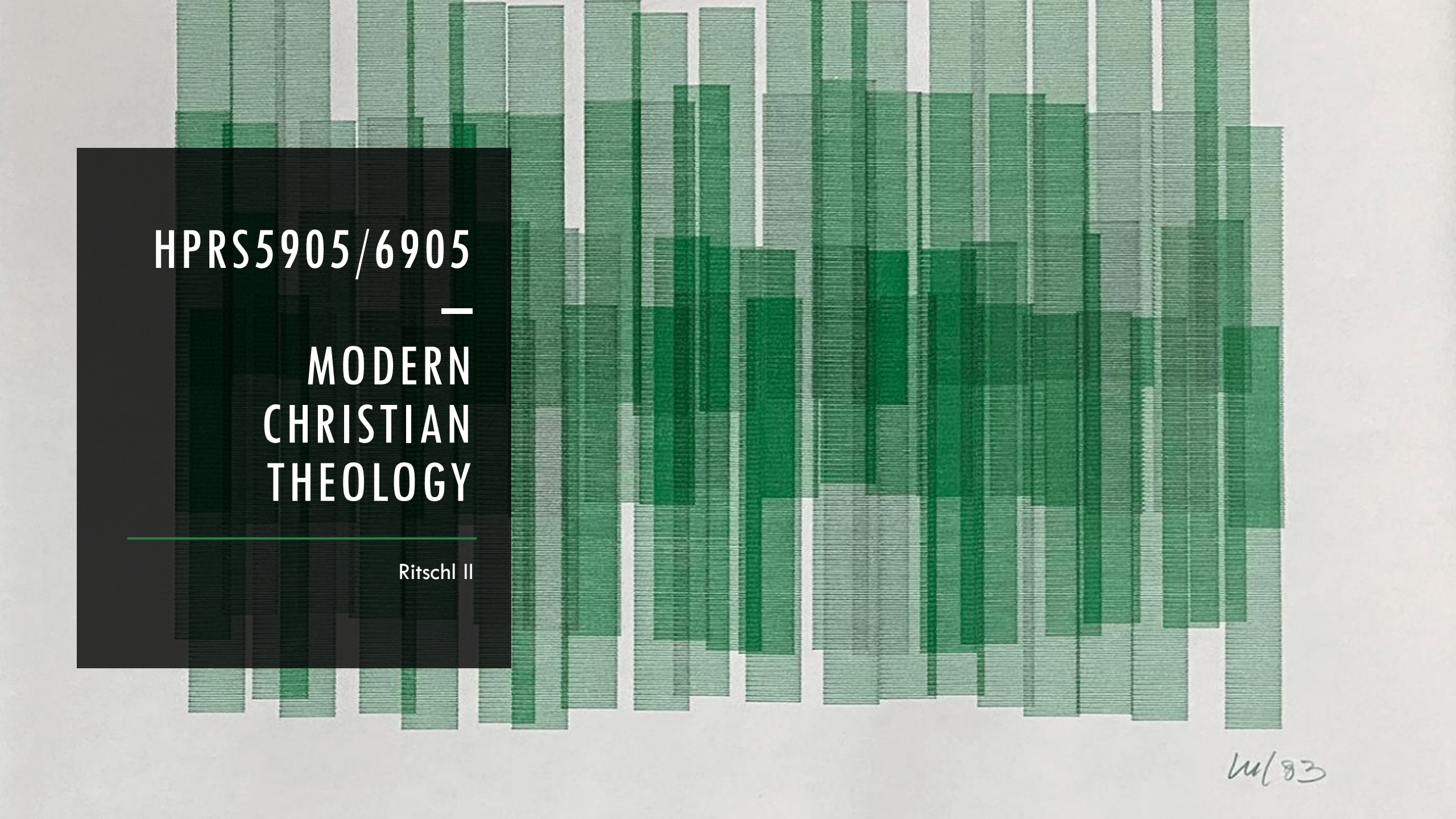


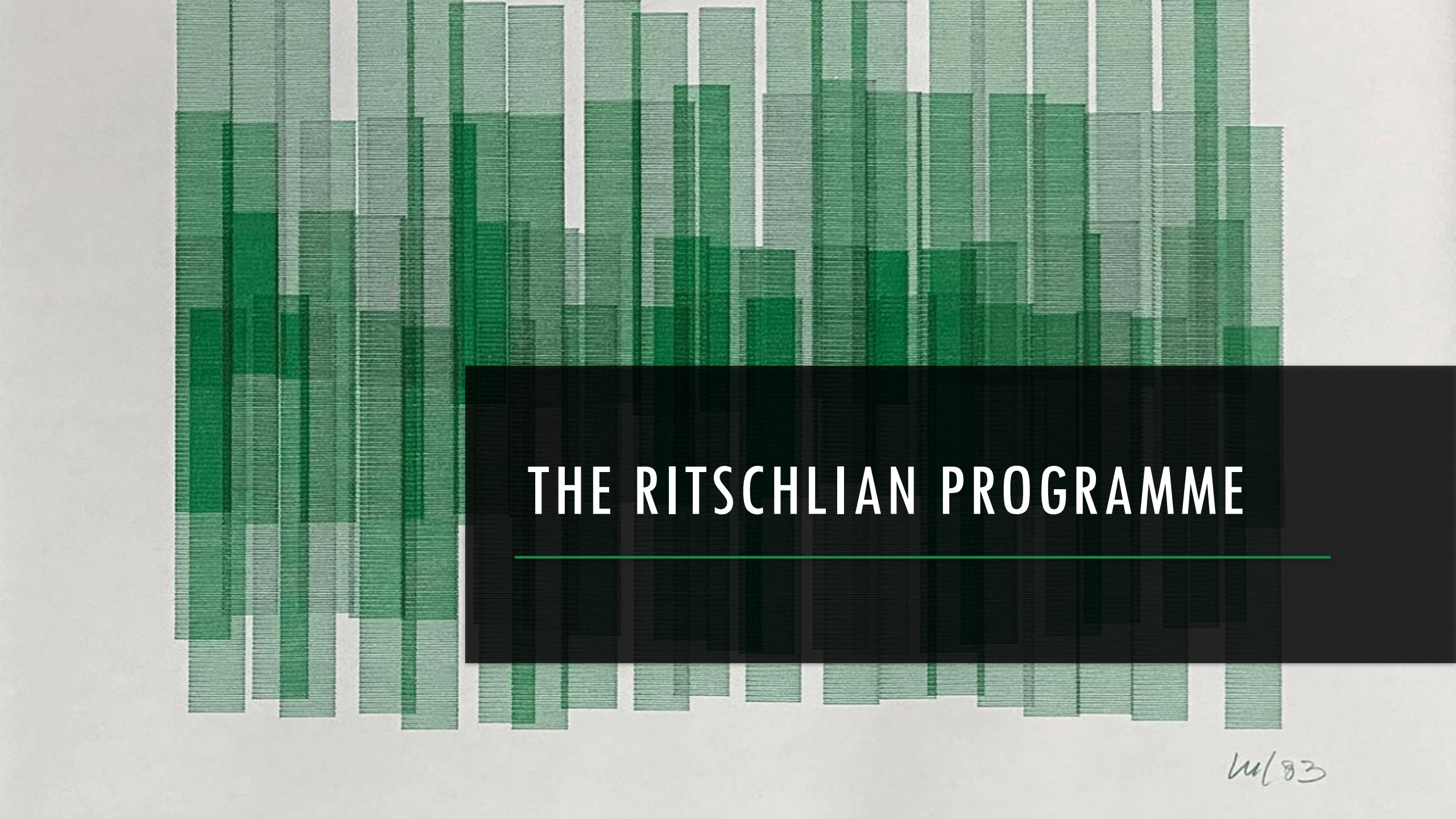


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MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Ritschl II

W/83



THE RITSCHLIAN PROGRAMME

W/83

THE RITSCHLIAN PROGRAMME

The previous session established the methodological foundations of Ritschl's theology:

- the neo-Kantian distinction between facts and values
- the concept of the *Werturteil*, the rejection of speculative metaphysics and mysticism,
- the grounding of theological knowledge in the moral and communal experience of the Christian community.

