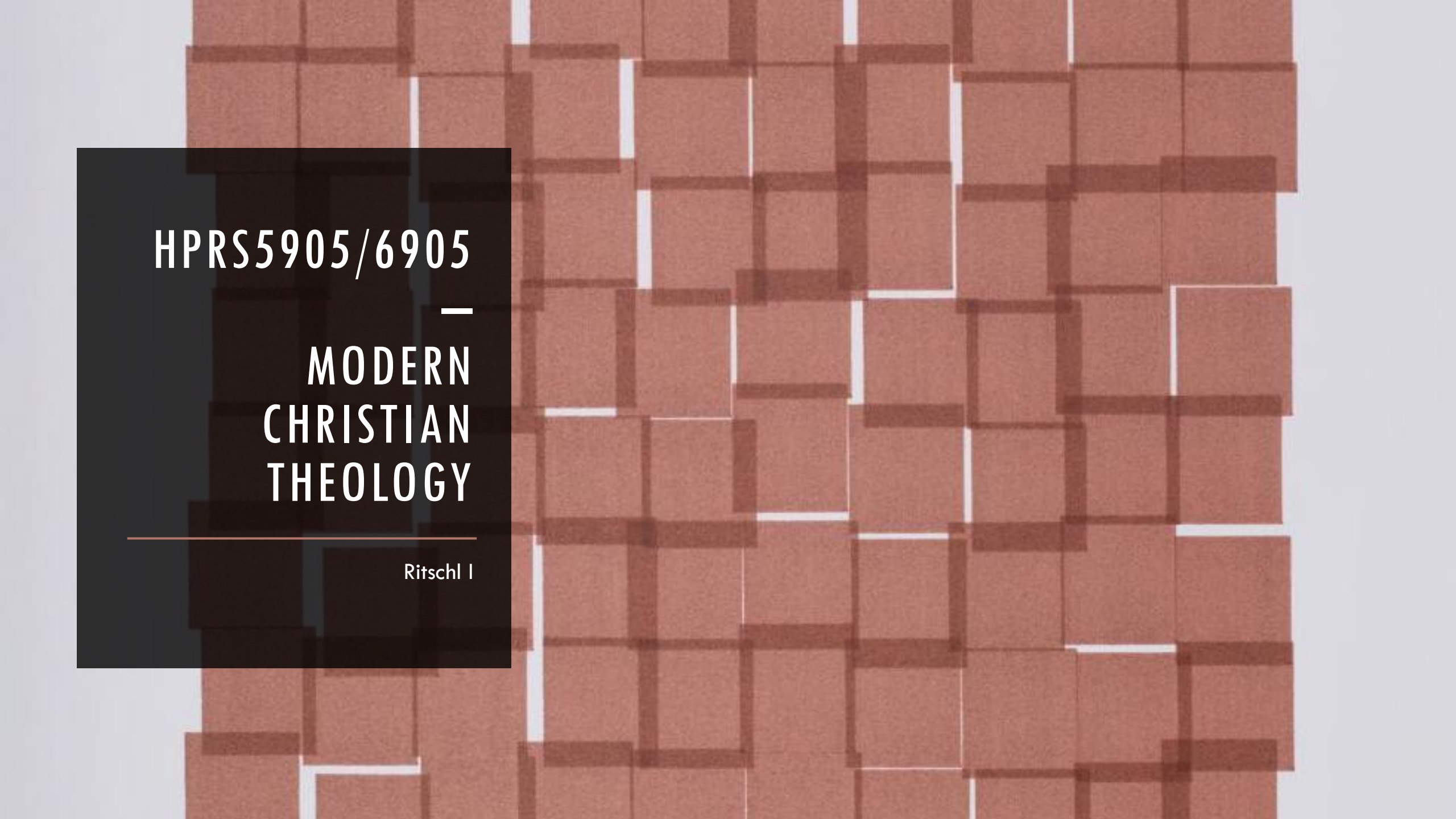
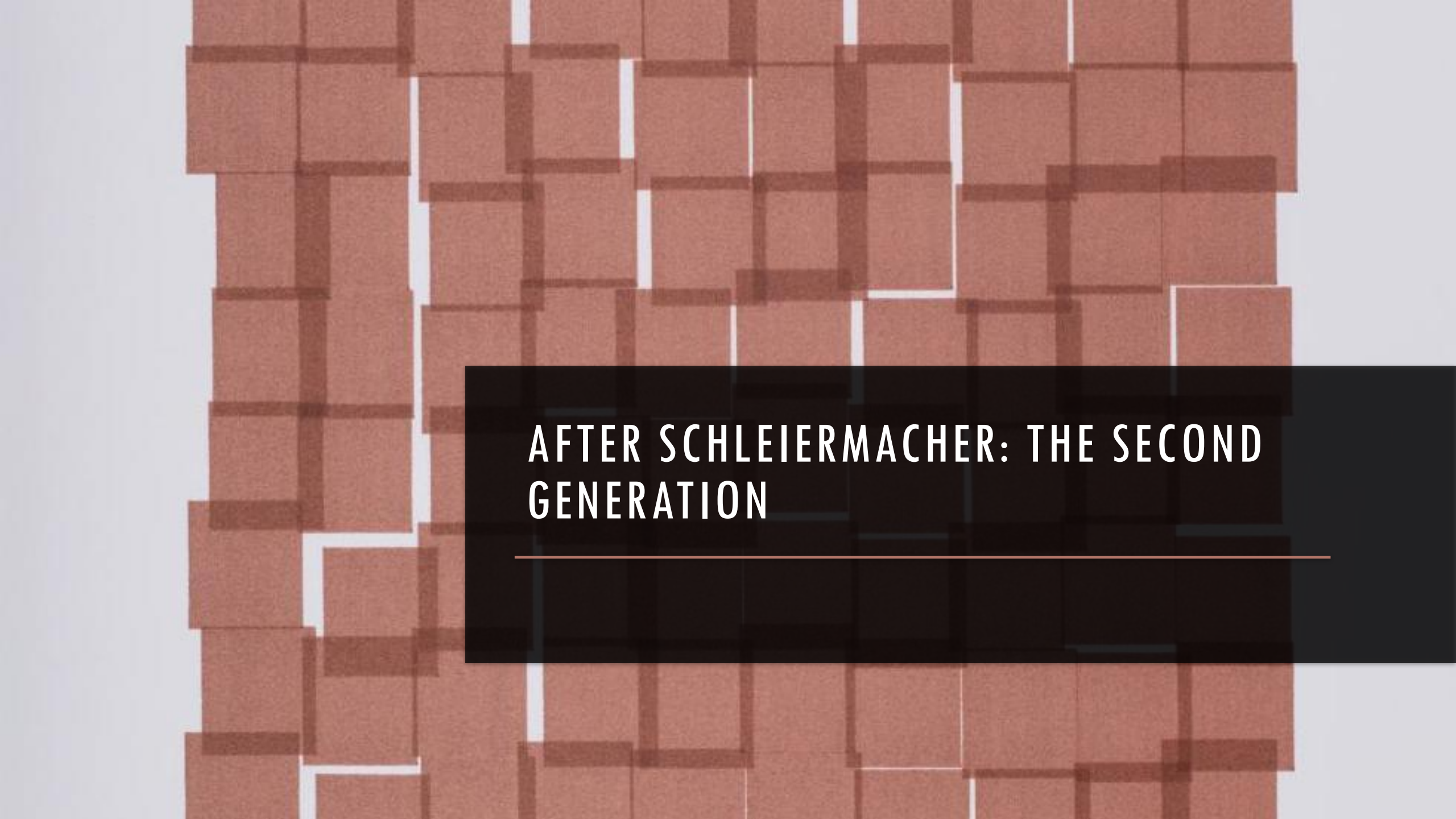




