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A. F. C. VILMAR:
THEOLOGY OF CHURCH AND MINISTRY

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
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May 2007

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedicated to the Reverend Doctor
Ronald Feuerhahn,
Advisor, Friend, Doctor of the Church.
*In ecclesia non valet: hoc ego dico, hoc
tu dicis, hoc ille dicit, sed:
Haec dicit Dominus.*
-Augustine

ABSTRACT

Conkling, Martin E. "A. F. C. Vilmar: Theology of Church and Ministry." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2007. 271 pp.

This historical study explores the theology of A. F. C. Vilmar. The theology of church and ministry championed by Vilmar received critical attention in his own day, and he remains a bright star in the constellation of nineteenth century Lutheran theologians who sought to restore Lutheranism to the strength of its confessional origins and to correct the cultural tendencies of thought gone wrong in revolutionary Europe. Little secondary literature exists on this "Theologian of Fact" in English, and virtually none of his extensive works have been translated for English-speaking theologians to profit from his insightful analysis of that age when the church became a question to itself. Literature on Vilmar can easily be classified pro or con as it assesses the content of his theology. What has so long been overlooked is the hermeneutical method he used to produce a view of the church that remains compelling and profound—even in our post-critical age. Vilmar's close up analysis, intimately intertwined with the issues facing the church, led others to label his world view as "metahistorical." Today we might label this effort "metacritical" as he sought to correct errors of his time. The study of Vilmar from this historical vantage point opens a door for the reader to enter the tumultuous Western world where revolution arrived, according to the Theologian of Fact, "from above and from below." Even more, Vilmar asked questions and proposed answers to the continuing problems of church and ministry that many will find compelling and even startling, since they were proposed by a man who lived so long ago.

INTRODUCTION

THE TIMELY QUESTION OF THE CHURCH

“In the future all is forgotten (*In futuram oblivionem*).” This epitaph pronounced on all doctrine by one of August F. C. Vilmar’s theology professors coincided with what F. Lichtenberger termed “the end of the era of dogmatism” occasioned by the prevailing view that all teaching and belief were subjective and thus fleeting.¹ August F. C. Vilmar (1800–1868) wanted to find something that would not be forgotten, something of which he could be absolutely certain, a certainty that eluded him in his theological studies at the University of Marburg. His concern highlighted what many in his day would brand as the failure of contemporary epistemology and the presuppositions of liberal theology to lend any certainty to the content of Christian teaching, whether it be based upon a discredited Kantian rationalism, a theology of Hegelian idealism, or the Romantic religion of feeling associated with Schleiermacher. Vilmar wrote of the impact of a bankrupt theology of oblivion on the students of theology:

These sections [of dogmatics] were chiefly the ones on faith, on justification through faith, of the person of Christ, of the sacraments and of the gifts of grace by the Holy Spirit. But they had no meaning; only for pen and paper, mainly meant for examinations, for learning and subsequent forgetting of established words and formulas; all these things were schemes and schematics, mainly sufficient for awarding and obtaining ordination (*theologische chria aphthoniana*). But with other things, which those dogmatics contained, it was no different . . . that there was no God, and that he would not be revealed to us but become increasingly dark in these dogmatics, to us immortality would be doubtful, the forgiveness of sins needless—a way of speaking for the “moral endeavor” and the sacrifice on Golgotha reduced to nothing.²

¹ F. [No first name provided] Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 158.

² A. F. C. Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen wider Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984; reprint, 3d partially rev. ed., Marburg, 1857), 1. “Es waren das vorzugsweise die Abschnitte vom Glauben, von der Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben, von der Person Christi, von den Sacramenten und von den Gnadengaben des heiligen Geistes. Damit war es also nichts; nur für die Feder und

Vilmar's theology expressed the solution to this dilemma within the matrix of the church. He found there a correction of the doubt generated by theologies based on human presuppositions and concepts of the church that were scripturally unsound and consequently injurious to Christianity. His views placed him in opposition to prevailing opinions on the nature of the church. It was plain in Vilmar's day that church polity transcended mere organization and reflected definite theological perceptions, and in the early nineteenth century these concepts of polity reflected the prevailing German Protestant theology of the period.

Vilmar's answer to the troubling question of certainty was to locate the task of theology within the church. He rejected all philosophical epistemology which sought to demonstrate the validity of particular theologies either formally or substantively. That is to say, his approach was at its origin a hermeneutical shift, that as he began not by arguing substantive issues but by identifying presuppositions that clouded the "scientific" pursuit of the "systematic" (a term Vilmar rejected as imposing philosophic presuppositions on theology without warrant) based upon theology of his day. This formal shift lent a unique view to the understanding of doctrine and its relationship to Bible and Confession. As one author recently observed:

Vilmar occupies an important place in the history of interpretation. Long before Albert Schweitzer, he objected to the commonly held idea that historical criticism could provide a better understanding of Scripture than that held by earlier generations. He drew a clear distinction between theology, as the study of God and his works, and exegesis, which he regarded as primarily a literary technique. This distinction was not widely appreciated in his own day, and Vilmar was severely criticized for making it, but it has become more widely accepted in recent times.³

das Papier, höchstens für das Examen zum Lernen und Wiedervergessen bestimmte Worte und Formeln, Schemata und Schemen waren alle diese Dinge, höchstens dazu gut genug, um eine theologische chria aphthoniana daraus und darnach anzufertigen. Aber mit den andern Dingen, welche jene Dogmatik enthielt, war es nicht anders bestellt . . . dass ein Gott sei, wurde uns nicht offenbar, sondern dunkel und immer dunkler in dieser Dogmatik, die "Unsterblichkeit" wurde uns mehr als zweifelhaft, die Sündenvergebung vergeblich—ein modus loquendi für das "sittliche Streben"—und das Opfer auf Golgatha zu nichts gemacht."

³ Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 330–31.

For Vilmar the task of theology was internal to the church whose reality is not found in an abstraction but in the very presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit. It was solely the church's task to write theology and formulate doctrinal statements and not—as the common practice was and remains to this day—that of a scholar isolated in the academy, producing one's own system of theology apart from the norm of Scripture and apart from the doctrinal inheritance of the church. Rather, doctrine manifested the church's "experiences and events (*Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse*)," developed not merely for a single generation and to be subsequently discarded for something more useful, but to be received and passed on by succeeding generations as a norm. This contextual basis of theology rejected all abstractions that laid an unfounded claim to objectivity under the name of "science." Rejecting abstractions (which Vilmar would brand as an empty "rhetoric"), he sought reality in God's word and in the historical experience of the church: "Theology serves real life, the real life in this world in eternity, and every view of the theologian which neglects real life is a false view."⁴ In this manner, Vilmar joined the lively theological discussion over the nature of the church. This discussion was decidedly a fight, employing the word "*Kampf*" in all literature looking back on the debate.

"In our day all people are talking about the church," wrote Wilhelm Löhe in 1844, "Everybody has an inkling that 'church' is not simply a name, but only a few realize what a precious and luminous reality lies behind that name."⁵ Löhe voiced the opinion of other Lutheran theologians such as Vilmar who found it necessary to explain the doctrine of the church in the face of contrary views developed over time and by the early nineteenth century were widely

⁴ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 5. "Die Theologie dient dem wirklichen Leben, dem wirklichen Leben in dieser Welt and in der Ewigkeit, und jeder Blick, welchen der Theolog neben dem wirklichen Leben vorbei tghut, ist ein falscher Blick."

⁵ Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans., ed. and with an introduction by James L. Schaff, *Seminar Editions*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 47.

accepted. Vilmar identified the theological moment when this question came to the forefront of theological concern:

The doctrine of the church, which in the time of the rule of rationalism and supernaturalism [the Enlightenment, especially the eighteenth century] belongs to the most gaunt and distorted periods of dogmatics, has grown in recent times to the most prominent of all doctrines (one normally dates it externally beginning with the tercentennial of the Reformation in 1817 and that of the Augsburg Confession in 1830).⁶

Vilmar's efforts had great effect on his own country of Lower Hesse (*Niederhessen*) or Electoral Hesse (*Kurhessen*), where Hermann Sasse asserts that by his endeavors representing the General Superintendent of the Diocese of Kassel: "[he] had begun to lead the Electoral Hessian church, which Vilmar had led out of the sleep of the Enlightenment and from the course of muddled confessional circumstances, back to its old Lutheran confession."⁷ However, this impact was not confined to a small German state in a remote time and place.

H. Echternach compared Vilmar to an Old Testament prophet because he had a view that encompassed a "metahistorical dimension," that is to say a prophetic insight, as he saw the impact of the modern liberal theology on the church.⁸ About this prophetic tone, Bernhard Lohse recognized that Vilmar addressed a real danger to the faith.

There is no doubt that Vilmar had an especially sharp eye for the many-faceted tendencies for disintegration in the past century [i.e., the nineteenth century]. Even if we do not want to concede that the "metahistorical view" was opened to him, nevertheless Vilmar largely rightly recognized the dangers that threatened theology. . . . It [these tendencies] had to be fatal for theology and church if the object of faith is lost in an idea which has nothing more to do with real history.⁹

⁶ A. F. C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, ed. K. W. Piderit (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 181. "Die Lehre von der Kirche, welche in der Zeit der Herrschaft des Rationalismus und Supernaturalismus zu den magerfsten und verkümmertesten Abschnitten der Dogmatik gehörte, ist in der neueren Zeit (man datiert gewöhnlich äusserlich von den beiden Jubiläen der Reformation 1817 und der A.C. 1830) zu der hervorragendsten unter allen Lehren der Dogmatik herangewachsen."

⁷ Hermann Sasse, "Forward" to *Dogmatik: Academische Vorlesungen*, vol. 1, by A. F. C. Vilmar (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1938), xiv. ". . . der kurhessischen Kirche, Vilmar aus dem Schlaf der Aufklärung aufgerüttelt und aus dem ganz unklaren Konfessionsverhältnissen zu ihrem alten lutherischen Bekenntnis zurückzuführen begonnen hatte."

⁸ H. [No first name given] Echternach, "Vilmar's Theology der Tatsachen," *Eckhart* 25 (1955/56): 414; quoted in Bernhard Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung bei A.F.C. Vilmar," in *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1957): 445.

⁹ Bernhard Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung bei A. F. C. Vilmar," *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1957): 467. "Es

But whether displaying a “metahistorical view” or simply acting upon a conviction opposed to those “many-faceted tendencies,” he was consequently condemned by many if not the majority of contemporary Protestant theologians of the German-speaking church.

Yet the issue would not pass with Vilmar and the contemporary questions that occasioned his joining the fray. The German church again had to face the issues concerning polity, the essence, and the mandate of the church in the 1930s. Confessional Lutherans such as Hermann Sasse saw the discernment and insights of Vilmar to be a ready resource again as the church sought to demonstrate its own legitimacy against the state church of the Third Reich. The crisis occasioned a reprint of Vilmar’s *Dogmatik* and Sasse found this a hopeful sign.

It is no bad sign for the theologians of our time that a new edition of the *Dogmatik* of Vilmar can appear. The deep lack of understanding with which theology of his and recent times, and even Lutheran theology, opposed the great Hessian churchman—no theological faculty awarded him a doctorate – is explained in part that no one perceived the seriousness of the church’s situation which Vilmar saw with prophetic view.¹⁰

The pressing issue of the church, as well as the corresponding lack of understanding of the related questions, extends into our own day and will not be ignored. It is not a topic that can be relegated to the distant nineteenth century or to the nearer German church two or three generations distant. Ecumenism is only one issue in our own time that keeps the issue of the church at center stage. As the Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson recently observed in a book review:

ist kein Zweifel, dass Vilmar für die mannigfachen Auflösungstendenzen des vergangenen Jahrhunderts ein besonders scharfes Auge gehabt hat. Wenn wir auch nicht gerade sagen möchten, dass ihm der Blick in “metahistorische Dimensionen” geöffnet war, so hat Vilmar doch die Gefahren, die der Theologie drohten, zum guten Teil richtig erkannt . . . es für Theologie und Kirche tödlich sein muss, wenn der Gegenstand des Glaubens in eine Idee aufgelöst wird, die nichts mehr mit der realen Geschichte zu tun hat.”

¹⁰ Sasse, foreword to *Dogmatik*, xv. “Dass heute ein Neudruck der *Dogmatik* von Vilmar erscheinen kann, ist kein schlechtes Zeichen für die Theologie unserer Zeit. Die tiefe Verständnislosigkeit, mit der die Theologie, auch die luthersche Theologie, seiner und der später Zeit, dem grossen hessischen Kirchenmann gegenüberstand—keine Theologische Fakultät hat ihn zum Doktor promoviert – erklärt sich zum Teil daraus, dass niemand den Ernst der kirchlichen Lage verstand, den Vilmar mit prophetischem Blick sah.”

As Pannenberg notes, ecclesiology has become a major theological enterprise only in this century, most decisively in the ecumenism that began after World War II. For most of the Church's history, the Church was understood as a presupposition of theology rather than as a problem for it; and until Vatican II no great council had thought to promulgate doctrine about the Church herself. . . . The questions of what the Church is and how she may be identified becomes urgent.¹¹

Jenson's assertion, with Pannenberg, exposes any misconception that questions of the doctrine of the church must be relegated to a former century, where "that battle has already been fought." Rather such questions recognize that theological discussion must address what remains an unresolved issue, one that finds little agreement among the different denominations and indeed within the various denominations.

Jenson's view also reveals a common misperception. As we shall see, the doctrine of the church received widespread and profound examination already in the nineteenth century. This examination was not confined to Protestant circles but was debated also among the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians as a prelude to Vatican I. The Lutheran Confessional renewal coincided with a similar renewed interest in the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century. Because of differing presuppositions and method, the doctrinal discussion among theologians and laymen alike proceeded with disagreement and rancor. Jenson also makes another observation about the church in our time that requires closer observation: if the church is simply presupposed, then is it presupposed as just another chapter in the context of dogmatic undertakings, or is it consciously recognized as the *context itself* in which all doctrine is really, or at least legitimately, produced? Or stated otherwise, do we recognize the church only substantively, as if it is a chapter among many addressed in dogmatic texts, or do we recognize it formally as determining the very setting and presupposition of theology itself? Vilmar saw that the doctrine of the church was not simply another chapter of a dogmatics text. Rather the church

¹¹ Robert W. Jenson, review of *Systematic Theology: Volume 3*, by Wolfhart Pannenberg, *First Things*, 86

was itself the context in which all doctrine had been written up to his own day, and this practice was contrary to that instituted in Germany in the early nineteenth century when “scientific systematic” study was left to a confessionally neutral academy. Vilmar in this regard thought that all theology was legitimately autobiography rather than biography. He contrasted his conviction with that prevailing in his time in Germany. The two choices were those of a theology written according to the Spirit of God or according to that of men.