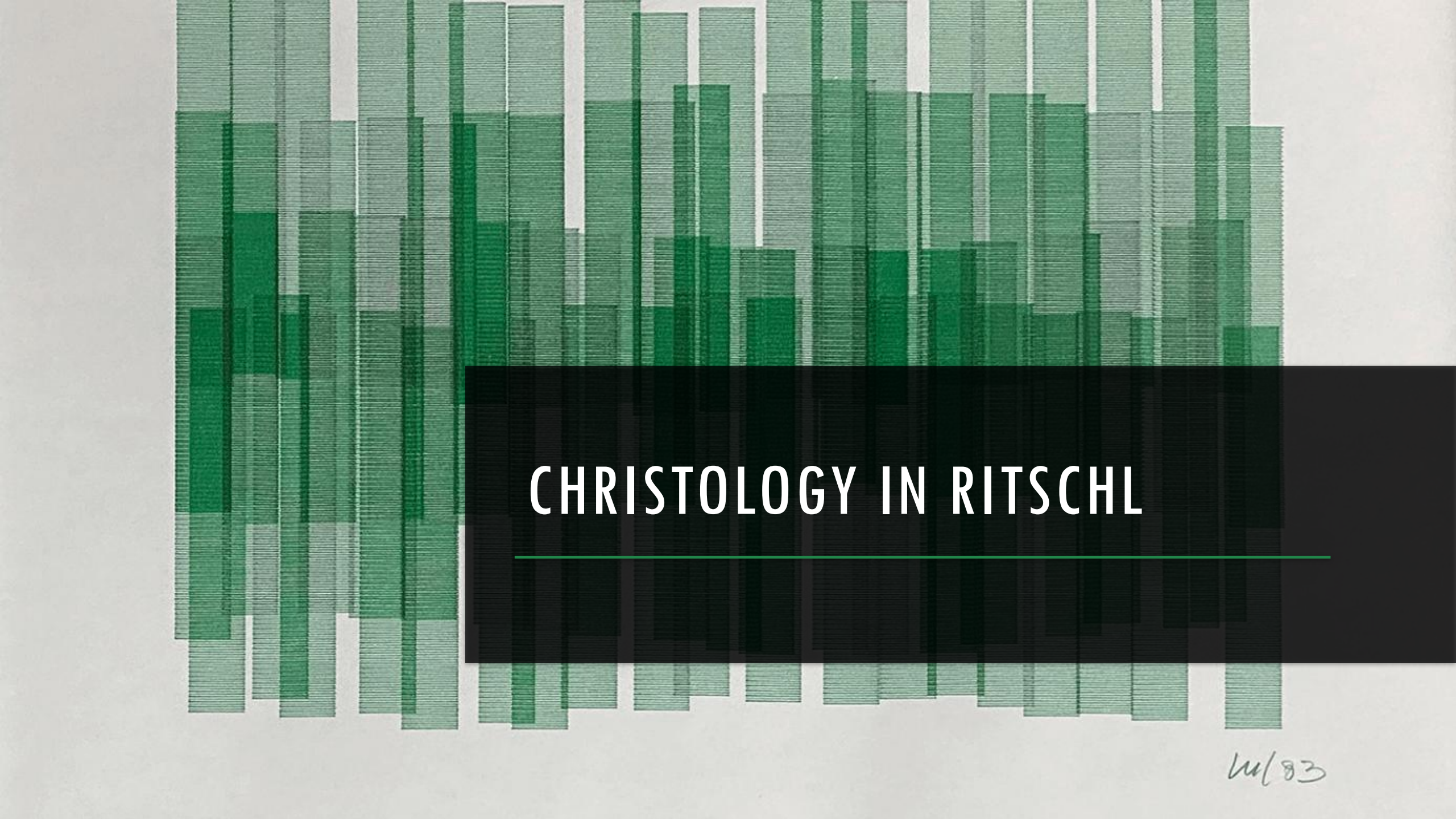
This session deepens the inquiry by examining how these methodological commitments shape Ritschl's treatment of two concepts: Christology and the kingdom of God.

THE RITSCHLIAN PROGRAMME

These two concepts are not independent of each other in Ritschl's system, but instead they are internally related in a way that is really central to the entire project.

Christ is intelligible only in relation to the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is intelligible only in relation to Christ.

It is precisely this tight integration of person and community, of redemption and ethical vocation, that is Ritschl's most distinctive contribution to modern theology.



CHRISTOLOGY IN RITSCHL

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THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PROBLEM

The Christological problem that Ritschl inherits from the tradition is one of the most complex and contested in the history of Christian thought.

The Council of Chalcedon (451) had established the classical formula: Jesus Christ is one person in two natures, fully divine and fully human, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.