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MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Ritschl I



AFTER SCHLEIERMACHER: THE SECOND GENERATION

AFTER SCHLEIERMACHER: THE SECOND GENERATION

Almost every major intellectual movement produces a second generation, whose task is more demanding and usually more constrained than the founder's. This is because the founding gesture has already been made, so the object of study has already been set and constrained, but also more demanding because the implications of that gesture must now be worked out with greater rigour and tested against a much wider range of objections from critics.

Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) who we are going to look at in this session and the next is the defining figure of modern theology's second generation.



ALBRECHT RITSCHL (1822—1889)

Ritschl inherits from Schleiermacher the conviction that theology must be grounded in the lived experience of the Christian community, rather than in speculative metaphysics or confessional orthodoxy.

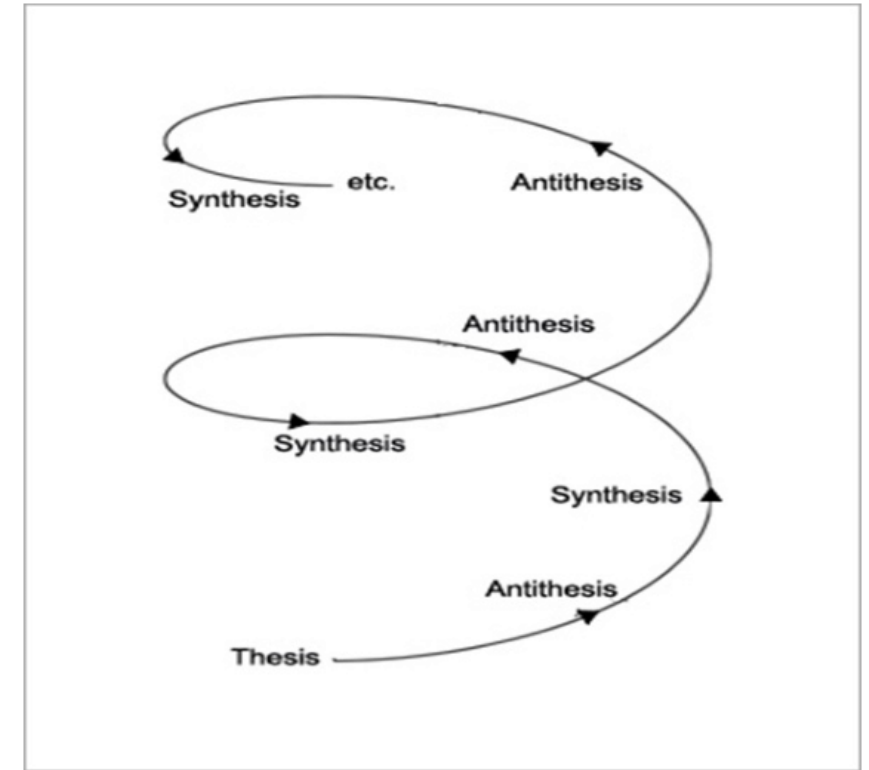
But he is acutely dissatisfied with the specific form Schleiermacher gave to that conviction — the feeling of absolute dependence seemed to Ritschl both philosophically unstable and theologically insufficient.