The lively theological discussion over issues of church and ministry continues into our own day. Because of the prominence of these questions, it is surprising that Vilmar is ignored in many circles. He is hardly known to the English-speaking church, though the literature in German is extensive and seemingly unending, as Vilmar has endured as a source of insight for those embracing a view of the church, its ministry, and its doctrine beyond the confines of liberal theological presuppositions. Correspondingly, he is the continuing object of attack by those who find his view of the church repugnant. Therefore, it is amazing that a man of such originality can remain so neglected in such an extensive part of the Christian church, especially among English-speaking Lutherans. Karl Barth identified his theology of the ministry as original: “In stressing the relationship between theology and the pastorate, Vilmar said something new to his time, and that meant an action whose influence was not reduced by the impetuosity by which it was accomplished.”¹² Barth’s verdict is indicative of a highly original theologian who relentlessly and fearlessly confronted the most pressing issue of his day, seeking a doctrine yet to be formulated. We will see that the extent and originality of his work have yet to be completely recognized.

It is the thesis of this study that Vilmar’s hermeneutics, a method unique to its time but within a wider tradition of metacriticism, provides the basis for his extraordinary theology

(October 1998): 42.

¹²Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Valley Forge:

formed within the matrix of the church. This theology then led him to address tasks he could not overlook: the preaching office, both within the congregation and in the broader society. He placed his hope for church renewal in both arenas and both to be addressed by the ministerium. This study then approaches Vilmar from a new perspective, a perspective largely unnoticed by studies in the 19th and 20th centuries. The following chapter examines the assessments of Vilmar by scholars who have failed to see any originality in his work and may have dismissed him with the tag of reprintation, or those who see his contributions as nothing more than those received from earlier theologians, or even those who commend his achievements but neglect to examine this essential feature of thought necessary for assessing this Theologian of Reality.

Judson Press, 1973), 633.

CHAPTER 1

ON RECEPTION AND CONGRUENCE

Astonishment and Admiration

During the nineteenth century, A. F. C. Vilmar was not ignored, but he was not taken seriously by many except as an object of attack. Typical for its tone—and what proves to be disparate and even contradictory assessments of the Marburg professor—is this description by F. Lichtenberger:

The whole theological movement of Germany from the beginning of this century is attacked and branded in this work [*Theologie der Tatsachen wider Theologie der Rhetoric*]. The author has not rage and insult enough to pour forth against what he calls ‘the theology of rhetoric,’ to which he professes to oppose ‘the theology of facts.’ Through the bespattering mud, which is thrown at all the great names of modern theology, we may try to search out the mother idea of this opusculum, which is the maturest fruit of the tendency which we are endeavoring to characterize [New Lutheranism]. It is to Vilmar that the honour belongs of having inscribed on the standard of his party the name ‘realism,’ which will remain to it, and which, as will be seen, insufficiently conceals that of materialism; for the rhetoric which the professor of Marburg condemns in the theory of Schleiermacher and his successors, is just spiritualism.¹³

Lichtenberger accurately relates the tone and suggests some of the more substantive issues. Of note are the polemical nature of many of the exchanges in a revolutionary time. A noticeable characteristic of Vilmar’s critique is the rejection of the brand of liberal theology associated with Schleiermacher in which theological disciplines were considered positive scientific disciplines. Lichtenberger’s admiration of Schleiermacher is lent the sobriquet of “spiritualism,” which in context suggests an admirable spirituality. The “materialism” he deplores levels an indictment of the close association between these New Lutherans and the conservative forces of reaction

following the Revolution of 1848, as well as the assertion of Vilmar and others, the “Neo-Lutheran party,” that the church is not an ideal but an objective institution guaranteed by laws and treaties. Opponents of the Neo-Lutherans perceived their opposition to a favorable “development of philosophical ideas and the progress of Biblical criticism, sought a refuge in the arms of the state.”¹⁴ Only seldom did astonishment and admiration mix in such descriptions as Vilmar’s “gifted demonic nature” (Hase), or his “resolute character” (Frank), and discovery of this “man of extensive education.”

In Prejorem Partem

Those addressing the countless questions attending church and ministry that are topics for discussion in the present day have often noted Vilmar and lent his theology of church and ministry a special place in the discussion. The discussion was lively in Vilmar’s own day as well, as we have seen from Lichtenberger’s polemic. In more recent times Vilmar has provoked passionate response from enthusiasts and critics alike. The focus has typically been on one prominent point of Vilmar’s theology as the cornerstone for the remaining structure; the resulting criticism is thus often confined to one “single formula” around which Vilmar’s entire theology is constructed. Each “formula” may be a prominent teaching, or it may be the one identified presupposition governing all his other teachings. This method can be found among both Vilmar’s opponents and allies, whose assessments concern us in the next section, “In Meliorum Partem.”

Many have seen Vilmar as a foe and attack him in *perjorem partem*, lending the worst possible meaning to what he said. Vilmar’s point of view is ascribed to one prevailing interest or prejudice and then dismissed by association. Under this guise, he is seen as a “receptionist” of a school of thought or captive to a historical trend. Having identified these influences to their own

¹³Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology*, 439.

satisfaction, critics then dismiss both Vilmar and the supposed sources, considering them as part and parcel based on the same indefensible position, either their unfounded presuppositions or their relative historical nature. There are many examples of such assessments; by coupling the supposed source to the single “formula,” the stage is set for a critique ranging from a considered dismissal to a strident polemic.

These single formulas include: the self-interest of post-Napoleon Restoration (Restauration) politics, the office of the ministry (Amt), the institutional nature of the church as Anstalt, experience (Erfahrung) theology, Vilmar’s supposed Romantic roots, and his lack of a systematically consistent and exhaustive exposition. The standard works in twentieth century studies on Vilmar reflect these criticisms.

Among the critiques is Wilhelm Maurer’s, who in *Aufklärung, Idealismus, und Restauration* portrays Vilmar’s views of church and ministry as proceeding from eighteenth-century empiricism coupled with the “idealism” of the Kassel Historical School, with which Vilmar was associated from 1831–1832.¹⁵ His worldview lent him a conservative, reactionary vision of politics in which the church was best served by aligning itself with the monarchs against social change. The structure of this conservative viewpoint was based in large part on the political philosophy of Karl Ludwig von Haller. Maurer attributes all notions of a legal right attending a Christian confession, either directly or indirectly, to Vilmar’s *Restoration of Political Science* (*Restauration der Staatswissenschaft*). But can all the confessional struggles throughout the German states in that period be attributed to von Haller?¹⁶ Maurer neglects to note any of Vilmar’s mature works after 1850 even though these were available after many of Vilmar’s

¹⁴ Ibid., 421–25.

¹⁵ Wilhelm Maurer, *Aufklärung, Idealismus, und Restauration* (Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1930), 260.

¹⁶ Ibid., 173–78.

lectures were published posthumously, i.e. after 1868. Many of the features, that Maurer emphasizes are almost completely absent among these or at least play only a minor role in Vilmar's more developed thought.¹⁷

Hermann Gunkel attributes Vilmar's exegesis of the Old Testament to a typology identified with the old regime (of Europe), which was attempting to overcome all revolutionary sentiment through restoration of an earlier, conservative concept of family, state, and church, thereby assuring the steadfastness of the king's rule.¹⁸ Such a glib assessment and dismissal of Vilmar's theological work, which stemmed from the Marburg professor's obvious conviction, does not consider his extensive literature on Scripture. Vilmar did consider the Old Testament as a type of conditions in his own day, but this does not even begin to address all that he had to say on the subject of Scriptural authority, exegesis, and interpretation. Nor does such an assessment account for the criticism he levied at the absolutist governments of his day. As we shall see, Vilmar clearly cannot be dismissed simply as a political reactionary.¹⁹

Barbara Schlunk in *Amt und Gemeinde im theologischen Denken Vilmars* locates the single formula in Romanticism, which produced an overemphasis on tradition and history, thus lending authority to Restoration politics and an equally authoritarian view of church and Amt. Likewise, she locates the origins of Vilmar's experience theology in the work of Schleiermacher, whose own experience theology is characterized as early Romantic thought emphasizing individual feeling.²⁰ She fails to explain some of the most important features of Vilmarian theology such as

¹⁷ Bernhard Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung bei A.F.C. Vilmar," *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1957): 464.

¹⁸ Hermann Gunkel, "A. F. C. Vilmar's Auffassung vom Alten Testament," *Evangelische Theologie* 17 (1957): 239.

¹⁹ Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Europäische Krise und das Amt der Kirche: Voraussetzungen der Theologie von A.F.C. Vilmar, Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums*, ed. Max Keller-Hüschemenger, Wilhelm Maurer, Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, Ernst Sommerlath, and Walther Zimmermann 18 (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967), 65.

²⁰ Barbara Schlunk, *Amt und Gemeinde im theologischen Denken Vilmars* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1947), 57–62.

corporate experience over Schleiermacher's emphasis on individual experience and intuition, as well as Vilmar's well-known opposition to the kind of absolutism of Restoration thought that intruded into the spiritual affairs of the church. W. Schneemelcher concurs with Schlunk's "romantic source" in the person of Vilmar's fellow theologian, Julius Stahl (1802–1861), from whom he inherited such romantic concepts as "organic" and an emphasis on experience. This appraisal suffers from the same shortcomings as Schlunk's work and serves to defend W. Schneemelcher's earlier assertion that the Amt originates with the congregation.²¹ Reiner Strunk concludes that Vilmar's teaching on the Amt was an eminently political theology in its origins, receiving its emphasis only by opposition to the revolutions which swept Europe by the nineteenth century and which Vilmar sought to surpress by the authority of the Amt.²²

Most recently, Renate Sälter has examined the activities of Vilmar and the Lutheran movement that he led in Lower Hesse. She emphasizes the politicization of the religious consciousness during this period of attempting a "scientific examination (wissenschaftlich Untersuchung)" of the mixing of politics and religion. Little is said of Lutheran concern over the politicizing of the church by civil authorities of the time; this intrusion was a central concern for all Lutherans following the official (at least) popularity of church unions orchestrated by the various German states beginning in 1817.²³ Awareness that confessional integrity and the need for church independence seriously compromised by the civil government found expression beyond the German states. Such an awareness gave rise to the Anglican Oxford Movement, in which the parallels with the German movement were nothing less than astonishing. "Especially

²¹W. Schneemelcher, "CA VII in Luthertum des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1949/50): 308-33.

²² Reiner Strunk, *Politische Ekklesiologie im Zeitalter der Revolution* (München and Mainz: Chr. Kaiser Verlag and Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1971), 297–305.

²³Renate Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer: Von der fürstentreuen kirchlichen Restaurationspartei zur hessischen Rentienz* (Darmstadt und Marburg: Selbst Verlag der Hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der Historischen Kommission für Hessen, 1985), 8–10. This line of thought is consistently pursued throughout the book,

noteworthy is the fact that both arose out of the conviction that the church qua church must be free of domination by civil authorities.”²⁴

Others would agree with J. Heubach that the concept of the Amt is “the centerpiece (Herzstück) of the theology of Vilmar.” Such a focus does little to explain the objective-subjective aspects of his theology of interpretation and witness. As will be seen, it is in hermeneutical method that Vilmar is largely overlooked and where the student will profitably pursue the basic thought of the Theology of Reality.

For others, the institutional nature of the church is the single nucleus around which all the other aspects of Vilmar find their center of gravity. For J. Hausleiter, only Vilmar’s institutional concept of the church is decisive.²⁵ Holsten Fagerberg warns against such a single-formula assessment (though he will commit much the same error in describing his understanding of the office of the ministry).²⁶ H. Schmidt correctly identifies the overlap between ecclesiology and Christology in Vilmar’s work; the famous Vilmarian identity of the church as “the ‘I’ of Christ” is based upon a Biblical discernment of the theology surrounding the church as the Body of Christ.²⁷

Many writers have noted Vilmar’s use of “experience” with suspicion and attribute its roots to an early Romantic inheritance from Schleiermacher, i.e. religion understood as personal

but the real concerns of the Lutherans for the survival of Christ’s church are not prominent.

²⁴E. Clifford Nelson, *The Rise of World Lutheranism: An American Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 39. German lands not annexed by the Prussians following their victory over the Austrians in 1866 provided a basis of support for those churches that wished to retain their confessional identity. These churchmen were not of one mind; the Lutheran parties are generally categorized in three ways: repristination, high church, and “Erlangen” theologians. Their common concern to preserve a distinctive Lutheran presence in the Second Reich led to the formation of the *Allegemeine Evangelisch—Lutherische Konferenz* (AELK) in Hannover in 1867, p. 36—42. It is astounding that Sälter neglects to mention such an historical movement.

²⁵Johann Haußleiter, “August Christian Friedrich Vilmar,” in *Real-Encyclopedie*, 3^d ed., 652.

²⁶Holsten Fagerberg, *Bekenntnis, Kirche und Amt in der Deutschen Konfessionellen Theologie des 19. Jahrhundert* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri Ab, 1952), 308.

²⁷H. Schmidt, “Ontologie und Personalismus in ihrer Bedeutung für eine Bestimmung des Wesens und Auftrags der Kirche, dargestellt an zwei Beispielen: A.F.C. Vilmar und S. Kirkegaard,” Dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1956, 184.

feeling or conviction apart from dogmatic formulations or a church which speaks with an authority of the external word. Karl Barth, who actually provides a more measured examination of Vilmar, also sees the influence of Schleiermacher in Vilmar's use of "experience."²⁸ Barbara Schlunk attributes this *Erfahrung* to an exclusively personal intuition or feeling.²⁹ Emmanuel Hirsch identifies Vilmar as an enthusiast (*Schwärmer*) whose own intuition is the source of his view of *Amt* and which he dismisses as indistinguishable from similar claims for papal authority.³⁰ F. Lichtenberger makes a comparable assessment: "... the rhetoric which the professor of Marburg condemns in the theory of Schleiermacher and his successors, is just spiritualism."³¹ Whether rooted in Schleiermacher or opposed to him, in vain does one seek consistency in their condemnations of Vilmar's lack of methodological objectivity. None of these authors attempt to explain the prominent understanding of interpretation as a collective task within the church, resulting in objective doctrinal formulation, nor how these are related to subjective experience and interpretation; both features are present, prominent, and linked in Vilmar's well-known writings; they remain one of the most original parts of his literature.

H.F. Hedderich locates these roots in the early Romantic thought of Schleiermacher and, like Schneemelcher, the later Romantic works of Lutheran theologian, Julius Stahl.³² E. Wolf identifies the problem of romanticizing the church as "historicizing Christ as much as it spiritualizes the Holy Spirit . . ." both lead in a circular argument where presuppositions are conclusions.³³ Both of these men fail to account for peaks of thought in Vilmar which depart

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 633.

²⁹ Schlunk, *Amt und Gemeinde*, 59ff.

³⁰ Emmanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie: im Zusammenhang mit den allgemeinen Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens*, vol. 4 (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1954), 196

³¹ Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology*, 239.

³² Hans Felix Hedderich, *Die Gedanken der Romantik über Kirche und Staat* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1941), 35-36, 108-155.

³³ E. Wolf, "Santorum Communio: Erwägungen zum Problem der Romanticizing des Kirchen Begriffs," in *Peregrinatio*, 1954, 299.

significantly from Romantic thought, or in what ways these features depart significantly from various, supposed sources who bear far more identifiable traces of Romanticism. F. Melzer asserts that Vilmar lived in a world formed by the literature and thought of Goethe (“Goethischen Bildungs Welt”) where poetry, (and other literature) proceeded from the soul of the poet, and if the poet is Christian, then the poetry is Christian as well. Such an opinion tears apart the whole of Vilmar’s thought, and though this depicts an essential feature of Romantic criticism, it fails to account for the eminent streams of thought which relate text and reader in a manner largely unknown to either Romantic critics or to the rationalists who preceded them. While admitting some influence of Romantic ideas, Bernhard Lohse discusses and dismisses any assertion that Vilmar’s theology was inherited from and dependent upon Romanticism. His critique is discussed in more detail below.