This formula had served as the standard formulation of orthodox Christology for fourteen centuries, but by Ritschl's time, it faced pressure from multiple directions simultaneously.



Historicist Biblical Scholarship

Showed that the metaphysical categories of Chalcedon were the product of Greek influence on early Christianity.

Kantian Epistemology

Questioned the legitimacy of any metaphysical claim about the nature of reality beyond our experience.

Social and Cultural Pressures

Found the abstract ontological language of the councils remote from the realities of Christian life.

CHRISTOLOGY IN RITSCHL

So where does Ritschl go with this?

The most fundamental thing to say about Christ in Ritschl's theology is that he is the founder and lord of the Kingdom of God.

This is not merely a secondary or instrumental role assigned to Jesus alongside a more basic Christological identification as it often is in more common forms of Christian theology.

Jesus is understood, first and foremost, through his unique, morally consistent, and divinely ordained task of establishing the community of persons united by love and oriented toward the moral perfection of humanity that Ritschl calls the Kingdom of God.



CHRISTOLOGY IN RITSCHL

This means that Ritschl's Christology is inseparable from his ecclesiology and his ethics.

The question "Who is Christ?" cannot be answered in abstraction from the questions "What did Christ accomplish?" and "What is the community he founded called to be and do?".

The person and work of Christ are, for Ritschl, not two separate topics but a single, integrated reality whose intelligibility depends on holding them together.



CHRIST AS A MORAL EXEMPLAR

Christ is not merely the proclaimer of the Kingdom though. He does not just tell us or show us what a perfect community might look like, he is its embodiment. The one who, in his own historical existence, lived out with absolute consistency the orientation toward God and the service of humanity that constitutes the Kingdom's inner spirit.

His moral perfection is not simply the sinlessness of one who has never been tempted; it is the active, positive realisation of the full human vocation in obedience to God and love toward others, maintained with unbroken constancy through suffering, opposition, and ultimately death



CHRIST AS A MORAL EXEMPLAR

This means that Christ, for the community of the kingdom, is both the ground of justification and the pattern of life, that is the one whose redemptive influence frees believers from guilt and condemnation, and the one whose moral personality provides the defining model of what membership in the Kingdom community concretely requires.

The two functions — exemplar and redeemer — are not identical in Ritschl's system, but they are quite tightly connected.



CHRIST AS REVEALER

So, if Christ is our moral exemplar, what does he tell us about God, if anything?

For Ritschl, it is through the historical person of Jesus – e.g. through his proclamation, his actions, his moral personality, and his relationship to God – that the community of faith knows God as Father.

This might appear to turn us back towards natural theology (look out the window and the world tells us about God), but Ritschl is very clear that this knowledge is not supplemented or corrected by natural theology; it is the sole reliable source of theological knowledge.



