

15. The View of Albrecht Ritschl

The most important theologian and historian of the early church in the latter half of the nineteenth century was Albrecht Ritschl (A.D. 1822-1889). Ritschl was greatly influenced by Kant and by Schleiermacher. Kant taught him that knowledge of things in themselves was unattainable; Schleiermacher taught him that religious consciousness was the source of faith. Yet he felt that Schleiermacher's emphasis upon religious consciousness was too individual-oriented; the proper norm of faith is the religious consciousness of the Christian community. Applied to Christology, these concepts meant that metaphysical thinking about Christ was meaningless to the religious experience of the first disciples; such questions as whether Christ was preexistent, had two natures, or was one Person of a Trinity, had no meaning for the experience of the early church, and therefore no significance for faith.

Ritschl held that Christ was a man, a revelation of what God is in love, the pattern of what man may be, the bearer of God's moral authority over men, and the Founder of the kingdom of God. In view of His teachings, example, and influence (by which He redeems man), and in view of His work and service, He is worthy to be called God.

Ritschl strongly influenced Wilhelm Herrmann (A.D. 1846-1922), a professor of theology at Marburg, and Adolf von Harnack (A.D. 1851-1930), an outstanding church historian at Berlin.