One of the most criticized portions of Vilmar’s writing is his use of analogy. This trait directs social and political criticism based upon an analogy between church history and secular history. H. Schmidt considers this an aspect of natural theology and accordingly rejects it, but Ulrich Asendorf notes carefully that his cultural criticism is based not upon an analogy of the church to world history, but the analogy compares history of the world to that to the church. This feature reveals much about the world view of Vilmar and opens the way into some of the most original of his thought presented as cultural criticism. As we will maintain, this critique is congruent with a larger stream of thought, which sought to correct social and political developments of the Enlightenment.³⁴

Another frequently leveled criticism is not Vilmar’s Romantic presuppositions so much as his Roman predispositions. His teaching of the institutional and organic nature of the church is

³⁴ Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Europäische Krise*, 39, 109-111, 142-158.

compared to the articles of doctrine on the priesthood and the church catholic as they are confessed by Rome. Efforts to trace a Lutheran parallel by Vilmar are specifically found in identifying his “source” in the Tübingen theology of Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838). Little is said about the clear, precise, and critical assessment Vilmar often makes of the Roman Catholic Church on just these issues where the supposed similarity is most common: authority of the teaching office, the nature of doctrine, the ministry of word and sacrament, not to mention other issues clearly identified in the Lutheran Confessions. As we shall see, the accusations of “Romanism” are more often based upon the presupposition of what Protestantism ought to be and not what the nature of Vilmar’s confessional theology really is. Foremost among the studies finding Roman sources for Vilmar is that of F. Kantzenbach.³⁵ Along with ignoring clear differences with Roman Catholicism this study suffers from the receptionist fallacy as Rudolf Keller asserts: such conclusions are tentative if Vilmar does not attest to them himself.³⁶ Significantly, Vilmar himself hardly mentions Möhler in his later writings, and he does not loom large in any writings where he describes his early development.

Kantzenbach reiterates (*Gestalten und Typen des Neuluthertums*) this source theory of attributing Vilmar’s conviction of church and Amt inherited from Möhler. He then introduces a new critique. Having identified Vilmar’s understanding of “organic” development of doctrine, he identifies doctrine as something that is always present though perhaps in need of deeper explication or burnishing.

But the elements which make up true doctrine cannot be unraveled in a historical sequence, in a more or less continuous succession. All of doctrine is in effect today and tomorrow, as it already was yesterday. Luther conferred the conviction, indeed the pathos, into the struggle concerning the ecumenical validity of the Reformation

³⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, “Vilmars ‘Theologie der Tatsachen’ und die ‘Symbolik’ Johann Adam Möhlers,” *Zeitschriften für Kirchengeschichte* 70, 3-4 (1959): 253-277.

³⁶ Rudolf Keller, “August Vilmar und Wilhelm Löhe: Historische Distanz und Nähe der Zeitgenossen im Blick auf ihr Amtsverständnis,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (July-Sept 1993): 215.

movement that his doctrine was the old and proper doctrine of the church of all times.³⁷

By such a view these “elements” of all doctrine are treated as a “substance” which is present in history at all times to the entire church; this approach resembles a scholastic understanding of history where the contingencies of history are but the “accidents” of true doctrine and bear no impact on the doctrine at all. This attack ignores the dynamics present in historical contexts. It is only there that one finds the process by which doctrinal statements are developed, become normative, and are confessed by the church. This type of critique by way of contrast will illustrate one of the unique facets of Vilmar’s work in the following chapters.

Another misleading presupposition ascribes to Vilmar an attempt to present the articles of faith in a “system” of theology. Vilmar was an occasional writer who had little interest in producing an exhaustive systematic theology nor did he have any sympathy for those in his own day who supposed that they could do this by pretensions to objective scientific analysis. W. Wollenweber assumes in his review of the Marburg professor’s theology that Vilmar supposes just such a system.³⁸ Eberhard Amelung criticizes Wollenweber for this false assumption but then overcompensates by identifying a period of two or three years following the Revolution of 1848 where Vilmar develops his political thought from his theological thought.³⁹ Asendorf claims that this is doubtful.⁴⁰

³⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, *Gestalten und Typen des Neuluthertums: Beiträge zur Erforschung des Neokonfessionalismus im 19. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1968), 122. “Aber die Elemente, die die gute Lehre ausmachen, können nicht in ein geschichtliches Nacheinander, in eine mehr oder weniger kontinuierliche Abfolge aufgelöst werden. Die ganze Lehre gilt heute und morgen, wie sie auch schon gestern galt. Gerade die Übersetzung, dass seine Lehre die alte und eine gute Lehre aller Zeiten der Kirche ist, verleiht Luther ja das Pathos im Kampf um die ökumenische Geltung der Reformationsbewegung.”

³⁸ M. Wollenweber, *Theologie und Politik bei A.F.C. Vilmar*, FGLP III, I. München: 1930.

³⁹ Eberhard Amelung, “A.F.C. Vilmar’s Entwicklung zum Konservativen Politiker,” *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 9 (1965), 101-109.

⁴⁰ Asendorf, *Die Europäische Krise*, 127. Asendorf ascribes this attribute to Vilmar’s cultural criticism as a further extension of his method in writing in other areas as well. “An dieser Stelle zeigt sich wider etwas von der unzureichenden Methodik der Vilmar’schen Analysen. Er hat die verschiedensten Elemente nicht in ein grosses System zu bringen vermocht. Seine Urteile beruhen auf intuitiven Durchblicken, die dann auf mannigfaltige Art,

These criticisms of Vilmar reveal shortcomings of a critique based upon either presuppositions that are ascribed to him from a single source or summarized in a single formula on which the entire structure of his thought or indeed his “system” is fabricated. A further examination reveals that it is not Vilmar who suffers from an over-simplification of theology but the critics who fail to note what is original or to recognize the entirety of his theology. Thus many assessments reach too easily for a quick basis on which to condemn him and consequently are frequently questionable and hinder an accurate assessment. The “single formula” method fails to see the connections between various features of Vilmar’s teaching, and lends itself to an easy dismissal by tarring him as an enthusiast, Romanist, fanatic, Romantic, or any other deprecation which is not in conformity with the writers’ own presuppositions. Vilmar criticized the delusion of such critics who believe that they can justify their own claims of objective assessment without any presuppositions at all. Further he saw in modern methods of analysis an atomization which examined the parts while neglecting the whole.⁴¹

In Meliorem Partem

There are twentieth century theologians who put the best construction, if not totally uncritical, on Vilmar’s beliefs. He served as a source of inspiration and instruction when the church was under attack by civil authorities long after his death. A number of Lutheran theologians in the 1930s and 1940s issued a largely favorable assessment of Vilmar when the churches of Germany faced opposition by the Third Reich. In 1939 Georg Merz (“Vilmar und

gelegentlich auch dort, wo man sie nicht suchen würde, ihren Nachschlag finden. Diese Diskontinuität von Beobachtung und Reflexion hängt ohne Zweifel mit Vilmars Gewohnheit zusammen, seine Gedanken mehr in journalistischer Form zu äussern, und zwar weniger aus Freude an der Improvisation, also mitg einer gewissen Scheu vor umfassender systematischer Formulierung und dem in ihr liegenden Anspruch.“

⁴¹Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 13, 20. “Diese Unbegangheit und Voraussetzunglosigkeit ist denn auch mit grossem Applaus von den Atheologen in ihr System herübergenommen worden, und mit recht, denn durch diese Herübernahme wird ihr Zweck, die Zerstörung der Theologie, die Vernichtung des Glaubens, die Aufrichtung der Feindschaft gegen Christus und die Lossagung von Gott so wie von der eignene erlösungsbedürstigen und

die Theologie der Gegenwart”) was typical of these men who found a timely theology of the church when many German churches had years of struggle behind them and many more yet to come.

Merz notes that there was a renewed interest in Vilmar around 1920 because of the contemporaneous interest in eschatology. Vilmar clearly added to the Protestant church’s understanding of this topic, but Merz insists that his work had to be considered only in relationship to the whole of this nineteenth century theologian’s work and that those involved in this renewed attention had little interest in discerning the correlation between the last things and church, office or indeed how the historical confessions of the church should in any way be normative. Because of this “dilettantism” they, unlike Vilmar, could not see in the signs of the times the catastrophe for German culture which Vilmar had long predicted, and in their “arrogance (Übermut)” could in no way foresee the coming Third Reich. He observed that Vilmar correctly read the times by predicting a period of continuous revolution (having begun with the French Revolution of 1789) and offered an assessment of Vilmar’s assertions on revolution only thinly veiled in its application to Merz’s own situation:

He had experienced the French Revolution in every respect, in its external consequences during the French occupation of Hesse, in its inner consequences during his wandering through philosophy, which led him to skepticism, indeed to nihilism, until he experienced the great change in the recognition of sin and grace. He wanted to see returned to all people his own experience of the sin-forgiving power of grace; for this he pressed to understand the office of the pastor (Pfarramt) as the office of grace—administering blessing and labored to make the pastor competent to attain ‘power over the spirits.’

erlösungsfähigen Seele, mit unzweifelhafter Sicherheit erreicht: dann wird das Gottesleben nach dem Weltleben, die Gotteserkenntnis nach der Welterkenntnis gemessen, und damit die Eigenetümklichkeit der Theologie vernichtet.”

Accordingly Vilmar had without doubt correctly interpreted the signs of the time. Few men saw so clearly as he that the church could no longer be joined with the irreligious, or lend itself to a religious omnipotence sought by the striving states.⁴²

Noting his cultural criticism as a salient feature of Vilmar's effort, Merz explores its theological basis. His ability to see connections between the history of salvation and worldly events appealed to a theology acquired from a belief in the pastoral office's ability and responsibility to judge the affairs of history. Vilmar's criticism in opposing Bismark's liberalism was an inspiration. ". . . in the same manner Vilmar's theology is an authority for the struggle of every contemporary church which wants to regain the royal, prophetic, and priestly position of the pastoral office with regard to the entire culture."⁴³ Upon describing this task, Merz then examines Vilmar as the teacher of the church—an title his disciples claimed for him.

Vilmar's cultural criticism is based upon an assertion that God acts in the world; as the creator, his power enters into the world and can be discerned by the church as it experiences God's actions in its historical experience. The goal of history is to return humankind to the unity of paradise. Thus eschatology is the essential formula to understand the theology of church, ministry, and office as expounded by the author of the *Theology of Reality*. For that reason Vilmar finds a unity in past, present, and future events. Merz's insights are valuable and note the common link of eschatology in Vilmar's cultural critique and his theology. But the manner of

⁴² Merz, "Vilmar und die Theologie der Gegenwart," in *Um Glauben und Leben nach Luthers Lehre: Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, Theologische Bücherei: Neudrucke und Berichte aus dem 20. Jahrhundert, vol. 15 (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1961), 216. "Er hatte die französische Revolution in jeder Hinsicht erlebt, in ihren äusseren Folgen während der französischen Besetzung Hessens, in ihren inneren während seiner Wanderung durch die Philosophie, die ihn zur Skepsis, ja zum Nihilismus führte, bis er in der Erkenntnis der Sünde und Gnade die grosse Wendung erfuhr. Seine eigene Erfahrung von der sündenvergebenden Macht der Gnade wollte er allem Volke widerfahren sehen; darum drängte er darauf, das Pfarramt zu verstehen als das Amt des Gnade spendenden Segens und mühte sich, den Pfarrer tüchtig zu machen zur "Gewalt über die Geister.

"Vilmar hat dabei ohne Zweifel die Zeichen der Zeit richtig gedeutet. Dass die Kirche nicht mehr in der alten Weise mit dem religionslos gewordenen, einer sich religiös gebärdenden Omnipotenz zustrebenden Staate verbunden sein könne, sahen wenige Männer so klar wie er."

interpretation is not explored other than this concept of “experience” which leaves many questions. Just how did Vilmar understand experience? How did the experience of the church compare to individual experience as understood by Schleiermacher? In what manner did doctrine result from this experience and what authority did it possess for its contemporaneous generation or for subsequent generations, i.e. the dialogical question. What exactly enabled the church to offer social criticism with authority? By what authority could it formulate doctrine? In fact the defense of doctrine was one of the prominent features of Vilmar’s theology; he maintained that the formulation of doctrine was as a task exclusively internal to the church. In spite of these unanswered questions, Merz rightfully recognizes the powerful witness that this nineteenth century professor bequeathed to a church under attack in the continuing revolutionary movement in the next century. “Vilmar und die Theologie der Gegenwart” identifies Vilmar’s unique distinction as the only man of his time who simultaneously criticized both idealism and Schleiermacher’s romanticism.⁴⁴ In this regard, Merz’s work contributes original and in-depth insight.

Two years after this essay by Merz, Karl Ramge (*Vilmar’s Bedeutung für die Kirche in der Gegenwart*) provided a further assessment emphasizing a theme for which Vilmar was well-known: the origins of the German people lay in Christian conversion which gave them language and identity; before Christianity, there was no unity, no literature among these Teutonic peoples, and thus there was no identity as a single German people. The historical, factual “relationship of Teuton-German to Christianity-Church (Verhältnis von Germanentum-Deutschtum zu Christentum-Kirche)” is the focus of Ramge’s work. He concurs with Vilmar’s assertion that the stems of the Teutonic peoples were brought together into a unity only under and by Christianity,

⁴³ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 212.

an assertion which reflects the basic nature of organic thought found throughout Vilmar's theological work as well as his cultural criticism.⁴⁵

Further, Ränge responds to Merz's examination whereby Vilmar's cultural critique is presented separately from his theology. According to Ränge, such an approach truncates what cannot be separated without inflicting serious damage on the consistency of Vilmar's thought; Vilmar was at once a German, a Christian, and a theologian.⁴⁶ Vilmar's theology of the organic means "first of all an appeal to Article 1 [of the Creed]." He attributes the misunderstanding often attending Vilmar to the lack of a logical exposition of natural law among well-known orthodox theologians. He contrasts this trend with Luther whom he considers to have had a healthy theological understanding of natural law, never having imagined that theology would never be surrendered to philosophy. This understanding had been ubiquitous among theologians since the Middle Ages. Only with the introduction of "one-sided" thought, Schleiermacher's experience theology, and such men as Ritschl, had such damage been done. Vilmar spoke of natural law with no reservation. This appeal to Article 1, depicting the personality of God the Creator and giver of revelation, leads to the living Christ of Article 2 and then to the visible church of Article 3. His theology is not concerned simply with doctrine as doctrine but doctrine as the common experience of the church. It was the task of the pastor to propagate this doctrine as living faith and life experience.⁴⁷ Then Ränge provides further insight. The experience of the church is event in this world; doctrine is the expression of the "experiencing faith of the church . . . It is then a question of the experiences of the church as it strives for a right understanding of the universal . . . which exists only in the living personal God."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Karl Ränge, *Vilmars Bedeutung für die Kirche in der Gegenwart* (Essen: Lichtweg Verlag, 1941), 6-7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

Ramge takes note of deep streams of Vilmar's work which often elude other writers: the organic embracing all articles of the creed is original to Vilmar who thought that the divine Creator was reflected in physical creation, made physical in the Incarnation, and finally in the tangible body of Christ, the church. He also recognizes, as few other authors, the wide embrace of Vilmar's thought as it was reflected in theological works, social comment and political critique. Yet there remains a problem in another area of comparison and assessment. At one point Ramge cites and passes quickly over Vilmar's criticism of the orthodox theologians as "stiff (steifstellig)" though he insists that Vilmar is himself orthodox and often cites certain Lutheran fathers to show influence and agreement.⁴⁹ For example, he cites the common understanding of Luther, Gerhard, Arndt, Chemnitz, and Vilmar as the shared common ground in the proclamation of the Incarnation of Christ.⁵⁰ Such a facile blending of these men betrays insensitivity to the contrasting methods employed by each as well as a failure to note the different issues which Lutherans had to confront in their respective periods.