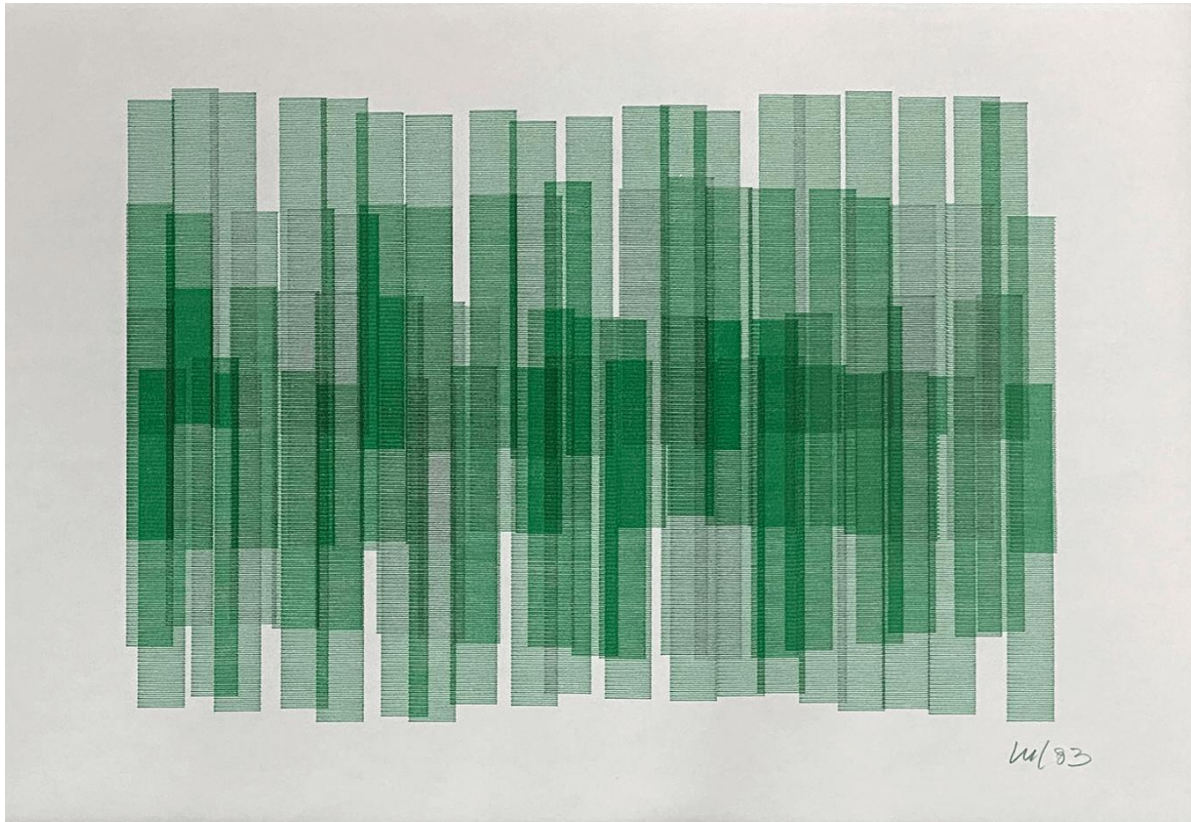
CHRIST AS REVEALER

Ritschl insists that the Christian conception of God as Father, that is the God who wills the Kingdom of ends, who sustains the community of love, who receives sinners through justification etc., is derived entirely from the historical revelation in Christ and cannot be inferred from the general structures of nature or our reason.

Christ's revelatory significance is therefore what we call 'exclusive': knowledge of the God of Christian faith is available only through him.

But, and this is characteristic of Ritschl, this exclusivity is understood in historical and experiential rather than metaphysical terms.





SUMMARY

Through his actions and story, Christ tells us what God is like in a very specific and exclusive way, which serves as a moral example to us, allowing us to develop and experience the feeling of community in a way that we would not otherwise be able to do.

For Ritschl, this is Christ's purpose and the basis of his uniqueness – it is experiential and grounded in the community he builds, not in specific metaphysical claims.

THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST AS A VALUE JUDGEMENT

Ritschl's account of Christ's divinity is the point at which his method is most sharply tested and most clearly exposes its commitments.

He declines to affirm the Chalcedonian formula in its traditional metaphysical form, and he is equally reluctant to reduce Christ to a merely human moral teacher.

His solution is the value judgement: Christ is divine in the sense that he has the worth of God for the community of faith.



THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN RITSCHL

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN RITSCHL

Following on from Ritschl's Christology, the Kingdom of God is the supreme organising concept of his theology, the lens through which every other theological category must be understood and evaluated.

His definition is carefully constructed: the kingdom of God is the divinely ordained community of persons united by love, oriented toward the moral perfection of humanity, founded by Jesus Christ through his redemptive work, and sustained through the ongoing life of the Church.



Present and Future

The Kingdom is both a present reality and a future goal: it is partially embodied in the Christian community now, and it is the end to which that community is moving.

Communal and Social

The Kingdom is not the aggregation of individual salvations, but a social reality — a fellowship of mutual love and moral obligation.

Religious and Ethical

Participation in the Kingdom is simultaneously the reception of God's grace and the exercise of moral freedom.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN RITSCHL

A question that Ritschl's concept of the Kingdom inevitably raises is its relationship to existing social institutions like the Church and to the world beyond the Church.

Ritschl is notably reticent about identifying the Kingdom of God straightforwardly with any existing ecclesiastical or social structure, including the Prussian Protestant Church in which he was embedded.

The Kingdom is the goal toward which **all** social institutions are called to move, but none of them in their existing form is simply identical with it.



THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN RITSCHL

But, and this is important, at the same time, Ritschl's Kingdom is emphatically this-worldly in its orientation.

It is to be realised in the fabric of human social life in the here and now, not in a purely eschatological future, or a privatised interior individual space.