For him, the problem was that it located religion's centre of gravity in an individual and inward state (the personal feeling of dependence) rather than in the active, communal life of the Christian community in its pursuit of the kingdom of God.

ALBRECHT RITSCHL (1822–1889)

Ritschl was formed in the Tübingen School under F. C. Baur, who applied Hegelian historical dialectic to the development of early Christianity which was a formative but ultimately unsatisfying influence on Ritschl's work.

His rejection of Baur's speculative historical framework mirrored his broader rejection of Hegelian metaphysics, and his subsequent development moved steadily toward a more rigorously historical and ethically orientated theology.

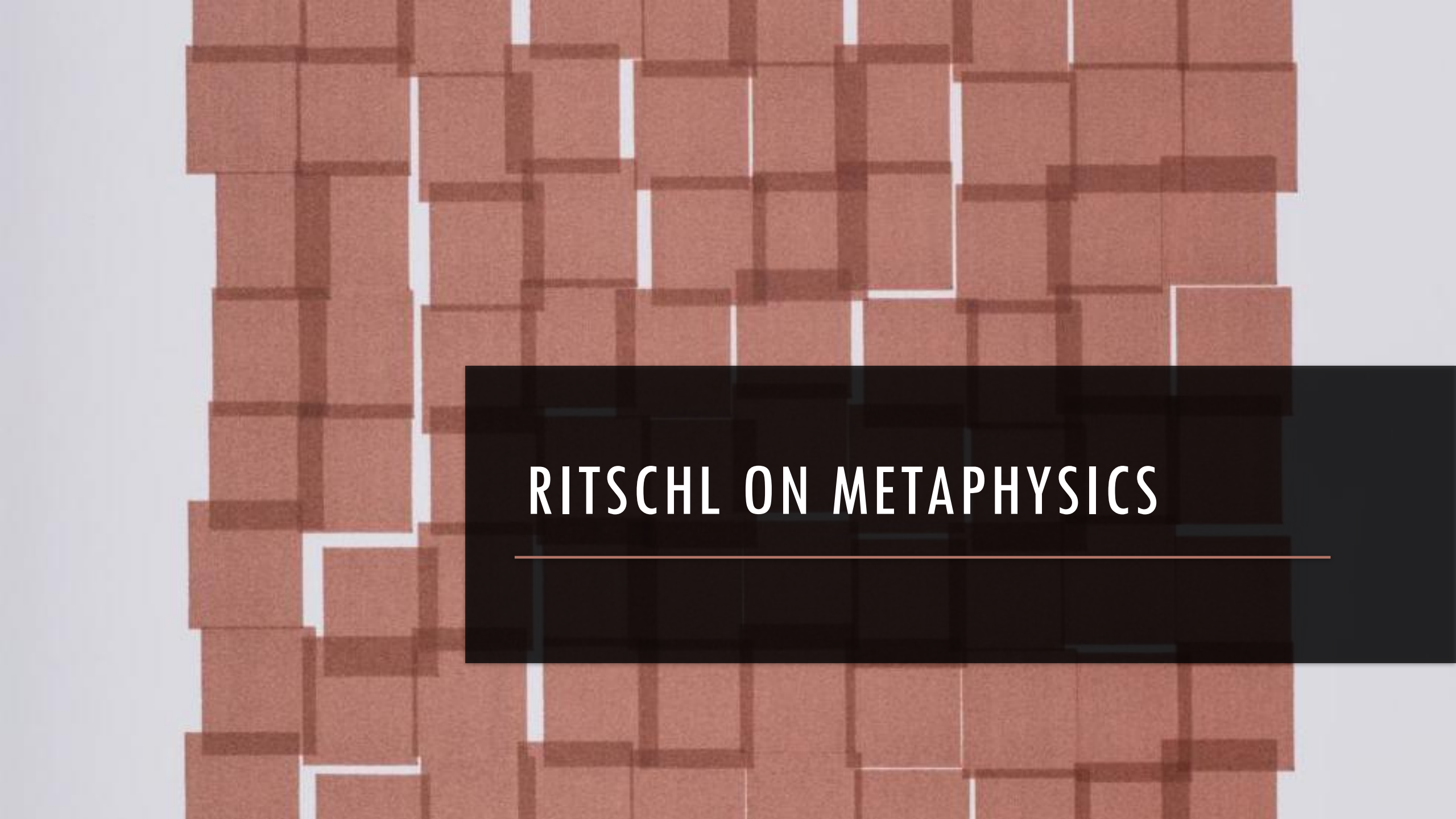


ALBRECHT RITSCHL (1822—1889)

Ritschl's work was then shaped by the philosophical climate of mid-nineteenth-century Germany, just like Schleiermacher was.