Identifying Vilmar with these men, or attributing his viewpoint of organism to a concept of natural law reduces his critique to an abstract understanding of theology, a method that Vilmar never missed an opportunity to denounce. Indeed Ramge goes so far as to recognize Vilmar's emphasis on what he would call "reality (Tatsachen)" and his rejection of abstractions of any sort as a way to seek reality and meaning. Hence, Ramge in identifying this nineteenth century theology as a "natural theology"⁵¹ would place Vilmar among the eighteenth century theologians whose contributions the Theologian of Reality consistently vilified. Vilmar's dislike of abstract, propositional truth statements in theology, statements whose truth claims which failed to recognize the historical context in which such statements were made by the church. This

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21, 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

characteristic was so pronounced that the researcher will find many assessments, in agreement or disagreement, of the content of various orthodox theologians but will search in vain for anything like their scholastic method. Ignored by Ronge is his sharp criticism of what he terms “abstractions” or empty “rhetoric” which he associated with the rationalism of either the eighteenth century or his own day especially in either theological presupposition or method. Accordingly, he did not revert to a pre-modern critique, or intend to re-pristiniate one. Rather he addressed the issues associated with Kant and Enlightenment rationalism. While he could recognize with Schleiermacher theology as historical phenomena, he disagreed with his experience theology and the positivistic, scientific method it engendered, a method which sought to relieve theology of abstraction in metaphysical speculation, but also made its truths pragmatic and relative to historical context, dating its truth claims to a specific place and time. And Hegelian idealism found an opponent in Vilmar, whether such idealism found itself in the Biblical criticism of David Strauss, the atheism of Ludwig Feuerbach, or communism (though to Vilmar the advocate of this movement may well have been Prudhom rather than Marx). In his defense of theology as a task belonging exclusively to the church, Vilmar’s presuppositions and method are distinct but cannot be attributed to a period of pre-critical orthodoxy. Rather his public life was focused on issues brought before the church in his day and which reflect the language of his own time, e.g. organic thought. Moreover, as we will see, his contributions were, in this setting, innovative, unique, and on the mark.

In the same year of Ronge’s essay, Wilhelm Wibberling (“Um die Freiheit des geistlichen Kirchenregiments”) examined the 1849 Jesberg Conference where, with Vilmar as leader, it sought to establish the independence of the Hessian Lutheran church from the government. The conference perceived reforms resulting from the initial successes of the revolutionaries in 1848

⁵¹Ibid., 21-22.

to be hostile to the church. Later developments defused the situation as a more friendly and traditional arrangement was soon restored. However, for like-minded men of Wibberling's day, it served as an enduring example of the proper authority of the church and its Amt apart from the state. "The foundation of the agency of the national church authority to the existing spiritual church authority truly serves, and deserves, serious examination and attention."⁵² He observes that in spite of the alleged "Vilmar Renaissance" in Hesse, the facts of Vilmar's theology and bold stand against illegitimate government intrusion into the church was known by few, and he observed wryly that those who honored him perhaps would not find his exposition of doctrine to be suitable to their views. In reflecting on the freedom sought for the Lutheran Church in the presence of a government not only indifferent but influenced by forces hostile to Christianity, Wibberling concludes his article reflecting the sentiment of his fellow Lutherans and obliquely points to the condition of the church in his day: "We want to follow the example of the forty-eight [the number of representatives at the Jesberg Conference]; but far more, it is a matter of genuine longing for the one Lutheran Church in Germany, which in actual fact, in every relationship, is church and nothing but church."⁵³

Wibberling's "Vilmar Renaissance" and Merz's prophetic appraisal of Vilmar's work did not stand alone. Joining them in 1937 was Karl Wicke's compendium of Vilmar's essays (*A.F.C. Vilmar's Zeugnis von der Kirche*) originally issued in the nineteenth century. He saw the question of the Christian church to be more acute than it had perhaps ever been before. Vilmar, he thought, had known of these issues by personal experience, issues originating in his own day.

⁵² Wilhelm Wibberling, "Um die Freiheit des geistlichen Kirchenregiments: Die Bedeutung der Jesberger Konferenz und des Alleruntertänigsten Memorandums von 1849," in *Aus Theologie und Kirche: Beiträge kurhessischer Pfarrer als Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag von Professor D. Hans Freiherr von Soden, Beiträge zur Evangelischen Theologie: Theologische Abhandlungen*, vol. 6, ed. E. Wolf (München: Evangelischer Verlag Albert Lempp, 1941), 147. "Die Begründung des an die Stelle des staatlichen Kirchenregimentes zu setzenden geistlichen Kirchenregimentes verdient wahrlich auch für unsere Zeit ernste Prüfung und Beachtung."

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

Yet with seeming uncanny accuracy, he predicted that these troubles would only worsen as his contemporaneous revolutionary era accelerated with increasing strength into the future of Germany and the Christian West. Wicke attributed the problems the German church faced in his own day to those same troubles experienced by Vilmar. Vilmar condemned what he termed the mounting “anti-Christianity” manifested in Germany as the people deserted the Christian faith. This faith had been the very basis of their identity as a people and had sustained them since their conversion. Consequently, some, like Wicke, thought that the revolutionary movements inherited by the twentieth century were leading the people to the abyss predicted by Vilmar. Anticipating a catastrophe for the German people, and the Christian West as well, men such as Wicke found the prophetic voice they sought in this remote predecessor. For the struggling church in Germany of the 1930s, Vilmar again served as their advocate. For Vilmar and many with the same convictions as Wicke, the church was the only antidote for the troubles of his day.

The witness from this man of the church will sound loud from this book.

But this is not meant as if a historical monument should be raised. Rather it should project a direct witness into this our time. Therefore time-bound portions of such witness are removed as far as possible. (Here it chiefly concerns the matters referring to the specifically political and can no longer be applied under present-day circumstances.)

Some who know Vilmar will perhaps find some words missing. . . . But I did not intend to present Vilmar’s doctrine of the church. It should much more plainly be Vilmar’s witness of the church, the warm, sincere, flowing witness from personal experience of the church, from which faith can be ignited or strengthened as need be.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Karl Wicke, ed., *A. F. C. Vilmar's Zeugnis von der Kirche* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1937), vi. “Das Zeugnis dieses Mannes von der Kirche will das vorliegende Buch wieder laut werden lassen.”

“Das ist aber nicht etwa so gemeint, als ob damit nur ein historisches Denkmal gesetzt werden sollte. Sondern es soll ein direktes Zeugnis damit gegeben werden in diese unsere Zeit hinein. Deshalb sind Jahreszahlen und solche Zeugnisse, die in besonderer Weise zeitgebunden waren, nach Möglichkeit weggelassen worden. Vor allem gilt das von Zeugnissen, die das politische Gebiet im engeren Sinne berühren und unter den heutigen Verhältnissen nicht mehr wiederholt werden können. . . . Aber um Vilmar's Lehre von der Kirche war es mir bei diesem Buche eben nicht zu tun. Es sollte vielmehr wider laut werden Vilmar's Zeugnis von der Kirche, das warme, herzliche, aus persönlicher und kirchlicher Erfahrung quellende Zeugnis, an dem sich der Glaube entzünden bzw. stärken kann.”

Wicke was a recognized leader of the free church that traced its origins to Vilmar's leadership. It was known for its resistance to the union of confessions and for its generations-long outspoken opposition to militarism and nationalism whether apparent in the German imperial government or that of National Socialism, hence the name by which it was popularly known, Renitenz ("Obstinacy") Kirche. Its preserving the integrity of its churchly life and maintaining the continuity of the church through confession of the Lutheran Reformation symbols won the admiration of Karl Barth:

. . . within Germany the particular witness of the so-called Renitenz Church of Hesse in the matters of legal relationships of the church and state cannot be denied or diminished, albeit the witness of a peripheral hardly recognized free church.⁵⁵

Also writing of the Marburg professor in this period, Hermann Sasse ("Introduction" to *Dogmatik* by A.F.C. Vilmar) attributed a general misunderstanding of this theology of church to a failure to discern the grave danger in which the church stood in Vilmar's day. Those theologians who led the Lutheran confessional renewal early in the nineteenth century

. . . wanted neither to bring about a Luther Renaissance nor to reprimarize the old Protestant Orthodoxy. They sought much more the lost church, indeed as all serious men of the Christian West did at that time, the time of Pietism and the Enlightenment, of religious individualism and the rule of reason. They perceived the voice of the church when the Confessions of the Lutheran Church spoke to them afresh for the first time. So they became Lutherans, they became orthodox theologians really against their own wills.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G., 1948), 726. See also Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Gerhard Sauter, vol.1 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1927), 4-5. Barth cites Vilmar as one of the theologians with whom "in really various ways, I felt at home in decisive theological points. . . ." " . . . sehr verschiedener. . . . Hinsicht in entscheidenden Punkten theologisch zu Hause fühle. . ." Barth admired Vilmar's contention that theology was a task to be done only within the church, but he may not have agreed with Vilmar's thoughts on Christian theology as a correction for philosophy.

⁵⁶ Hermann Sasse, Introduction to *Dogmatik*, by A.F.C. Vilmar (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874; reprint, Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1937), xii. "Sie wollten weder eine Luther-Renaissance herbeiführen noch die altprotestantische Orthodoxy reprimarieren. Sie suchten vielmehr, wie es alle ernstesten Menschen des christlichen Abendlandes damals taten, die im Jahrhundert des Pietismus und der *Aufklärung*, des religiösen Individualismus und der Vernunft Herrschaft verlorene Kirche. Sie vernahmen die Stimme der Kirche, also zum ersten Male wieder die Bekenntnisschriften der lutherischen Kirche zu ihnen redeten. So wurden sie Lutheraner, wurden sie orthodoxe Theologen eigentlich gegen ihren eigenen Willen."

The quest for the church has to be understood as part of a larger historical phenomenon if one is to understand Vilmar's theology at all. Sasse examines his theological effort over the years and denies that it was an isolated movement of little import.

'When I had been turned around by God, it did not take long for me to devote myself to the proper purpose of the church, and indeed the real church, not a theoretical, speculative church—an idol around which so many otherwise faithful Christians dance.'⁵⁷ On the quest for the church of God, after the real, not imagined church, Vilmar and his fellow adherents found the confessional church just like the Reformed, the Anglicans, and the Catholics at that time.⁵⁸

Much more recently than Sasse's appraisal, Rudolph Keller ("August Vilmar und Wilhelm Löhe: Historische Distanz und Nähe der Zeitgenossen im Blick auf ihr Amstverständnis") examines the influence of the both Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802—1861) and Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872) on the thought of their Hessian contemporary.⁵⁹ He notes that Stahl is a Lutheran source for Vilmar's view of the church as Institute (Anstalt).⁶⁰ But Keller wisely limits the usefulness of such early source theory. While he admits that Vilmar gave Möhler's *Symbolics* an enthusiastic reception in the early 1830s, he wryly dismisses attempts to identify a reception theology which supposedly permeates the mature works of Vilmar, and he labels it "early sources confusion," reflecting only the opinions of commentators while ignoring the facts. For example Möhler's work is reported by Vilmar in 1833: "This book has opened for me a sense for these things more than any protestant books, and I intend to continue to work on it if things remain normal this winter. . . ."⁶¹ Yet Möhler, who occupies a prominent place in the young theologian's attention in this year

⁵⁷ Haussleiter, vol. 29, 652, quoted by Sasse in Introduction to *Dogmatik*, 10.xii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

⁵⁹ Rudolph Keller, "August Vilmar und Wilhelm Löhe: Historische Distanz und Nähe der Zeitgenossen im Blick auf ihr Amstverständnis," *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (1993), 206–19.

⁶⁰ Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung," 455-456. Lohse notes that there were unique elements to Vilmar as opposed to Stahl. For example Stahl had little trouble speaking of an invisible church, and he had far fewer reservations concerning the *summus episkopat* and his interference in the internal affairs of the church.

⁶¹ Wilhelm Hopf, August Vilmar: Ein Lebens- und Zeitbild, vol. I (Marburg: Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1913), 237. "Mir hat dies Buch, mehr als alle protestantischen, den Sinn für diese Dinge geöffnet, und wenn ich diesen Winter . . . mässig zu tun habe, werde ich . . . daran fortarbeiten."

according to Kantzenbach, receives hardly a mention later; he is neither cited nor discussed in essays where Vilmar speaks of his theological development.⁶²

Keller then questions the validity of comparing the viewpoints of various theologians who developed their ideas in response to the particular situations that they faced. Thus he criticizes attempts to compare abstractly the theologies of various men with no regard for their context. He criticizes Joachim Heubach for such an attempt as he addresses the various views of church discipline by Kliefoth, Vilmar, and Löhe.⁶³ He observes that the theologies of such men developed in quite different contexts and it is therefore a questionable undertaking to compare them by subject. Accordingly, he labels Heubach's assessment of Löhe as tenuous and of questionable usefulness. (Löhe, Heubach concludes, offered the only creditable concept of the Office of the Keys because it embraced both pastor and congregation). Keller seeks mutual influences of Vilmar and Löhe, but though the men were obviously aware of each other and even shared in many opinions, their respective theologies of the office of the ministry, so prominent in each of their undertakings, can be compared with little gain.

Keller notes that Löhe's theology of the pastoral ministry as described in his *Three Books on the Church* (1845) interprets the Silesian church crisis as an event uniting confessional Lutherans in Germany. He considered it leading to a right understanding of the congregation and its relationship to the pastorate, as well as the relationship of the congregation to the state. In addition, his views of the office were produced with concern for missions in North America and the German Inner Mission as well. On the other hand, the civil rulers through the prince's role as summus episcopus focused Vilmar's theology on the freedom of the church and its illegitimate domination by the state. Unlike Löhe, he spent little time as the pastor of a congregation,

⁶² Keller, "August Vilmar und Wilhelm Löhe," 214.

⁶³ Joachim Heubach, "Das Verständnis des Schlüsselamts bei Löhe, Kliefoth und Vilmar," *Festgabe für Ernst*

developing his theology rather from the point of view of an educator, diocesan official, etc. His thought on the pastoral office recognized the continuance of the church through the means of grace and the office of the ministry. This theology received a special accent in several of his most significant treatises which were written against the background of the Revolution of 1848. This upheaval reinforced Vilmar's distrust of democracy, a distrust already established by the French Revolution and the Revolution of 1830.⁶⁴ Thus we have two very different accents on the Lutheran Confessions.