This is a really world-affirming, socially engaged character of the Kingdom of God which has made it a natural resource for the Social Gospel movement in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Protestant theology, as well as more contemporary forms of Liberation Theology.



JUSTIFICATION AND FORGIVENESS

This has consequences for Ritschl's doctrine of justification, which represents one of his most controversial departures from the Reformation heritage of his tradition.

Luther and Calvin had understood justification as the judicial declaration of the sinner's righteousness before God, a divine verdict that is wholly gracious, wholly external to the sinner, and wholly independent of any moral transformation on the sinner's part.

Ritschl reconceives justification as the forgiveness of sin's understood as the removal of guilt and estrangement that impedes the sinner's participation in the community of the kingdom.



JUSTIFICATION AND FORGIVENESS

It is worth thinking the consequences of this through, as it differs significantly from the way that justification is usually thought of.

First, the idea of justification as an act of divine grace, not of human moral achievement, remains, but it is reframed as the divine act that restores the sinner to membership in the community of the Kingdom of God, rather than as a verdict delivered at a divine tribunal.

The community dimension is primary here: justification is not the isolated transaction between an individual soul and God, but the act by which God incorporates the sinner into the fellowship of the redeemed.



JUSTIFICATION AND FORGIVENESS

Crucially, this process of justification results in the reconciliation of the believer with God, a full account of what Christ accomplishes in his work.

Where Ritschl's vision of justification addresses the guilt and estrangement that result from our sin, reconciliation addresses the fear of divine condemnation and the sense of hostile otherness between God and humanity.

Through Christ's mediating work between God and ourselves, the believer is brought into a relationship with God characterised by trust, freedom, and the assurance of divine favour, rather than a feeling of disconnectedness and fear.



ATONEMENT

Ritschl explicitly rejects the satisfaction theory of the atonement associated with Anselm and developed in Protestant orthodoxy: the idea that Christ's death satisfies the demands of divine justice by bearing the punishment that sinful humanity deserves.

This theory, for Ritschl, imports an alien legal and commercial language into the Gospel, making God appear as a creditor whose honour must be satisfied before forgiveness becomes possible.

It represents precisely the kind of metaphysical speculation that theology must avoid.



ATONEMENT AND ECCLESIOLOGY

In its place, Ritschl offers an account of Christ's work in terms of his consistent obedience to his vocation, and his founding of the community through which his redemptive influence continues to operate.

Christ reconciles humanity to God not by satisfying a legal demand, but by demonstrating and communicating the love of God in the face of human sin.

This makes the Church not primarily a cultic institution for Ritschl, e.g. a community organised around sacramental rites or authoritative teachings, but an ethical community that teaches us through practice – quite a radical divergence again!



The True Church

The mark of the true 'Church' is ethical, rather than institutional. It is where the Kingdom is being pursued most effectively.

The Edge of the Church

The boundary between the 'Church' and the world is not absolute, but is the goal of all humanity, not just the baptised community.

The Mission of the Church

What then is the mission of the Church? It is primarily the moral transformation of individuals and societies towards the Kingdom, rather than performing sacraments.

ATONEMENT AND ECCLESIOLOGY

The practical corollary of Ritschl's Kingdom theology is a distinctive account of the Christian life as vocation. Every believer, having received justification and reconciliation through Christ, is called to exercise their particular station in life as means of advancing the Kingdom of God.

Christian vocation is therefore not the sanctification of ordinary life, but the active orientation of ordinary life towards moral ends. This means that the Christian life is characterised above all by a composed, confident engagement with the structures of social life.

The Christian who has been freed from guilt and reconciled to God is equipped for a productive, morally engaged worldly existence — neither retreating from the world into privatised piety nor being absorbed by it without moral purpose

CRITICISM OF RITSCHL

The most persistent and serious criticism directed at Ritschl's Christology and soteriology is the charge of reductionism: that by reconceiving Christ's person in terms of value judgements, and his work in terms of a moral example, Ritschl has reduced Christianity to something that is no longer adequately distinguishable from secular ethical idealism.

If what makes Christ divine is that he functions as the supreme organising value for the community of faith, then the logical pressure is toward a Christology that makes Christ the projection of that community's highest aspirations.