Where Kant had distinguished theoretical reason, e.g. knowledge of the phenomenal world, from practical reason, e.g. knowledge of the moral life, neo-Kantian thinkers such as Hermann Lotze argued for the irreducibility of value to fact, of the normative to the descriptive.

It was in this philosophical context that Ritschl developed his central claim: that theological statements are not theoretical descriptions of realities but value judgements – that is expressions of the worth that the community of faith places on its experience of Christ.



RITSCHL ON METAPHYSICS

WHAT IS A VALUE JUDGEMENT?

The concept of the value judgement, *Werturteil*, is the methodological cornerstone of Ritschl's theology, and it is important that we understand where he is coming from.

A value judgement, for Ritschl, is a judgement that expresses not a theoretical description of how things are, e.g. the sky is blue, but an assessment of their worth, e.g. their significance for the life, wellbeing, and moral destiny of the person making the judgement.

This emerges from criticisms of the tendency in Kant's work to read from what is, to what ought to be.

WHAT IS A VALUE JUDGEMENT?

To take an example, when a Christian confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, this is not really a metaphysical claim about the ontological constitution of Jesus's person, e.g. about the relationship of divine and human natures in a single person.

Instead, it is a value judgement: the declaration that Jesus Christ has the worth of God for us, that in his person and work the supreme good that orients and redeems human life is encountered and received.

The statement "Christ is divine" means, on Ritschl's account, that Christ functions as God for the community of faith, that his worth for redemption is equivalent to what the community means when it speaks of God.

(NEO-)KANTIANISM

To appreciate quite why Ritschl goes down this quite interesting route, we probably need to understand the neo-Kantian philosophical framework within which it operates.

The neo-Kantian distinction between the domain of facts (***Sein***) and the domain of values (***Sollen***), that is between what is and what ought to be, was one of the defining intellectual commitments of the late nineteenth century.

Natural science describes the order of the world using the categories of empirical inquiry, but the domain of moral and religious significance is not reducible to scientific facts.

(NEO-)KANTIANISM

Instead, all those “ought” questions (e.g. What ought we to do?) belong to the order of values, which have their own irreducible standing and their own form of rational warrant.

Ritschl’s appropriation of this framework for theology allows him to claim that theological statements are not in competition with natural science because they operate in a different domain entirely.

The conflict between science and religion dissolves once it is understood that they are addressing different kinds of questions with different kinds of judgements – similar to Schleiermacher’s appeal to religious feeling.

REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS

Ritschl's rejection of speculative metaphysics in theology is one of the most emphatic in the whole history of modern theology, going much further than Schleiermacher's own.

He rejects the attempt to ground theological claims in a philosophical system that claims knowledge of ultimate reality that is accessible to theoretical reason, independently of the historical revelation in Jesus Christ.

His objections are multiple and mutually reinforcing covering a whole host of what we think of as "traditional" Christian things!

REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS

Epistemologically

Ritschl denies that reason has the ability to reach beyond our natural world – it can describe what is, but not what ought to be.

Historically

Ritschl proposes that it is the corrupting influence of Greek metaphysics that pushes Christianity down the wrong path.

Theologically

Ritschl insists that knowledge of God is available only through the particular historical revelation in Jesus Christ and its reception in the community of faith

REJECTION OF METAPHYSICS

This means that theology's true purpose is not to attempt to describe the way things actually are.