Keller's sensitivity to the concrete situation over an abstract "scientific" undertaking would have appealed to Vilmar, we may gather, with his own theological method emphasizing the same considerations. It is instructive for us that Keller qualifies the undertaking in this article with the title's inclusion of the phrase "Historical Distance and Proximity" (*Historische Distanz und Nähe*) as he considers any possible relationship between the two men. Moreover, this introduces us to a major critique that Keller offers against all such undertakings as he notes the proximity of both men to their historical situations.

Both positions can no longer be immediately set into our time, not even in the church struggles of the 1930s. They can always keep us attentive to the historical viewpoints and their meanings. The authors themselves are sometimes nearer to us than their later interpreters who are more concerned to accommodate the notions of their own time. This one notices, if one keeps his mind on them, and does not only study something "about" them.⁶⁵

Sommerlath zum 70. Geburtstag (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, [No date]), 313-324.

⁶⁴ Keller, "Verständis," 215-19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 203-204. "Beide Positionen können nicht mehr unvermittelt in unsere Gegenwart übertragen werden, ebensowenig wie das im Kirchenkampf der dreissiger Jahre gelang. Immerhin können sie uns aufmerksam machen auf Gesichtspunkte die ihre Bedeutung behalten. Die Autoren selbst sind uns manchmal näher als ihre späteren Interpreten, die auf Akkommodation der Gedanken an ihre Zeit bedacht waren. Das merkt man, wenn man sich mit ihnen selbst beschäftigt und nicht nur etwas 'uber' studiert." Keller levels this criticism at Renate Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer: von der fürstentreu kirchlichen Restaurationspartei zur hessischen Renitenz, Quellen und Forschungen zur hessischen Geschichte 59* (Marburg and Darmstadt: Selbstverlag der Hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der Historischen Kommission für Hessen, 1985).

The last commentator we will consider among this group is Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (“Wege zum Bekenntnis der Kirche bei August Vilmar”) whose defense of the church found encouragement in the work of this Theologian of Reality, whose extensive biography of Vilmar remains the authoritative account of his life.⁶⁶ His approach also identified a single formula which may be more instructive than others discussed here because he identifies a hermeneutical key. He considered the leading belief to be the presence of Christ with his church:

Vilmar rejected all thoughts and every formula where the church in some sense was constituted by the confession of the members. . . . The church is also not constituted through ‘the right belief of its members,’ nor somewhat primarily through ‘the right concept of the word or the right use of the sacraments,’ but exclusively in that the word and sacraments are there administered, tendered, offered. In other words, that Christ’s acts happen with, under, and to us. According to AC VII it is ‘undeniable that we confess no church whose existence depends on the activity of its members, but a church which is constituted and dependent upon the presence of Christ in word and sacrament. We have no ‘confessing church,’ but a church as Institute of the Lord Christ (*Dogmatik*, 2, 201).’⁶⁷

Consequently, Hopf identifies the cornerstone of this theology as the true presence of Christ with his church. Hopf’s insight is an essential point in understanding Vilmar’s theology: it is the presence of Christ with the church (and indeed in the world, the middle of history, as we shall see) that presupposes the rest of his theology. Indeed his grasp of doctrine and its authority in relation to the church is based upon this understanding, as Hopf recognizes. For it is in Christ’s presence that the church experiences real issues and controversies, indeed crisis, where new teaching is demanded in the confession of the church. The preceding confessions of the church retain their validity because of this abiding presence of Christ with his church. Old confessional statements are not replaced by the new because they are the true experience of the church; they are reality (Tatsachen). In this manner, Hopf recognizes that Vilmar departed from

⁶⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, “Wege zum Bekenntnis der Kirche bei August Vilmar,” in *Lutherische Blätter* 123/124 (*Jahreswende* 1981/82): 119-150; and Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, “Wege zum Bekenntnis der Kirche,” *Lutherische Blätter* 125 (*Jahreswende* 1982/83), 41-90. These essays are here republished from the late 1930s.

Enlightenment rationalism in theology and based knowledge of God not on epistemology but on Christology and ecclesiology. Here we begin to explore more carefully the impact of Vilmar: just how does the church know truth in its doctrinal statements. In a similar vein, other theologians more recently have identified the essential question asked by Vilmar is the question of knowledge of revelation.

Revelation: A Hermeneutical Key

Lohse notes that estimates of Vilmar's theology have little in common other than their common disagreements. While perceiving this general lack of consensus, he agrees that almost all assessments have focused exclusively on the articles of church and ministry. This dwelling on the content of church and ministry is not sufficient to understanding Vilmar. The red thread running consistently throughout his theology is that of "reality (Tatsache)" and "experience (Erfahrung)." These two words are essential elements within Vilmar's concept of revelation and one cannot really understand Vilmar without taking into account the presuppositions governing revelation.⁶⁸

According To Lohse, the reality of God's salvation is present even before it is experienced. It is only within the believing interpretive community of the church that the experience of this revelation is found, where the Amt teaches, proclaims the gospel, and administers the sacraments. Thus the church's experience of faith is found in doctrine where the reality of salvation is experienced by the church and actualized in the language of confession. This experience becomes conviction expressed within the human heart and within the congregation. Lohse believes this concept of God's word as reality is that of a pre-formed word which cannot

⁶⁷Ibid., 87.

⁶⁸ Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung," 447-48.

then be presented as a living word and a creative word. Thus he criticizes the theology of reality and experience as no theology of God's word.⁶⁹

Lohse does not at this point address the hermeneutical nature of the church's interpretation of Scripture. Lohse's criticism explains the subjective nature of the church only in individual terms and does not account for the historical context of the church's doctrine. A central insight and theme of Vilmar is that of doctrine as the experience of the church and is a discipline only rightfully found within the church itself. This doctrinal expression is predicated on the presence of Christ in the church; his Holy Spirit makes new facets of Scripture's meaning known as the church faces new issues and challenges. There is clearly a hermeneutical procedure in evidence with which Lohse does not concern himself in this article. Far from viewing the word of God as an unchanging substance as it enters the world and is identified as doctrine, Vilmar understood doctrine/experience as something different from an abstract truth statement. The experience was objective because it was a real experience. Nothing could be further from Vilmar's grasp of scriptural interpretation and its role in doctrine's normative function than the understanding of doctrine as a pre-formed word. Doctrines of the church are not simply a restatement of Scripture but are interpretive, according to Vilmar; Lohse does not address this aspect of Vilmar's theology. His recognition of the fact-experience nature of Vilmar's theology is accurate. Yet clearly a hermeneutic is at work which calls for further elucidation.

Ulrich Asendorf (*Die europäische Krise und das Amt der Kirche*, 1967) noted the need for a hermeneutical key to Vilmar's writings in 1967. Asendorf perceives that Vilmar's cultural criticism proceeds with the same presuppositions as his theology and identifies a "hermeneutical key:" Christ is present in the middle of history.⁷⁰ This presence is also that of Christ present with

⁶⁹ Ibid., 467.

⁷⁰ Asendorf, "Die europäische Krise," 103.

his church and provides an interpretive key and a common understanding of the world and God's revelation to his church. It is this key which provides the starting point for Vilmar's theology of church and ministry as well as his view of world history. If this key cannot be the one, single formula on which to base all of Vilmar's prose, it nevertheless delineates the boundaries within which it consistently lies. It is here where one should begin.

An Anti-Cartesian Tradition

Rather than a source theory, or a single formula theory to explain Vilmar's theology, this paper will contend that it is far more profitable to see Vilmar's thought as consistent with an anti-Cartesian tradition where the Western world was vexed by an epistemological question of how anything could be known for certain and which led to the separation of thought on the one hand and experience and language on the other. This tradition began with Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), and continued with his disciples such as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). The criticism leveled by these men toward the thought of their times is consistent with the understanding which Vilmar furnished theology. In fact these forerunners had little interest in defending the nature of doctrine as ecclesial norm, but Vilmar's criticism of theological practice and understanding in his day was consistent with their "metacritique," a critique of the critics in philosophy and Christianity, not creating another system of thought, such as Hegel or Schleiermacher did subsequent to Kant, but to demonstrate the feasibility of traditional Christianity and specifically the truth of Christianity as found in the Augsburg Confession. This metacriticism sought to correct the rationalism of Kant and the Cartesian presuppositions which supported it. It questioned the discrete theological domain claimed by Schleiermacher, a domain excluded from all other pursuits of thinking and doing, and leading Christianity into a new rationalism with his view of theology as positive science. It

attacked the idealists for their excesses as they were manifested in David Strauss, Feuerbach, and communism. It has been labeled a theological critique of philosophy.⁷¹

Yet as already discussed, it would be a mistake to think of Vilmar as simply receiving his thought from predecessors. Georg Merz notes the uniqueness of Vilmar's critique in his simultaneous rejection of both Idealism and the Romanticism of Schleiermacher.⁷² In Vilmar's assessments of the cultural sickness of his day, and the impending catastrophe he saw descending upon the German people in the course of the revolutionary movements (whose chief characteristic he saw as continuous revolution), Ulrich Asendorf asserts that there was no other theologian of the nineteenth century who saw the prevailing situation ("Es gibt keinen Zweiten!").⁷³ It becomes increasingly obvious that Vilmar cannot be considered a receptionist or someone who predictably follows a master or school of thought. There is a limit to which he can be explained "by his heredity and environment, and the thought world of his contemporaries."⁷⁴ In fact he shares something of the character of the "wild and crooked tree"⁷⁵ as Karl Barth described himself in answering inquiries about his lack of philosophical precision where a pre-established harmony between the matter and particular concepts was not uniformly consistent. He, like Vilmar, remains an individual who establishes his own category and eludes classification even as Vilmar did with many of his fellow Lutherans.

⁷¹ John Milbank, "Knowledge: The Theological Critique of Philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 21-22.

⁷² Merz, *Theologie der Gegenwart*, 212-14.

⁷³ Asendorf, *Die Europäische Krise*, 142-43.

⁷⁴ E. Gordon Rupp, "Opening Address to the Third International Congress for Luther Research," quoted by Lewis W. Spitz, "Headwaters of the Reformation: *Studia Humanitatis, Luther Senior, et Initai Reformationis*," in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era: Papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, VIII, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 90. Rupp recognizes original thought in great men such as Luther which can not be explained as "receptionism" or simply repeating or reorganizing thought paradigms which they had inherited.

⁷⁵ Scott Saye, "The Wild and Crooked Tree: Barth, Fish, and Interpretive Communities," *Modern Theology* 12: 4 (October 1996): 435-37.

Nevertheless it aids our quest for understanding the Theology of Reality by examining the headwaters of the stream of thought where Vilmar stands. He shared with these “radical pietists” of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century several characteristics and tendencies, which provide a point of departure, a terminus ad quem, for contributions that were quite original.

A Key Facet of the Metacritique: Lutheranism

The metacritique employed by Vilmar finds its Lutheran roots in such predecessors as Hamann, Jacobi, and Herder. The Lutheran faith of Hamann is particularly instructive. Hamann understood Christianity as a Lutheran Christian understands it, and made it his mission to renew Christianity through a renewal of Lutheranism. At a time when the teachings of the Reformation were not typically objects of study for the learned, Hamann was well-read in Luther for a man of his time, having researched extensively in both the Rambach and Jena editions. These collections of the great reformer, along with the Bible and a book of hymns, Hamann considered to be his three indispensable books (Leib- und Magenbücher). So central was Lutheranism to his understanding of faith and creation that he termed all of his twenty-five years of writing nothing other than a polemical Lutheranism (ein evangelisches Luthertum in petto). At the heart of Luther’s writings was the Small Catechism which Hamann sought to take out of the ghetto of house, school, and church, as he termed it, and plant it in society.⁷⁶ Recent research by Oswald Bayer has helped to identify this critical feature of Hamann’s work.

The Small Catechism occupied center stage as it provided an antithesis and alternative to the Enlightenment understanding of religious instruction. The advocates of rational religion employed the Socratic method for students to locate true religion with their own reason and not from any other outside source. Hamann could not accept this. For him the most important

⁷⁶ Oswald Bayer, *Leibliches Wort* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), 105–32.

catechesis was the question asked by Jesus in Matthew 22: 42 “What do you think about the Christ (Luther: Was denkt ihr von Christo?)?” For the most important question in Christian understanding is this one asked by Christ; the assertion of Luther’s explanation to the Third Article met with Hamann’s approval as man was incapable of saving himself or coming to faith. In a sense, the catechism read man, and not the other way around. This catechetical instruction was thus ironically seen as a questioning process but not the one presented by Enlightenment theologians. Hamann condemned their method which he saw leading to a new practice of works righteousness; morality was made the focus of religion, and it was assumed that man could find the answers himself. Hamann contended that man could not determine these answers for himself because the presupposition of religious knowledge had to be faith. He pointed to fear of God as the beginning of wisdom. Like Socrates, Hamann’s question was to reveal first that in this most important question, a person’s natural faculties counted for nothing.⁷⁷

This new rationalist self-justification, Hamann thought, could only be achieved at the expense of the teachings of the Lutheran fathers. With Luther he counted growth in the Christian life to be a continuing return to baptism and a fresh start. The only true self-consciousness comes from one’s hearing the word, and the only true self-examination was in recognizing one’s own sin. He was glad to be in the church where such true righteousness before God was obtained. The church of Enlightenment reason and morality was that of paganism, Roman Catholicism at its worst, or freemasonry. This regard for the church was not at the center of his critique. Rather he addressed the issue of how one knew God and the essential character of faith.⁷⁸

Vilmar thus received a foundation of thought for his metacritique that was based on a Lutheran understanding and practice of Christianity. His conversion to Lutheranism coincided

⁷⁷ Ibid., 128–38.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 121, 141.

with his rejection of rationalist theology in the late 1820s, when he found his newly formed beliefs compatible with the hermeneutics which were the trademark of this metacritical thought. He saw them as a correct interpretation of what Luther himself had advocated even as he had contended with scholasticism, another term which Vilmar applied to the rationalism of his time. Vilmar also inherited the polemical nature of Hamann's critique. This appraisal was unavoidably confrontational just as the Small Catechism was an affront to human reason and the understanding of rationalism according to Hamann. The bitter polemical nature of Lutheranism would be even more intense in the era of revolution when Vilmar came upon the scene.