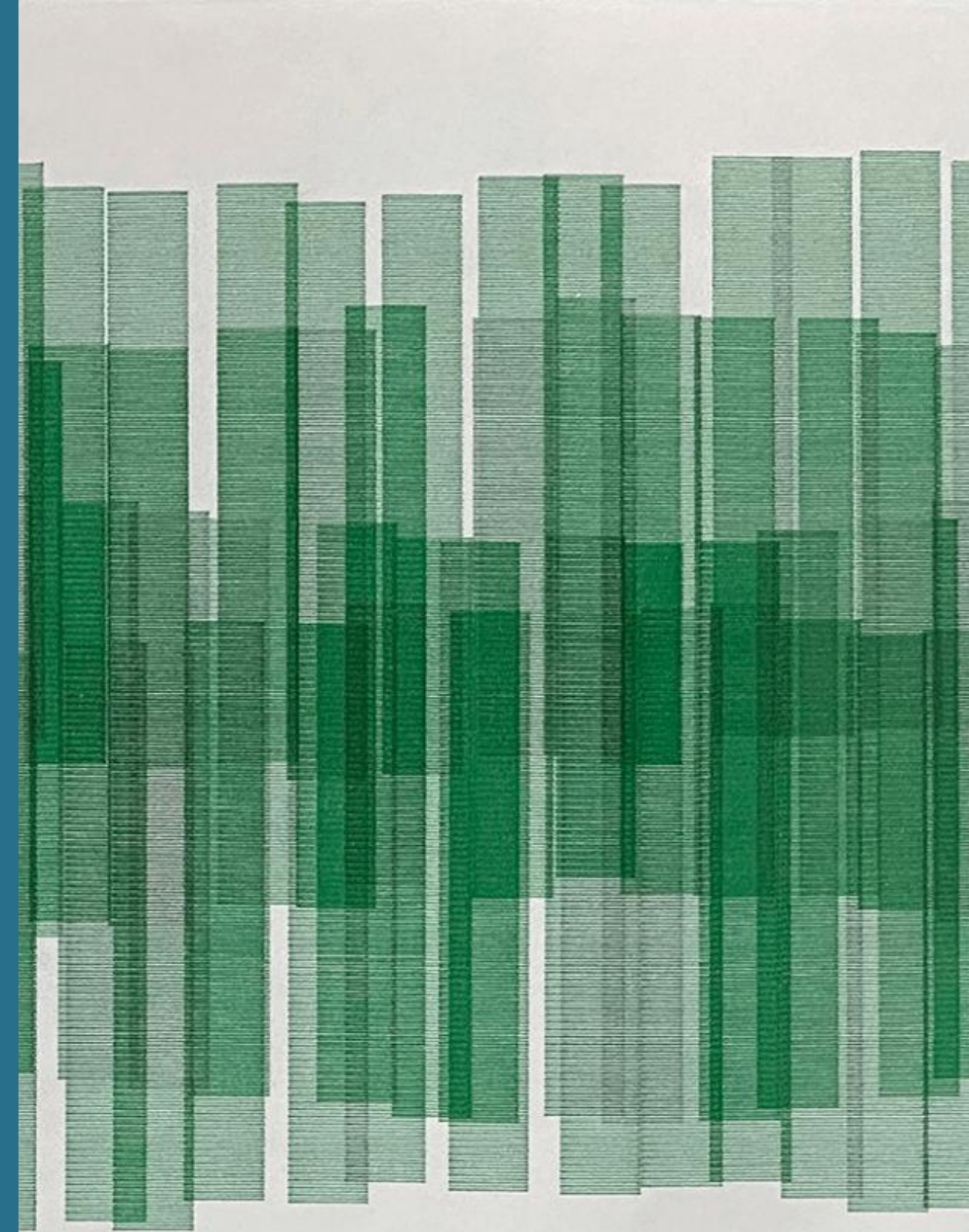


CRITICISM OF RITSCHL

A related but distinct critique is the charge of moralism: the accusation that Ritschl has so thoroughly ethicised Christianity that its distinctively religious dimensions (e.g. worship, prayer, the sense of divine presence etc.) are marginalised.

His system has no room for the experiential, devotional, and affective dimensions of Christian piety, nor for the sacramental, liturgical, and contemplative life of the Church.

From within the liberal tradition itself, figures like Troeltsch (to come!) argued that Ritschl's reduction of religion to ethical community had impoverished theology's capacity to account for the specifically religious like the sense of the holy or the experience of transcendence, that is irreducible to moral experience.



READINGS

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