather, pastoral office and listeners, *auditores*' ([*a*]*ktives Pastorat und passive Gemeinden oder vielmehr Pastorat und Zuhörer, auditores*).[80] The motto of the priesthood of all believers, then, has been lost or not sufficiently developed in post-Reformation times, and Schlatter intends to offer some correction.

While encouraging believers to take their active Christian vocation seriously, Schlatter is also keen to clear up two major misunderstandings regarding Christian vocation. First, it is not burdensome, as some might think, since God's grace, Schlatter is convinced, works everything in us, from beginning to end. God's grace 'grants us the vocation (*Beruf*), shows us the duty (*Pflicht*) and to this end gives us the will and the ability'.[81] Secondly, his stress on active ethics is not to be mistaken for blind activism. On the contrary, it is only as we participate in *God's* action in this world, through our union with Christ, that our vocation comes to its fruition. True Christian vocation is realised as the believer gladly makes herself available for the activating work of God's Spirit in her, and that in her own given context and situation. '[T]he dominion of Christ', Schlatter writes, 'manifests itself in us as he grants us the good will in *a certain situation*. We thereby experience that we are surrounded by his presence and that he makes his Spirit the foundation of our thinking and willing.'[82]

Conclusion

Some brief comments on Schlatter's recasting of theological anthropology are in order. First of all, one wonders whether Schlatter was entirely fair in his critique of the Reformers. One ought to acknowledge, in this context, the challenges of reading and interpreting Schlatter. Contemporary reviewers complained that Schlatter confronted his readers with ideas that were 'uncanny and strange' (*Frappierenden und Befremdlichen*).[83] Otto Michel called him an 'opinionated, in no way easily accessible theological thinker' (*eigenwilliger, keineswesgs leicht zugänglicher theologischer Denker*),[84] while again others lamented that reading Schlatter's sentences is like standing in front of the 'Delphic Oracle'.[85] There is some truth in this criticism. It certainly takes – even for the native German speaker – some time to become familiar with Schlatter's complex terminology and sentence structure. The real difficulty though with Schlatter's prose lies in his tendency to leave definitions deliberately broad and somewhat fuzzy. This presents a considerable obstacle for our purpose as we seek to

[79]Schlatter, 'Dienst des Christen', p. 16.

[80]Ibid.

[81]'Darin besteht die uns heiligende Gnade Gottes, daß sie uns Beruf erteilt, Pflicht zeigt und zu ihr den Willen und das Vermögen gibt.' Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, p. 470.

[82]Ibid., p. 467 (emphasis added).

[83]Bailer, *Das systematische Prinzip*, p. 12.

[84]Otto Michel, quoted in ibid.

[85]Ibid.

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trace his critique of the Reformers. Schlatter rarely mentions any concrete names, and instead speaks simply of 'the old ones' (*die Alten*).[86] One struggles to figure out whether he has Luther, Calvin or some post-Reformation theologians in mind. Locating the exact recipient of Schlatter's criticism is therefore, at times, challenging. Having said that, it remains the case that Luther's understanding of grace was arguably far more activating than Schlatter seems to have been willing to admit. Given Luther's focus on active righteousness and the activating effects of the Christian faith, Luther (at least as far as I can see) was much closer to Schlatter than the latter might have assumed.[87] Schlatter's criticism of contemporary Pietism, however, was perhaps more adequate, and his contribution here seems timely. Even today, in times of celebrity pastors and megachurches, Schlatter's complaint about passive listeners might still be valid. Entrenched in a consumerist culture, the believer might be tempted to outsource her Christian vocation to the 'professional', the pastor, and rest satisfied in the pew listening to a beautiful message.

Amongst today's moral theologians, no one has better articulated Schlatter's concerns of an organic and activating understanding of grace – although without explicitly referring to him – than Oliver O'Donovan. Much like Schlatter, he warns of the risk of a merely calming interpretation of God's grace that neglects its activating component: 'The conceptual importance of the doctrine of vocation', writes O'Donovan, 'lies in correcting the complacency to which sanctification is otherwise exposed. … "I count not myself to have attained" then becomes a structural rule for all talk of ethics, not a modest afterthought.'[88] Also reminiscent of Schlatter, he defines Christian vocation as 'the gracious work of God in our human living, which in turn leads out the gift of reconciled participation into the discovery of the opportune time and occasion for action'.[89] As we make ourselves available to God's activating grace in us, in our own time and context, dogmatics truly finds its fulfilment in ethics, just as Schlatter envisioned; or, to say it with O'Donovan: 'Ethics is doctrine existentially situated, extended into the living of life.'[90] We would do well to take up Schlatter's vision of the activating effects of God's grace. Schlatter's call for an existential appropriation of our Christian vocation as active moral agents in a fallen world is certainly timely.

Schlatter also paves the way for a significant ecumenical theological discussion, especially at the intersection of religious and christological anthropology. Schlatter's creative recasting of the doctrine of sin, and in particular his adjusted view of total depravity, offers much promise in terms of an ecumenical debate. Schlatter presents a view of human sinfulness that is rooted in the New Testament, takes our creatureliness seriously and is creatively situated between traditional Reformed and Catholic teaching. If we intend to make progress in our exploration of the relationship between nature and grace, we might want to follow Schlatter here. Again in terms of ethics, Schlatter's religious anthropology opens not only an avenue for ecumenical conversation, but also for a possible collaboration with secular ethics. Since we all share our 'creaturely condition

[86]Schlatter, 'Dienst des Christen', pp. 45–6, 51, 61, 69.

[87]See Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 23–31.

[88]O'Donovan, 'Sanctification and Ethics,' in Kelly M. Kapic (ed.), *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), p. 156.

[89]Ibid., p. 157.

[90]Ibid., p. 153.

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of life' (*schöpfungsgemäßen Lebensordnung*),[91] there is an innate connection between us humans that should allow us to work toward an ethical consensus. Schlatter's religious anthropology could offer some basic conceptual support for Hans Küng's vision of inspiring a peaceful dialogue between nations, cultures and religions regarding their shared ethos, what Küng calls a 'global ethic' (*Weltethos*).[92] Both Küng's approach and Schlatter's framework have been called bridging approaches.[93] In times of growing conflict, estrangement and isolation, the time has come for bridge builders such as Küng and Schlatter.

[91]This is Bailer's succinct description of Schlatter's view in this context. Bailer, *Das systematische Prinzip*, p. 147.

[92]Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos* (Munich: Piper, 2010); Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993).

[93]Küng's theology has been called 'bridging theology' (*Brückentheologie*, Karl-Josef-Kuschel; http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/theologe-karl-josef-kuschel-franziskus-teilt-kuengs.886.de.html?dram:article_id=413077) and Schlatter's framework has been termed similarly: 'With its unusually strong focus on creatureliness and nature,' writes Werner Neuer, 'Schlatter's ethics build – despite their decidedly Christocentric basis – a bridge to unbelievers.' Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter*, p. 505.

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