A Key Facet of the Metacritique: Language Criticism

Luther enjoyed the high estimate of Hamann because Hamann's critique was essentially a language critique. He understood with Luther that learning, especially as we have discussed, does not come from within by virtue of reason or the experience of the enthusiasts but from being spoken to and hearing, or in the case of the written text, the interaction of the text and the reader. This criticism was alien to the philosopher or the Romanticist. The former sought meaning in reason, or if an empiricist, in physical evidence; both presumed the a priori system of natural law which led to the use of methodologies of doubt. The latter focused almost exclusively on the inner emotions and perceptions of the author to explain the nature and criteria of his work; "there turns out to be only one distinctly Romantic criticism."⁷⁹ Vilmar not only criticized the claims of objectivity made by the Enlightenment "scholastics" as Hamann labeled them, but found in him a sympathetic point of view to explain his own view of interpretation of Scripture, doctrine, and the church by examining just such a relationship between the reader and the text. So essential is

⁷⁹ Meyer Abram, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 7.

this feature to the metacriticism that identifying Vilmar with Romantic criticism tears apart the whole of Vilmar's thought.⁸⁰

Hamann thought Luther a paradigm of the wise man by virtue of his achievements as an author where he found the spirit of prophecy and interpretation. The most powerful and noble work a man could undertake was that of speech [or writing]. For this metacritique noted that there was neither world without speech nor creation nor any reason. Thus learning was a matter of discovery but only by interpreting from what came from outside the person, i.e. speech. For Hamann nothing existed without speech; nothing existed in itself without being in relationship with something else, even if that relationship was confined to that of the created thing to the mind of God. God spoke through the Scriptures, and to the person of faith, all of creation mediated his speech as well. His polemic against the Enlightenment proceeded on this basis of this hermeneutical understanding that extended into theology, philosophy, history, and politics. Vilmar was furnished with a hermeneutic which emphasized experience of the external world, including written text, especially that of the Bible. There can be no doubt about the Lutheran character of this method which postulates a kind of "knowledge by faith alone" to complement the theology of justification by grace.⁸¹

Though long overlooked or dismissed as ineffective, Hamann and his followers are, only recently, more and more acknowledged to have had tremendous influence, though perhaps concealed and subterranean, contributing significantly to the rapid demise of Kantianism and the defenses of critical reason which arose in rapid succession by other idealists and then

⁸⁰ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 109–10, fn. 1. Also A.F.C. Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt oder die Aufgaben des geistlichen Amtes in unserer Zeit: Gesammelte pastoral-theologische Aufsätze*, I (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872, 21-23. This citation from *Kirche und Welt* is named the "Culture of Egotism." Also see Bayer, *Leibliches Wort*, 113-114, 147-148.

⁸¹ John Milbank, "The Theological Critique," 23.

romanticists. It denied Schleiermacher his discrete theological method and domain. It is to the contributions of this current of thought

that one can trace many of the most potent themes of modern philosophy: for example, the priority of existence over thought; the primacy of language; the 'ecstatic' nature of time; the historicity of reason; the dialogical principle; the suspension of the ethical; and the ontological difference. Is it not eccentric, in the face of this consideration, to make Schleiermacher pivotal for the history of modern theology? One does so . . . only because one has already assumed a liberal sundering of philosophy from theology. . . .⁸²

This study maintains that this metacritique extends into the Lutheran confessional renewal movement through Vilmar. He rejects the separation of philosophy from theology where philosophy insists on determining the manner in which God can be understood and defined. Yet he goes beyond the critique of his predecessors who were normally interested in how the individual could know and turned to the church as the only institution which could experience and thereby perceive the true interpretation of the Bible in its doctrine. He rejected the autonomous individual and asserted the teaching authority of the church. And all of this was accomplished not by a return to a seventeenth century scholastic method of theology but by this critique found historically by the men of this radical piety.

A Key Facet of the Metacritique: Cultural Criticism

Language criticism extended into criticism of government and culture as well. This approach recognized that there was a time when there was no "secular."⁸³

There had been a single community of Christendom, and the secular was a time, not a space or domain, though there were the dual aspects of sacerdotium and regnum. The secular had to be imagined beginning with such early Enlightenment writers such as Grotius, Hobbes, and Spinoza. The sacred became privatized, spiritualized and transcendent, and nature was

⁸² Ibid., 26-27.

reimagined with human action and society as purely a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power. For Enlightenment philosophers who developed this concept of politics as “science” it was completely consistent with language as referential, a sign for something beyond the language itself.

Herder influenced such men as Vilmar in his recognition of this development and his criticism of it. They asserted that an abyss had been perceived which Cartesian thought sought to conceal; it was the discovery of the post-Renaissance (“Baroque Poesis”) that language creates rather than reflects meaning. Culture is then

both outside and before us, in the works and words which issue from us, determine what we are, and act back on us beyond the reach of our conscious intentions. The sum of these words and works comprises culture itself, and therefore the social order is in no way beneath human subjects, and so fully within their control; neither can they step back from this social order to recover their identity.⁸⁴

Herder considered the human creative process, or history, interpreting the divine revelation that brings to completion the natural order. The central creative work of language should be the “imagination of religion itself.” This determination of meaning is then not internal and abstract, as with Kant’s critique, but the metacritique asserts it is external in human making and language, avoiding skepticism by an “aesthetic necessity” and avoids the inward retreat of the subject. Thus language does not grasp a system of values and ethics that exist apart from language, but are in fact determined by human statements where meaning is found.⁸⁵

Far from being a repristination of medieval thought, the metacritique focused on modern secularity and the expressive nature of language. It comprehended the expressive, creative power of language as human endeavor in the creative power of expression as it interpreted revelation.

⁸³ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 150–51.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 149–51.

This perception allowed for “critical retrievals”⁸⁶ such as the Lutheran Confessions in the early nineteenth century without the charge of repristination. Vilmar’s studies on language and culture place him firmly in this way of thinking. As a result he criticized the political perceptions in the era of revolution and the reduction of government to a compact between the masses and the rulers who identified themselves from among them. Additionally with Descartes, Vilmar identified the key issue of understanding to be the act of thought and not the content of thought itself.⁸⁷ By identifying this question as central to the issue, he also avoids being tarred with the brush of repristination, a term which he completely rejected and his version of metacriticism could embrace the Book of Concord as a valid interpretation of the church.

Vilmar asserted the church’s task not only to formulate doctrine but also to criticize the culture, and pursued this task in regard to the culture of his day. He refused to allow the discrete domains of secular and sacred. The church was not to be mixed with the world, but was not to be confined to a ghetto of the supposedly sacred sphere. The metacritique does enmesh thought more in the physical world, even more than Kant would approve, but it makes it less easy to distinguish between what is legitimate knowledge of the finite and what is legitimate knowledge of the infinite. Since no expression of the finite world can really claim the exclusively true understanding of factual reality from the standpoint of a stable platform of objectivity within a

⁸⁶ William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1-21. Placher uses this term to identify those classic theologies of the church which were once dismissed by modern rationalism, but which now gain a new validity as Enlightenment definitions of truth are questioned and other paradigms are employed.

⁸⁷ Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought* translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 53. While identifying the shift of thought to epistemology, Thielicke shows his debt to Enlightenment concepts of knowledge by asserting “Epistemological theory, like hermeneutics, is a sign of skepticism and a loss of certainty.” Critics such as Hamann or Vilmar saw epistemology as it came to be known in the Enlightenment as a move to the skepticism of subjectivism while hermeneutics were observed as a corrective to the tendency. Vilmar specifically identified Lessing’s desire to pursue truth rather than to know it as a demonstrable example of this dangerous development in western thought. See A.F.C. Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt, oder die Aufgaben des geistlichen Amtes in unserer Zeit: Gesammelte pastoral-theologische Aufsätze*, vol. 2 (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872) 332; also see Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 39.

single conceptual framework, it becomes impossible to demonstrate that human understanding is clearly

limited to judgement of the finite and must not trespass beyond these bounds. One no longer knows that the categories of . . . causality, necessity and relation, belong essentially to the framework of subjective grasp of reality—they are just part of the reality that we deal with and express, and therefore we are free to make ‘eminent’ or ‘analogical’ use of these categories in imagining the infinite and their relation of the infinite to the finite.⁸⁸

Having denied exclusive right to determine meaning and understanding to any foundational understanding of reality, we are then free to make analogical use of these categories to imagine the infinite and the relation of the infinite to the finite.⁸⁹ Similarly Vilmar could make use of analogy in his understanding of the relationship of the church to the world.

Vilmar thought that the Israel of the Old Testament was a type of the church in the world. In this regard he was in agreement with the assessment of Melancthon in the Apology: “. . . Israel’s history is an image of the future state in the church. For we see the prophets everywhere reject this opinion of the people, who dreamed that they merited the forgiveness of sins through the sacrifices of the law, and who, armed with this opinion, accumulated works and acts of worship.”⁹⁰ Vilmar saw culture in a continuous decline while the task of the Christian Church was to proceed to the completion of the telos. The two meet in the eschaton by a “contrary coincidence.”⁹¹

Consequently his theological boundaries included Luther’s two regiments and revealed how the church could be excluded from the world into its own ghetto. The consequences for his ecclesiology were far-reaching. Only the church was competent for the task of renewing the life

⁸⁸Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 150-151.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 173, Apology to the Augsburg Confession, 358, quoted in “Reflections on the Faith in the New English Translation of *The Book of Concord*,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, XIV, No. 1 (Spring 2000),

of the people by a process of “diagnosis and therapy.” He rejected the often-accepted idea that the church was not open to the great movements of the time. Rather to him belongs the “before-his-timeness” of identifying great currents that would mature only in the twentieth century. His critique was not simple “conservative,” but presented an “exemplary boldness” to the people of his day.⁹²

The Development of A Metacritical Theology

The theology discussed here then focuses on these notable points: The Theology of Reality found its critical roots in the metacritique associated with Hamann and others in response to Kant, and proceeded subsequently against other systems seeking to correct Kant and other Enlightenment thought. Vilmar sought the certainty of objectivity but thought that the certainty wanted by the Enlightenment, the so-called “Cartesian ‘Either/Or,’”⁹³ was the worst subjectivity and led to skepticism. Secondly, this metacritique found expression in the Lutheran Renewal associated with the tercentennial of the Reformation and the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. Vilmar gave expression to this understanding and in a manner often in sharp contrast to other theologians of this movement who understood and presented Lutheran theology in a more scholastic method associated with the orthodox period of seventeenth century Lutheranism. Thirdly, the theology of church and ministry is not one of many manifestations of the metacritique, but it is the primary exposition of it by Vilmar. Lastly, this metacritique was also a way to interpret Luther. As we have seen with Hamann, Luther and study of his work gained a

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⁹¹ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 134.

⁹² Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 134–38, 142–43.

⁹³ Richard Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 42. I have used this term which Bernstein uses to denote the quest for certainty in light of the “Cartesian anxiety” as western culture sought a sure, neutral matrix from whose neutral base they could assess reality as certain, a quest for certainty in light of the “Cartesian anxiety” as Western culture sought a sure, neutral matrix from whose neutral base they could assess reality as certain.

prominent place in the efforts of those who we identify with this criticism. These advocates did not presume to think that they faced the same substantive problems as Luther; rather they saw the issue generally as one of the experience of God's word by the church in history (Luther and Lutheranism). It was a church opposed to the false, abstract notion of theology as discreet truths systematically arranged according to an a priori set of rational laws (medieval scholasticism and Enlightenment rationalism). The metacritique identified all theology and doctrine as a posteriori, finding statements of truth in the church's doctrine as it was experienced by the church throughout its history.

The exposition of Vilmar's theology is a study in growth as he developed from a liberal and even revolutionary leader of the university Burschenschaft movement in his student days, to a conservative politician and confessional theologian. Both the personal and public events of his day marked his movement in this direction. His participation in the major events and interplay with major currents of thoughts of his day lend clarity to both his conversion to and defense of the Lutheran Confessions and Lutheranism as they took place in his land of Lower Hesse. Though localized, the struggle was with trends of far greater importance than this small German state.

For that reason the next chapter will examine Vilmar's life and the noteworthy events of his time concerning the church and the theologies which supported the government actions he opposed. The third chapter will examine the hermeneutic which led his defense of confessionalism and his understanding of so much of the world; he always remained within the bounds of his method. This method he set forth most concisely and completely in his programmatic work, *Theology of Reality versus the Theology of Rhetoric*, and will serve as the primary, though not exclusive focus. The next three chapters will then investigate and analyze

the controversies that proved the seedbed of his design and therapy in the church, ministry, and cultural criticism as each was discussed above. The seventh and final chapter will provide a general assessment for the church and Lutheranism, both to his contemporary church and to subsequent generations.

CHAPTER 2

REVOLUTION AND RESTORATION

Orthodox Against His Own Will

The birth of Vilmar on 21 November 1800 brought him onto a stage soon to be shared with many distinguished luminaries who would be identified with Lutheran confessionalism: Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802-1869) in Prussia, Claus Harms (1788-1855) in Kiel, Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861) who was long a professor in Berlin, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802—1869) who was Professor of Biblical Exegesis in Berlin, Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1861) in Bavaria, Theodor Kliefoth (1810-1895) in Mecklenburg and professor in Rostock, Theodosius Andreas Harnack (1817—1889) who served as professor in Erlangen and Dorpat, C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887) who would be one of the fathers of the new Lutheranism in America, and A.F.C. Vilmar's own brother, Wilhelm (1804-1884) who would join his brother in the struggles for the church in Lower Hesse; later Wilhelm assumed leadership of the Lutheran free church organization (Renitenzkirche) as it struggled for survival in the wake of Prussian annexation in 1866 when a Kirchenkampf marked the persecution of those Lutherans who had been followers of A.F.C. Vilmar. There were other notable churchmen who played leading roles in defining the church in Germany following the Enlightenment. These include the Catholics Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838) and Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger (1799-1890). Alongside these men those in Britain such as John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-1882) should also be considered because of their defense and ground-breaking writings on the church. All of these

churchmen are identified with the church movement which began circa 1817-1830 and swept through the Western Church, where great Lutheran theologians were prominent.