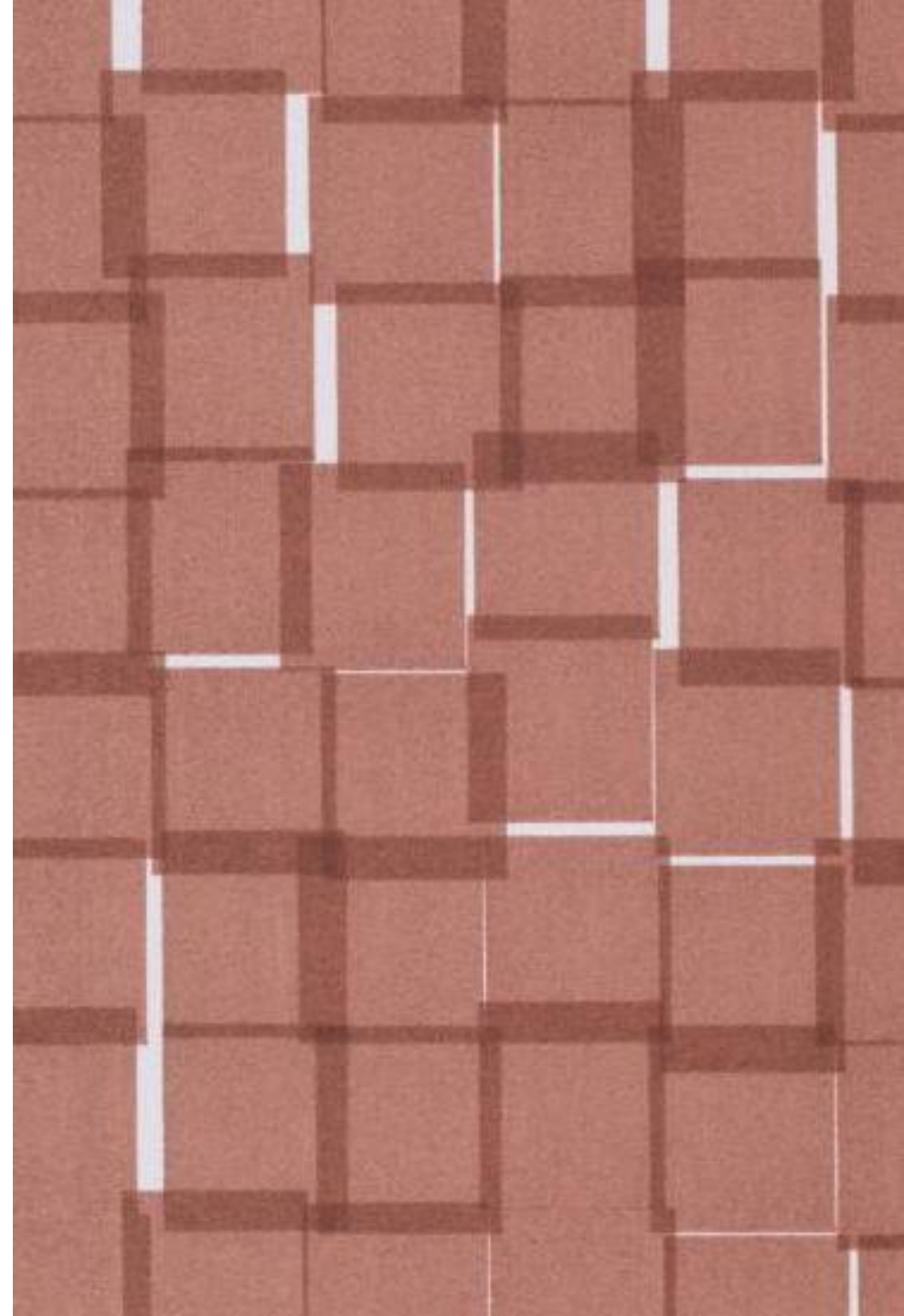
Any attempt at doing metaphysics in theology is not merely epistemically presumptuous, it is a distraction from the one proper source of theological knowledge, which is the particular historical revelation in Jesus Christ.

This could almost be a return to pre-Enlightenment reliance on the reliability of Scripture, but Ritschl takes things in another direction.

RITSCHL AND SCHLEIERMACHER

One of the ways that Ritschl could go, but doesn't, is in the similar direction as Schleiermacher.

Alongside his rejection of metaphysics, Ritschl is equally emphatic in his opposition to mysticism as a theological foundation. This is a pointed critique of Schleiermacher, whose grounding of religion in the feeling of absolute dependence Ritschl consistently characterises as tending toward a mystical immediacy that bypasses both the historical particularity of Christian revelation and the communal shape of Christian existence.

