

Shepherds of the Empire: Germany's Conservative Protestant Leadership—1888-1919.

By Mark R. Correll. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2014.

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This thoughtful inquiry into the “dissemination of theological ideas” (15) seeks to complicate conventional accounts of Protestantism in Wilhelminian Germany, and to a considerable extent it succeeds. Despite what his subtitle might imply, Mark Correll’s concern is not the general superintendents and *Konstitualräte* who controlled the commanding heights of the institutional church. Correll focuses attention, rather, on what he sees as a loose but consequential network of churchmen who in various ways sought to revitalize orthodox theology and practice as a transformative force in a fragmenting Protestant community. Broadly speaking, these “conservative leaders” embraced a theology of God’s Word that was both modern and “believing,” a creative alternative to the sterile rationalism of much liberal academic theology (and the smug moralism of bien-pensant bourgeois *Kulturprotestantismus*) but also the sclerotic Biblicism still common in the shrinking ranks of active churchgoers. Their “biblical realism,” as Correll terms it, stressed believers’ subjective appropriation of divine truth rather than a priori dogmatic assertions and called for an ethic of personal and communal response that would address the multiple crises confronting church, state, and society in the latter decades of Second Empire.

Much of the book is devoted to a sympathetic analysis of four representative figures: two university theologians and two activist preacher-politicians. Correll offers a mildly revisionist account of the controversial sometime court preacher and Christian-Social party leader Adolf Stoecker, de-emphasizing the notorious anti-Semitic agitation of Stoecker the politician in favor of his earlier efforts as an “architect of the believing community” (42), laboring to forge effective church-political alliances among the rank and file of theologically “positive” clergy and laity. A striking contrast to Stoecker’s paternalistic social conservatism was the political trajectory of the idiosyncratic pietist Christoph Blumhardt, a proto-charismatic whose personal brand of biblical realism, developed largely outside traditional academic circles, placed special emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit. It also fueled a chiliastic vision that led Blumhardt to perceive signs of the inbreaking earthly Kingdom of God in the program of the putatively atheistic and revolutionary Social Democratic Party, which he joined in 1899 and represented for one term in the Württemberg state assembly. Director of an independent retreat center inherited from his faith-healer father and namesake, Blumhardt always operated by choice and necessity on the margins of the organized church and in fact ceased to exercise the functions of an ordained pastor years before church officials formally defrocked him for his political activities. To cast him as a leader in any conventional sense may therefore be a bit of a stretch, but his importance for Correll lies in the fact that he exemplifies “the breadth of possibility and the diversity of opinion within the believing...community” (180).

The two theologians whom Correll treats in detail from the essential core of his study, Martin Kähler, a relative of Stoecker by marriage, held a university chair in Halle for decades and was one of the chief guiding spirits of the “modern-positive” faction in Prussia; his younger Swiss-born colleague Adolf Schlatter, famously called to Berlin in 1893 as a conservative counterweight to liberal icon Adolf von Harnack (with whom he in fact enjoyed cordial relations), went on to an equally lengthy tenure in Tübingen’s theological faculty. In their teaching and scholarship, both men articulated perspectives that affirmed the authority of Scripture as divine revelation while at the same time—Schlatter to a greater degree than Kähler—accepting and employing methods of modern critical scholarship. Correll does an impressive job of tracing their personal and professional interactions and teasing out commonalities and contrasts in their approaches, including subtle but significant differences in views of the church and its relationship to the German nation. These chapters are perhaps the richest and most original part of the book.

In the end, the Protestant community at large did not follow where Kähler, Schlatter, and their allies sought to lead. The book's concluding chapters explore their failure to influence prevailing discourses in the nation's pulpits. Given the structure and content of university curricula, ordinands were typically ill-equipped to translate academic theological ideas into concrete homiletical practice. Instead, most relied by default on time-honored providentialist topoi that posited direct connections between obedience and apostasy, national as well as personal, and divine rewards and punishments—a tendency to which Correll's conservative leaders themselves were not entirely immune, as the case of Stoecker in particular testifies. The catastrophe of world war conclusively undermined the credibility of such formulas, setting the stage for Barth's famous dialectical challenge to the implicit faith in progress shared by pre-war Protestants of all theological stripes. Much of the argument here is familiar from earlier studies. Correll's approach is noteworthy, however, for relying not on the usual published sermon collections but on a (necessarily limited) sampling of candidate sermons drawn from church personnel files, a source that to my knowledge has rarely if ever been exploited by scholars.

It is manifestly impossible in a brief review to do justice to the fine-grained texture of Correll's account. Those looking for nits to pick in his study will find occasional minor infelicities and inaccuracies throughout the book. (One not entirely trivial example: the Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat—the highest administrative body in most territorial churches, including Prussia—is more than once mistakenly conflated with the Prussian synod, a separate, nominally elected representative assembly.) But these in no way detract from the value of his insights. The book wisely confines itself to the specific context and concerns of the Second Empire, but interested readers will no doubt be tempted to ponder suggestive parallels with other times and places, not least the latter-day informal Protestant establishment in the United States.

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