Vilmar was born into a Reformed parsonage in the village of Solz in the vicinity of Fulda in Electoral Hesse. It was a large and pious family whose religious belief and practice reflected pre-rationalist sensibilities and convictions. Vilmar soon lost these convictions when taught the religion of late rationalism in his theological studies in Marburg, 1818-1820, and his convictions shared much with the Kantian religion taught him at the university. Completing his studies with a high level of academic distinction, he assumed duties of tutor for the children of petty nobility in the Hessian town of Kirchheim when he was ordained in 1824, though he did not serve in a parish but became the rector of a small Gymnasium or secondary school in Rotenburg-on-the-Fulda in the same year. His career in education continued as Gymnasium teacher in Hersfeld in 1827. Then in 1833 he assumed the duties of director of the Gymnasium in Marburg.⁹⁴

Education remained his profession until 1850 when he accepted a consistory position (Konsistorialrat), with duties similar to that of bishop, with a conservative government in the Department for Church and School Affairs in the Diocese of Kassel. His varied pursuits, such as parliamentary representative, embraced many interests and disciplines including education and theological education, Germanistik, philology (he assisted Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm with their famous *Wörterbuch*), hymnology, liturgics, and the history of dogma; he served as editor for two

⁹⁴ Three biographies of Vilmar offer a favorable assessment of the Hessian theologian. The most extensive is the two-volume work by Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, *August Vilmar: Ein Lebens-Zeitbild* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1913). The two remaining are more concise and are written in the midst of struggles within Germany concerning the church. The longer of these is Johann Heinrich Leimbach, *August F.C. Vilmar weil Ritter des Kurfürstlich Wihelmsordens, ordentl. Professor der Theologie, Doctor der Philosophie, und Konsistorialrat zu Marburg nach seinem Leben und Wirken* (Hannover: Buchhandlung von Heinr. Feesche, 1875). The shortest but nevertheless often cited work is by Walther Schwarz, *August Friedrich Christian Vilmar: Ein Leben für Volkstum, Schule, und Kirche* (Berlin: Im Furche-Verlag, 1938).

different publications, each of which ran for a number of years with wide circulation.⁹⁵ “Yet his heart always belonged to theology.”⁹⁶

Vilmar initially was a rationalist who opposed all vestiges of orthodox Christianity. He deplored the Awakening Movement (Erweckungsbewegung) in the early nineteenth century which Paul Tillich called the second Lutheran pietist movement. Many countries in the Western Church witnessed this revival, and certainly Germany was no exception. Our young rationalist educator dismissed its piety as “catholicizing mysticism.” He also condemned the new Lutherans such as Claus Harms about whom he wrote:

Which voices are raised more frequently than the shrieks for mass, for crucifix, for high altar and confession? These are only the first of the new Romans. . . . Still I am comforted that the wheel of time in its omnipotent movement cannot go backwards. Should it stand still for a period as it did in the grim times of the Middle Ages, all the more powerfully it will later move and strike the feeble, smashing them against the earth. Indeed the Middle Ages is their idol. For the last time: damned be all catholicizing and non—catholicizing mysticism.⁹⁷

Nevertheless he came to see the inadequacy, the emptiness, and the despair in rationalist theology. Hermann Sasse credits a change of heart beginning in 1827 to several factors: the influence of many his close friends and especially that of his brother, Wilhelm, the influences of the time which rejected the philosophy and poetry of the Enlightenment, and his serious study of

⁹⁵ Many were university lectures and were published posthumously. His works include *Geschichte der deutschen National-Literatur* (1850) [this work was a standard textbook into the twentieth century and by 1871, for example was in the 14th edition], *Schulreden über die Frage der Zeit*, 2d edition (1852), *Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik* (1856), *Zur neuesten Culturgeschichte Deutschlands*, 3 vol. (1858-1867), *Geschichte des Confessionsgeschichte der evangelischen Kirche in Hessen besonders im Kurfürstentum* (1860), *Augsburgische Confession Erklärt* (1870), *Die Lehre vom geistlichen Amt* (1870), *Lehrbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (1872), *Kirche und Welt: gesammelte pastoraltheologische Aufsätze*, 2 vol. (1872-1873), *Collegium Biblicum* (1880), *Dogmatik*, 2 vol. (1874), *Über den evangelischen Religionsunterricht in den Gymnasium: Vorschläge aus der Erfahrung*, ed. by Johannes Haussletier (1888), *Theologische Moral: Academische Vorlesungen*, ed. C. Christian Israel, 3 vol. (1871).

⁹⁶ Hermann Sasse, “Zur Einführung in Vilmars Theologie,” *Lutherische Blätter* 14 (1938), 8.

⁹⁷ Hopf, *Vilmar*, 94-95. “Welch Stimme erhebt sich wohl häufiger als das Gekreisch nach Messe, nach Kruzifix, nach Hochaltar und nach Beichte? Da lies nur den ersten den besten der neuesten Romane! . . . Doch tröste ich mich noch damit, dass das Rad der Zeit in seinem allgewaltigen Umschwunge nicht rückwärts gehen kann. Sollte es auch eine Zeitlang stille stehen wie in den grausen Zeiten des Mittelalters, desto gewaltiger schwingt es sich später und schlägt die Ohnmächtigen zerschmettert gegen die Erde. Aber, aber das Mittelalter ist ihr Abgott!

Augustine and Tertullian. Further his study of Calov, Hollaz, and Johann Gerhard as well as an examination of the Lutheran Confessions beginning in 1830 completed his transformation and opened his heart to the Scriptures.

The celebration of the [tridentennial of the] Augsburg Confession approached. Now I seriously took it up and its Apology and increasingly recognized—like a view extending over a wide landscape—that all my seeking was in vain, because all I sought was already long at hand. The AC opened up to me completely all at once the readings of Tertullian, Augustine, Gerhard, and my theological change was complete.⁹⁸

All of these appealed to the longings of his own heart so that step by step he came to the knowledge of a new theology. Schleiermacher still had to be seriously dealt with but he was in fact already overcome in Vilmar's thought through his readings.⁹⁹

Vilmar's development coincided with the transition from the subjective piety of the Erweckungsbewegung to a new understanding of the church. This new development was primarily Lutheran in character, though other denominations would also rediscover their old confessions in this period. Luther as well as the old orthodox theologians were the objects of a resurgence of interest. Sasse compares this development of Vilmar to the conversion of Harless who similarly progressed from the Bible to the church fathers and the orthodox Lutheran theologians and then to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church and finally to Luther himself. Under the influence of this transition, the 1830s witnessed a systematic and renewed study of Luther. These theologians sought neither a Luther Renaissance nor a repristination of Lutheran orthodoxy.

Zum letzten Male: Verdammt sei all katholisierende und nicht datholisierende Mystik!"

⁹⁸Ibid., 167. "Nun nahete die Jubelfeier der Augsburgischen Konfession. Jezt nahm ich diese und mit ihr die Apologie ernstlich vor und erkannte nunmehr—dass alles Suchen umsonst sei, weil schon alles Gesuchte längst vorhanden sei. Die A.K. schloss mir wie mit einem Male alles bei Tertulian, Augustin, Gerhard Gelesene vollständig auf, und meine theolgische Wendung war vollbracht."

⁹⁹Sasse, "Zur Einfuhrung," 9.

They sought much more the lost church, as did all serious men in the Christian West at that time, in the century of pietism and the Enlightenment, of religious individualism and the rule of reason. They heard the voice of the church for the first time as the Lutheran Confessions spoke again to them. So they became Lutherans; they became orthodox Lutherans really against their own wills.¹⁰⁰

As we shall see, this movement met with resistance from many quarters.

Vilmar's activities were not confined to education; his political activities as a churchman are noteworthy. In 1831 he was elected to the Electoral Hessian Diet (Ständeversammlung), a position which coincided with his other positions within the church and school. For his political activities Vilmar has been called the most hated theologian in the nineteenth century. By comparison with the Lutheran Hengstenberg in Berlin, a professor who faced the hostility of the liberals, Vilmar shared in this approbation but also incurred that of the Prussian conservatives and German nationalists for his political views opposing Prussian expansion. In his works such as the *Culturegeschichte* cited above and *Kirche und Welt*¹⁰¹ he is considered prophetic in light of the fall of the Bismark government and the catastrophes which overtook Germany in the next century.¹⁰² Vilmar was frequently tagged as a reactionary, but this term requires scrutiny; many at the other end of the theological spectrum, such as David Friedrich Strauss and Bruno Baur, were outspoken advocates of Bismark and his nationalist policies.¹⁰³ The summit of his career was during the period 1851-1855 when he served as representative (Ordinat) of the General Superintendent of Diocese of Kassel. So well was he received by the pastors of this diocese that he was elected by them to be the Superintendent by a large majority. But because Vilmar had been critical of concessions to the liberal forces of revolution immediately following 1848 with

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt*, 2 vol. (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872).

¹⁰² Renate Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer: Von der fürstentreuen kirchlichen Restaurationspartei zur hessischen Renitenz*, Quellen und Forschungen zur hessischen Geschichte 59 (Darmstadt and Marburg: Selbstverlag der Hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der Historischen Kommission für Hesse, 1985), 346-389. Also Sasse, "Zur Einführung, 10."

¹⁰³ Lichtenberger, F. *History of German Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Translated and edited by W.

regard to the church, the Elector did not ratify the pastors' choice. As a consolation to the Lutheran party, he was instead appointed as professor (Ordinariat) of theology at the University of Marburg, a position he retained until his death in 1868. This short account of Vilmar must be seen against the great historical moments and movements in Lower Hesse and the rest of Germany.

The Era of Revolution

The turn of the century, was the birth year of Vilmar and marked the beginning of a period which would encompass four revolutions in his life time. Vilmar explained that two of these were “from above,” and these he could only watch; these he counted as the French Revolution brought to Hesse by the invasion of the French in 1806 and the annexation of Lower Hesse by the Prussians as they defeated the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1866. Goethe had said only a few years before the beginning of the century in 1792 on hearing the sound of cannon fire, “From here, today, begins a new epoch of world history.” For Vilmar and Hesse it was immediately the Age of Revolution. It began by occupation and ended with the loss of sovereignty of Lower Hesse; regaining of sovereignty during the Restoration following the defeat of Napoleon marked a new epoch, but as it turned out, it was the last Hessian Epoch. The other two revolutions “from below” were the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848; as a leader in the government and church Vilmar “was himself part of the history of the German people.”¹⁰⁴

Though only an observer for the first of these revolutions from above, this revolution and the reaction against it a decade later brought with it ideas and institutions which would provide a focus of Vilmar's career. He addressed concepts of church, government control of the church,

Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 347–48, 367–68.

¹⁰⁴Walter Schwarz, *August Friedrich Christian Vilmar: Ein Leben Für Volkstum, Schule, und Kirche* (Berlin: Im Furch-Verlag, 1938), 7, 16.

the public nature of the church. Rationalist convictions formed the presuppositions of many of his theological opponents. They labored under the “Cartesian anxiety”¹⁰⁵ as they sought to find a firm foundation for theology in epistemology which for rationalists placed it in human reason, or with Schleiermacher in locating religion in human consciousness. In both cases the “turn to the subject” dominated epistemology. The philosophy of Hegel would provide some the most far-reaching effects, especially as it found expression in Strauss and Feuerbach, as well as the relationship between church and state in the various German states. The reaction of Schleiermacher who hoped to save religion from being subsumed in rationalism as well as the influence of Hegelian philosophical systems provided the basis

for the greatest battles of Vilmar’s life and challenged him to struggle not only to reassert the objective certainties of the Christian faith, their relation to the church, the church as the locus of theology, the teaching authority of this institution, but also to explore the manner in which subjective faith would find its expression.

Restoration and Schleiermacher

The government exercised legal authority over the administration of the church in the lands where the Reformation had taken root in Germany. This sovereignty found its role in the person of the prince who was supreme bishop (Summepiskopat) over the churches in his territories as understood within the widely accepted Theory of Episcopatism (Theorie des Episcopatismus). Under this arrangement, the civil government provided oversight over such areas as the management of property, education and placement of pastors, and much more. A distinction was made between the *iura in sacra* and the *iura circa sacra* where the former term concerned the

¹⁰⁵Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 18; quoted in Ronald Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985), 94.

spiritual and theological affairs of the church and the latter the legal, financial and administrative affairs. By expanding the arrangements of the Peace of Augsburg (1555) the Theory of Episcopatism was replaced by the Theory of Territoriality (Theorie des Territorialismus) during the period of absolutism. The state now exercised sovereignty in both areas of the church by a bureaucratic structure established as a department, or consistory, in the interior ministry. The lawyers and theologians in this consistory guaranteed the legal code of a particular confession, provided oversight for pastors who were considered state employees, and provided a general supervision over all congregations. This arrangement was to have far reaching implications in the period following the Congress of Vienna (1815) when Europe sought to establish a political system aimed at destroying the revolutionary spirit and restoring the former political rule and order.¹⁰⁶

In this political environment immediately following the Treaty of Vienna, thirty-nine German states formed the German Union (Deutsches Bund) with the goals of resolving all conflicts among member state and opposing all revolutionary spirit. With this background of growing absolutism, the German Union sought to form confessionally unified or “union” territorial churches.

There was no teaching sufficient to justify or define the church within these unions. Certain theologians attempted to fill the gaps. One advocate of the unified church under the administration of the state was the Hegelian, Philip Marheinecke. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a faculty member with Hegel and his opponent, serving with him at the University of Berlin, offered another alternative. Marheinecke promoted a unified Protestant national church whereby the faith of the people would be one with national character. Church and state should be two

¹⁰⁶Jacques Gadill and Jean-Marie Mayeur, *Liberalismus, Industrialisierung, Expansion Europas (1830-1914)*, German edition edited by Martin Geschat, *Die Geschichte des Christentums: Religion, Politik, Kultur* Series, vol. 11

sides of the same idea. The church was depicted as the inner side of the state, while the state was the outside of the church. The church only found legitimacy as a state church. Church administration should be an annex of state administration. He was not so logical or consistent as his sometime rival, Schleiermacher, who thought the solution of synodical government best.¹⁰⁷

Two proposed solutions of church synod gained currency. The first was the Restoration Model where Christianity was viewed as a basic power enabling people to live together peacefully and thereby stabilize society. The organization was the one described above where the state church would be contained within the organization of the state and the state church would be given the status of a welfare institution (Heilanstalt). The second was proposed by Reichsfreiherrn Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein (1757-1831). He proposed a model where the church was thought to be most effective as it was able to exercise a certain measure of independence. To obtain this independence he proposed a presbyterial-synodical church also proposed by Friedrich Schleiermacher¹⁰⁸ where the governing of the church would come from below; the congregation would elect members of the governing synod, and clergy and laymen would govern the church together; under this plan the monarch's authority as the Summepiskopat was reduced to that of a figurehead. This model was not accepted, but it had a living endurance and long provided an alternative to those who opposed the more absolutist institutions of the Restoration.¹⁰⁹

The discussion over the nature and governing of the church focused on three problem areas: the church constitution, the liturgy, and the union between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Addressing these issues Friedrich Wilhelm III (Brandenburg-Prussia) announced on

(Freiburg: Herder, 1997), 309–10.

¹⁰⁷Heinrich Steitz, *Geschichte der Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau: Unionen, Erwechungen, Kirchenverfassungen*, vol. 3 (Marburg: Verlag Trautvetter & Fischer Nachf., 1965), 349-350.

¹⁰⁸Lichtenberger, *German Theology*, 122–28.

27 September 1817 a unified Lord's Supper between the two confessional churches for Reformation Day which marked the tercentennial of the Reformation. The Theory of Territoriality provided him with the claim of *praecipium membrum ecclesiae*, prince of the church, a role to which he was entitled as prince of the realm. His advocacy of a union had both religious and political goals. These included the desire to strengthen the control of the ruling Hohenzollern family, who were of Reformed conviction, over their mostly Lutheran subjects. His government sought to strengthen the church which had been severely weakened by the philosophy of the Enlightenment as it had affected theology. Many of the clergy as educated men were children of the Enlightenment and had little sympathy for German nationalist aspirations nor had they shown much loyalty to the monarchs in their struggles with Napoleon.¹¹⁰

The union proved to be a widespread innovation among the restored governments, especially to the west. Nassau had actually effected a union of the confessions a week before the announcement by the Prussians. Other German nations followed as well with church unions enacted over the next several years. In spite of his sympathy for the presbyterial-synodical form of church government, Schleiermacher became one of the most ardent supporters for the union of the Reformed and Lutheran Churches. Certainly he had publically opposed the Prussian Union with a series of pamphlets and other protests. The chief reason for his opposition was the arbitrary manner with which it was forced from the top down. But his support was based upon his view of doctrine. The doctrine of the churches was time-bound and conditioned by contingency and should not serve as a reason for the separation of Christians. The basis of Christian identity was not doctrine, but it was faith in Christ. He saw the rise of Confessionalism with the greatest of apprehension.