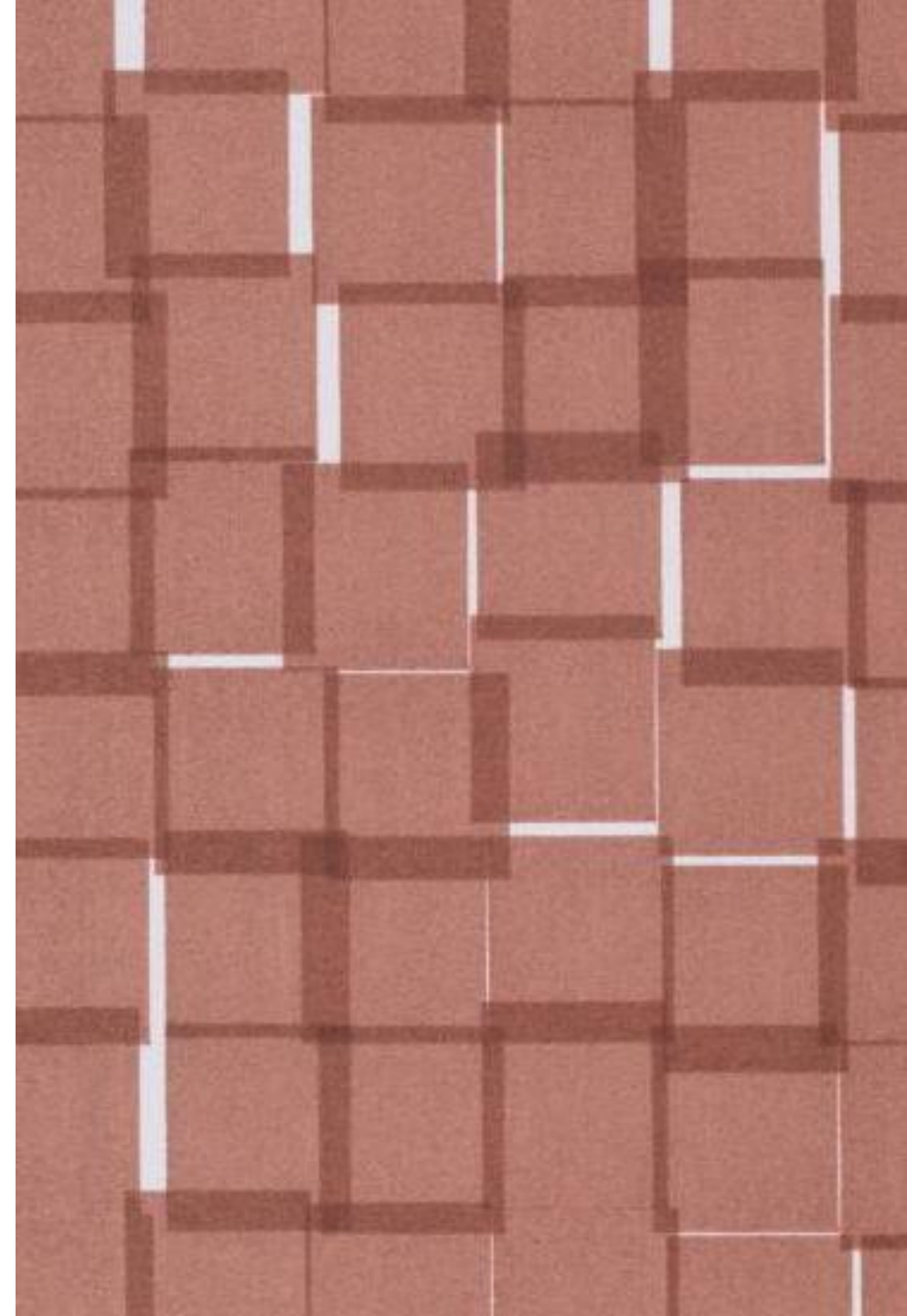


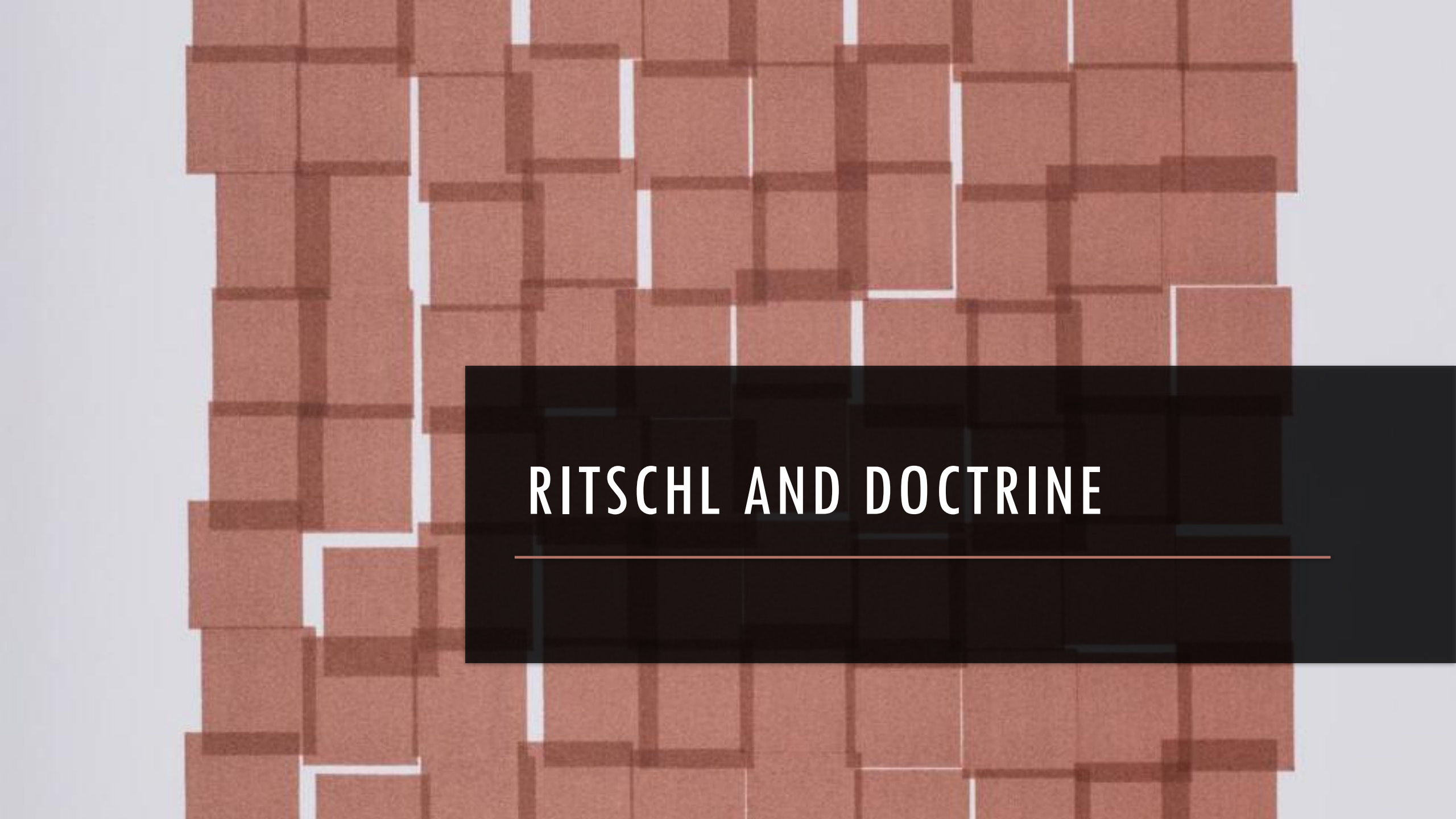
RITSCHL AND SCHLEIERMACHER

For Ritschl, mysticism shares with metaphysics the fundamental error of seeking a direct, unmediated access to the divine that circumvents the historical and communal channels through which God is actually known to us.

God is known through the historical person of Jesus Christ, attested in Scripture and received in the community of faith. There is no shortcut through private interior experience, however refined, nor through our reason.

This reflects Ritschl's belief that Christianity is an irreducibly historical religion and cannot be dissolved into a general religiosity of feeling or metaphysics.





RITSCHL AND DOCTRINE

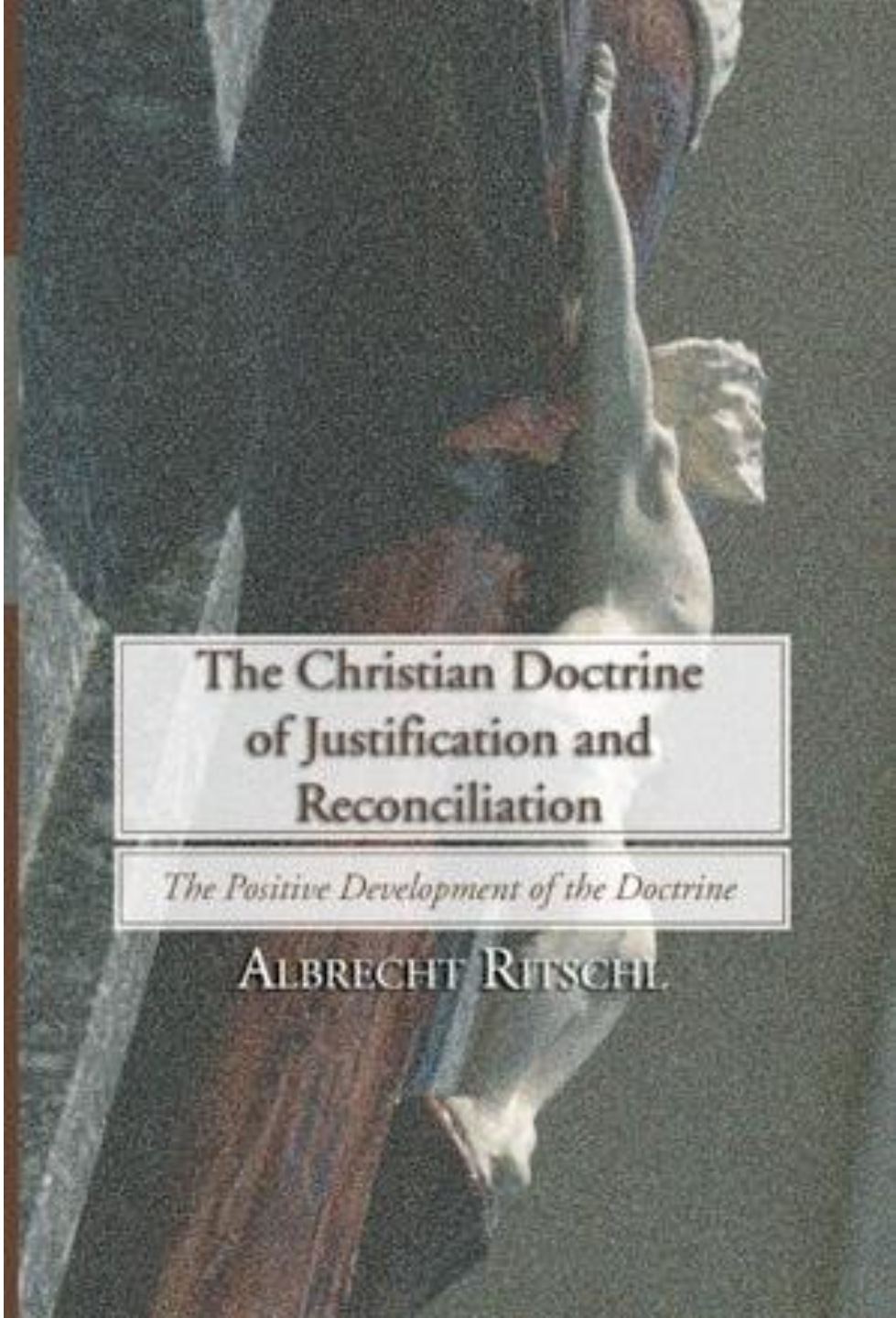
JUSTIFICATION AND RECONCILIATION

Ritschl's major systematic work, the three-volume *Justification and Reconciliation* (1870–74), demonstrates where he takes this ideas.

Justification, in Ritschl's hands, is not a declaration of the sinner's righteousness before God's tribunal, but the forgiveness of sins understood as the removal of the sense of guilt that impedes the believer's participation in the community of the kingdom.

Reconciliation is not the satisfaction of divine justice, that we talked about a few weeks ago, but the establishment of a new communal relationship between God and humanity.

Both concepts are reconceived in communal, ethical, and relational terms by Ritschl.



The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation

The Positive Development of the Doctrine

ALBRECHT RITSCHL

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

One of the most distinctive features of Ritschl's theology is his insistence that knowledge of God is available only through the moral and communal experience of the Christian life.

This is a more restricted epistemological claim than Schleiermacher's appeal to a universal religious feeling of absolute dependence.

For Schleiermacher, religion is a dimension of all human consciousness, for Ritschl, knowledge of God is accessible only within the particular community formed by the historical revelation of Jesus Christ.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

This means that natural theology, the attempt to know God from the general structures of nature and reason, is therefore not merely epistemologically dubious but theologically superfluous.

Instead, everything necessary for the knowledge of God is given in the historical revelation and its reception in the community of faith.

This makes Ritschl's response to the difficulties of Christian faith in the post-Enlightenment period as interesting divergence from Schleiermacher while still wrestling with some of the same issues.

CHRIST

Probably the most interesting part of Ritschl's work is the way that he treats the person of Christ.

He insists, that theological statements about Christ must be grounded in the historical person attested to by Scripture and received in the community of faith, not in speculation about the eternal relations of divine and human natures.

Christ's divinity is a value judgement: he has the worth of God for us because in his historical person and work the highest possible good is encountered. Ritschl explicitly declines to say that this 'makes him God' or anything similar. For him, the question of whether Christ is the second person of the Trinity is not a question theology is able to answer at all.

CHRIST

This doesn't mean that Christ isn't important for Ritschl though.

For Ritschl, Jesus is not merely the founder of a religious community or the proclaimer of a religious message.

Jesus is the one who, through the absolute consistency of his moral purpose and his unbroken orientation toward the Kingdom of God, embodies the supreme ethical calling of humanity. It is precisely this moral consistency, maintained through suffering, opposition, and death, that constitutes Jesus's unique historical significance and grounds the community's value judgement that he has the worth of God for them.

CHRIST

This means that Ritschl's Christology has a really strong exemplary dimension: Christ is not only the agent of a unique redemptive work that believers appropriate by faith, but the model of the vocation to which all members of the kingdom community are called.

The imitation of Christ, understood as participation in his orientation toward the kingdom, forms the second key consideration we will look at more fully in Ritschl's work in the next session

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The community of the kingdom (the Church) plays a key role in Ritschl's theology, analogous to the Church's role in Schleiermacher, but with a markedly different character.

The Church's significance is not primarily about what it makes us **feel**, but primarily about how it makes us **act**.

This gives Ritschl's ecclesiology a really strong activist and world-engaged character in contrast to the rather mystical orientation of Schleiermacher.

Schleiermacher

- The Church is the community through which Christ's God-consciousness is shared
- e.g. a community of shared religious feeling

Ritschl

- The Church is a community of moral action
- e.g. a community of shared ethical orientation

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Christian, for Ritschl, is not merely a recipient of divine grace, but an active participant in the purpose of God for the world.

The concept of vocation, *Beruf*, drawn from the Lutheran tradition, is given a strongly ethical content for Christians to follow. Each Christian is called to exercise their particular station in life as a means of realising the kingdom of God in the social order.

For Ritschl, Christianity is not a religion of individual salvation or private piety, but is instead a socially and historically engaged movement towards bringing about God's plan for the world.



SOME RESPONSES TO RITSCHL

ERNST TROELTSCH (1865-1923)

Ritschl's emphasis on the historical Jesus as the ground of Christian faith creates a tension between the Christ of faith proclaimed in the community of the kingdom, and the Jesus of history reconstructed by critical scholarship.

If faith rests on the historical person of Jesus, then the results of historical criticism threaten the stability of the faith's foundation.

Ernst Troeltsch pressed this problem with unsparing clarity: If Jesus is fully embedded in first-century Judaism, then the faith claims of the community e.g. that Jesus has the worth of God for us, face a radical challenge: on what historical grounds can the Christian community sustain this value judgement?

ERNST TROELTSCH (1865-1923)

The Ritschlian response that the value judgement of Christ transcends the merely historical fact because it expresses the community's experience of redemption, simply relocates the problem rather than resolving it.

If the community's experience of redemption through Christ is itself a historically conditioned phenomenon, it too is subject to the relativity that afflicts all historical experience.

Troeltsch's diagnosis was that liberal theology, in all its forms, had not yet found a way of securing the absoluteness of Christianity against the acids of historical consciousness.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Ritschl's contribution to the tradition of modern theology is substantial, even if few theologians are unqualified defenders now.

He identified with precision the dangers of both speculative metaphysics and individualistic mysticism as theological foundations, and his insistence on the communal, ethical, and historical character of Christian faith anticipated more modern forms of theology, like Liberation Theology.

The use of the Kingdom of God as the organising concept of Christian theology has also been widely influential, and the distinction between fact and value that underwrites his method continues to resonate in both philosophical and theological epistemology.

READINGS

Ritschl is quite difficult to read and not a lot has been well translated to English, so we have some secondary material.

Harnack, A “What is Christianity?”, Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter Term 1899-1900, Lecture 1

Stuckenberg, J (1898) “The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl”, The American Journal of Theology, Vol 2, No 2, pp. 268-292