¹⁰⁹Gadill and Mayeur, *Liberalismus*, 311.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

In his *Almanac of the Reformation* (1819) he addressed this issue. It would be folly to follow the ecclesial traditions of former generations. There was no advantage to doing it since the confessional documents and creeds were all subject to different interpretations. They are themselves then no effective measure against unbelief. To return to ancient creeds would be to create a break with culture, and return to an age of scholasticism. Rather the way to effectively promote Christianity lay with exciting the laity in the things of the church and allowing them full participation in managing its affairs. He only advocated the broadest and vaguest of requirements for pastors; they should accept the fundamental principles of Protestantism as stated in the doctrine of justification by faith and the authority of Scripture, and oppose the aberrations of the Roman Church. In the interests of liberty, he even would allow pastors to embrace naturalism and free thought. Schleiermacher and others who supported the union of the confessions did so because they were able to subordinate doctrinal differences. The old differences now disappeared in order to promote other interests: for the governments of the Restoration, it was to consolidate their power, suppress revolutionary tendencies in society, and to otherwise promote the welfare of society by solidarity with the support afforded by a common church body. For Schleiermacher and others of his convictions, it was in the interest of individual liberty.¹¹¹

This link between doctrine, theology and the church became the focus of the debate and the grounds for the confessional opposition which began to gain momentum in this period. It displayed a widespread aversion to a confessionless religion and a distinct dislike for governments who displayed an increasing antagonism in enforcement of the church union. The question of church, doctrine, and the connections between the two became inextricably linked by the theology of Schleiermacher. By contrast, Enlightenment rationalism considered the past to be a time of superstition which had been alleviated only in the present time. It displayed disdain for

¹¹¹Lichtenberger, *German Theology*, 129.

things of the past and developed a rationalist theology which recognized human reason as the ultimate authority in matters of religion. Schleiermacher developed his theology during the early period of Romanticism which sought to establish a bridge to what had existed in the past. Out of this effort developed the positive religion or theology which was to influence the conception of the church so decisively.¹¹²

The meaning of “positive theology” is distinguished from English positivism by Paul Tillich. The English version of positivism by someone such as David Hume was based upon empirical considerations, from a critical epistemology based upon sense perceptions and other given data. But on the continent and especially in Germany it was a facet of Romanticism which valued the historically and traditionally given.¹¹³ Thus systematic theology becomes the description of the faith as it is present and experienced in the Christian churches. In Schleiermacher’s famous ordering of theological disciplines into philosophical, historical, and practical theology, he includes dogmatics and ethics under historical theology. They are associated with a particular time, place, and denomination but there are no truth claims to be associated with them. Thus theology becomes the positive knowledge of historical phenomena.¹¹⁴

He identifies Christian theology as the total theoretical insights and practical rules without which no church government is possible. Here there is a specific link of theology to the church, and there is also something new: there are no claims to truth, indeed, the question is entirely absent. Theology becomes a matter of historical development but not the development of objective truth within the church or in theology. Schleiermacher posited a problem which Vilmar

¹¹²Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology*, ed. and with an Introduction by Carl Braaten (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1967), 102–3.

¹¹³Ibid., Schleiermacher’s book, *The Christian Faith*, was entitled, *Die Glaubenslehre* or “the doctrine of faith.” He could not give it the literal title of “theology” or “doctrine” of God because the faith is only what is positively given.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 103.

would address: how is doctrine developed and how can we describe or even know what is objectively true in theology? Christianity was conceived as a phenomenon of religion in general, religion as a universal human experience, though Christianity is the best example of it. His definition of religion was the absolute dependence upon God. This absolute dependence was a consciousness of God and rendered Christianity in its essence as neither thinking nor doing.

Another type of church theory identified by Vilmar was one whose roots were found in pietism where the means of grace were based within the congregation itself, that is with the royal priesthood of all believers. Such a concept considered the true church as invisible, but as Vilmar noted, they cannot administer the means of grace and remain invisible; this issue will be discussed below. This view of the invisible church coincided with a tendency to promote personal piety while diminishing the merit of doctrine. In this manner it agreed with Schleiermacher who essentially ended the era of doctrine. But elements of the Awakening Movement departed from Schleiermacher since these Christians actually believed in objective theological truth. Consequently, this pietism as it found expression in the Erweckungsbewegung fueled the Lutheran confessional revival as people rediscovered the sixteenth century confessions.

Vilmar addressed along with others engaged in the fray, the immediate issues of church constitution (Kirchenverfassung), liturgy, and the nature of doctrine. He discerned more profound concerns in questions of the church in a public domain, binding doctrine, subsequent theology, its basis, locus, and task, and the nature and teaching authority of the church itself. These of course would shape the theology of ministry and lead to a social critique by the church and its ministers as one of its tasks. Another task of the state power would be the occasion of extensive thought by Vilmar: education of the clergy at state universities. With the church

considered an arm of the state, a church whose task was viewed largely as instructing the people to support the state and its laws a new definition emerged: “The church . . . embraced the world of feeling and faith while the state manifested the absolute.”¹¹⁵

Lutheranism and the Renewal of Church Life

These religious currents left hardly any of the German nations untouched. The trend to confessional union was not met with universal acclaim. While many were moved to external religious unity, others rejected this unity in the name of the same faith. These currents, complex in their appeal across class lines and confession, shared a general move to a renewed life of the church and the re-examination of the nature of the church. In particular the confessional renaissance known by Germans between 1830 and 1866 often bore a deliberate and often decidedly Lutheran character.¹¹⁶ These years coincide almost exactly with the Vilmar’s lifetime efforts to defend and sustain Lutheran belief, practice, and thought.

Though it would be difficult to identify a specific date when the Awakening Movement in Germany shifted from a spiritual renewal reflecting Bible study and personal piety to one of concern for confession and the nature of the church, it seemed to coincide with reaction against the rationalism, resistance in some places such as Silesia to an enforced confessional union, and the celebration of the tercentennial of the Augsburg Confession in 1830. Lutheran professor at Erlangen, Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875), related this shift among Bavarian Protestants as he described their Christian sensibilities and relation with the established church in the 1820s:

The external form of church life did not matter; they let them [sic] be without worry; likewise the confessional statements had little meaning for them. What inspired them was the faith in the free mercy of God in Christ, what united them was the love of Christ. What stood before them as their most desirable goal was the free association

¹¹⁵Seitz, *Kirche in Hessen*, 348.

¹¹⁶Conser, Walter H., Jr., *Church and Confession: Conservative Theologians in German, England, and America, 1815-1866* (Mercersburg: Mercer University Press, 1984), 38.

of all believers from all confessions, after the example of the community of the Brethren or the apostolic church in Jerusalem.¹¹⁷

By the 1830s there was a marked change in concern and practice among these same believers:

We were Lutherans even before we knew it. Without reflecting very much on the confessional peculiarity of our church nor on the confessional differences that separate it from other churches, we were Lutherans. We did not even yet know what these differences were. We read the confessions of the church as testimonies of sound teaching for the clarification and support of our knowledge of salvation. Their symbolical meaning did not bother us. As soon as we began to investigate the road on which God had led us, about the testimonies out of which our faith had arisen, and about the historical roots of our church's past and present condition, we became aware of standing in the very middle of Lutheranism. Our Christian faith was the Lutheran faith, exactly as the Lutheran church is and aspires to be nothing other than an example of the one, Christian, saving truth, and as its confessional statements intend to be nothing other than the sound scriptural confession of the gospel, which has its center in the free grace of God in Christ. . . . In this way we became Lutherans voluntarily, from the inside out.¹¹⁸

Whether against their will (Sasse) or from the inside out or before they knew it, it is clear that by the 1830s a distinctive confessional Lutheran faith was emerging throughout Germany. The rise of this movement is usually measured before this decade from the landmark "95 Theses" of Claus Harms in Kiel in 1817, the tercentennial of the beginning of the Reformation. This polemic was a call for a return to Lutheran confessional faithfulness coinciding with a reawakening of religious sentiment during the national wars for liberation from the French, opposition to rationalism in the church, and response to the union of confessions just beginning to gain momentum in the German lands. His timing echoed the sentiments of many as well as inciting a hostility that would characterize the confessional struggle for future decades.

¹¹⁷Thomasius, Gottfried, *Die Widerwachen des evangelischen Lebens in der lutherische Kirche Bayers. Ein süddeutscher Kirchengeschichte, 1800-1840* (Erlangen: Deichert, 1867), 143-144, in Conser, *Church and Confession*, 37.

¹¹⁸Thomasius, *Widerwachen*, 244-245, quoted and translated in Conser, *Church and Confession*, 38.

Within a year over two hundred petitions both in support of and in opposition to Harms appeared.¹¹⁹

The rift in Germany over the nature of the church began to find expression in many Lutheran thinkers, not the least, Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861), educated in Würzburg, Heidelberg and Erlangen. His opposition to the union of confessions theologically presented by Schleiermacher provided a succinct and clear view of the confessional parties, i.e. those who opposed union and Schleiermachers understanding of church and doctrine. In his books, *Die Philosophie des Rechts* (1831) and *Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten* (1840) he elucidated a view of the church which provided an alternative view to Schleiermacher's teaching of the church. In this debate he identified two alternatives for the Christian church: it was either an organic institute (Anstalt) of Christ, uniting both visible and invisible facets of the church united in Christ, or it was an association of individuals who established requirements for membership. Thus Stahl laid out the primary contours of the church question among German Protestants.¹²⁰

Accordingly church polity could best exist, in his view, in episcopal form, rightfully delineating the supportive responsibilities of civil and church authorities, or it could exist as individual association with either a territorial government or a collegial government of the masses with their authority resembling that of popular sovereignty. Both of these latter alternatives appealed to individuality and pietism, as he saw it, demonstrated in the union of confessions imposed by ruling princes and supported by Schleiermacher's theology. Nor did

¹¹⁹Conser, *Church and Confession*, 23.

¹²⁰Ibid., 46, 50.

Stahl desire an episcopate modeled after Rome. He believed that in Roman Catholicism, polity came before creed, but in Protestantism, understanding, creed came before polity.¹²¹

The nature of the office of the ministry has to be included in any consideration of this debate. Stahl denied that the ministry was in any way based upon the congregation nor did the office proceed from it. Rather it is part of the institution of grace, the “objective” nature of the church instituted by Christ and exists for the “subjective” part of the church, i.e. the congregations. The office exists according to Scripture and church history and is not a *jure homano*. The issue stated within the framework of the office of the ministry is either *prius* to the congregation or *posterus*. Since the human association of church congregations comes from the means of grace administered by the office, then the office cannot possibly emerge from the congregation. Stahl opposed lay participation in the governing of the church, a position which Vilmar found condescending and looked at Cyprian for an example of how to govern the church, governing with the advice of clergy and the agreement of the laity. Stahl rejects to Vilmar’s satisfaction the understanding of the office of the ministry as only a leader of an individual congregation, a manifestation of human freedom in governing, and that it exists apart from the means of grace.¹²²

Stahl influenced another Lutheran leader, Theodor F. D. Kliefoth (1810-1895), a native of Mecklenburg. He was educated at the University of Berlin for a year and felt an early influence of his professors, Schleiermacher and August Neander. In 1830 he returned home and completed his theological education at the University of Rostock, and an entirely different theological view would emerge. An early friendship with the ruler of Mecklenburg, Grand Duke Friedrich Francis, led to his appointment as Superintendent of the Lutheran Church in

¹²¹Ibid., 48-50.

¹²²A.F.C. Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt, oder die Aufgaben des geistlichen Amtes in unserer Zeit: Gesammelte*

Mecklenburg in 1844 after serving as parish pastor from 1840 to 1844. He was already known for *Einleitung in die Dogmengeschichte* (Introduction to the History of Dogma) (1839). There he rejected positivism in the study of church history. He dismissed the contemporary study of dogma as crude empiricism and advocated study of church history identifying the unity underlying it. This method of fragmented empiricism he rejected as atheistic, “objectivity” focused only on singularities and individual incidents and not the unifying objective, spiritual nature of what lay behind historical phenomena. The historian of dogma should investigate the history of salvation with this in mind as it was attested both in Scripture and in human history:

. . . to grasp history, to recognize its unity in the many facets of its form, the order in its varied multiplicity, the abiding law in the succession of its changes. And if this proves difficult it is also the task of our time. In all historical science it is now essential to recognize the the law of historical development; and it is just this spiritual consideration of history that historical research in our day recognizes about earlier ages. . . .¹²³

He saw this unity or “law” in history as spiritual, both objective and subjective. The objective was the Holy Spirit and the subjective were the spheres where the Holy Spirit worked.

The first element of dogma is the spiritual. The Christian spirit is the living source out of which emerges all things Christian including dogma. Nothing can really be a dogmatic product which does not proceed from this Christian spirit as a manifestation of it. Thoughts and teachings which have another source, e.g. philosophical teaching, theories of natural science, etc. can never be dogma. . . . The Christian spirit has its objective and its subjective side. The objective side is the Holy Spirit, the substance of the Christian life and its own development, historically given in the appearance of Christ. From the subjective it is the Christian spirit of the subject, whose life is permeated and disposed by the Holy Spirit; in so far as it can only take shape this way, it becomes the principle of life of the individual. [There is] on the one side of dogma its Christian character, and on the other side its connection to the particularism in which it takes place, and thereby again in connection to the time in which it

pastoral-theologische Aufsätze, 2 vol., (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872-1873), 200–9.

¹²³Theodor Kliefoth, *Einleitung in der Dogmengeschichte* (Parchim and Ludwigslust, Verlage der D. C. Hinstorffschen Hofbuchhandlung, 1839), v. “. . . die Geschichte zu begreifen, in der Mannigfaltigkeit ihrer Gestalten die Einheit, in ihrer bunten Vielheit die Ordnung, in der Riehe ihrer Veränderungen das bleibende Gesetz zu erkennen. Aber wenn dies auch schwierig sein mag, so ist es doch einmanl die Aufgabe unserer Zeit. In allen historischen Wissenschaften gilt es jetzt die Gesetze der geschichtlichen Entwicklung [sic] zu erkennen; und eben diese geistige Behandlung der Geschichte ist es, was die Geschichtsforschung unserer Tage auszeichnet vor der früher Zeiten. . . .”

emerges, to the people's spirit (Volksgeschichte) and the historical connections out of the midst of which it grew. . . .¹²⁴

The second impulse behind dogma are the words of the Bible and the preceding development of Christian dogma.¹²⁵ This understanding suggests idealism. The Greek church was succeeded by the Roman church and then the Protestant Church appeared in succession. But unlike the idealism of Hegel who saw an unfolding of reason in history, Kliefoth saw the unfolding of the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. Unlike Hegel, he did not see a synthetic development (aufheben) but an additive view of development (annehmen). Each era brings unique, essential Christian elements into appearance and consciousness, adding the results which have developed up to that point. Here he developed many of the themes which would become prominent in his reflections of the 1850s: the Christian experience as both subjective and objective and the concept of unity understood within a developmental framework.¹²⁶

The period of 1848-1858 was especially meaningful for him as he articulated his doctrine of the church in light of revolution and condemned what he termed radical attempts to seize the state and either gain control of the church or dismiss it from public life altogether. He directed a

¹²⁴Ibid., 43-44. "Das die erste Moment des Dogma is das geistige. Der christliche Geist is der Lebensquelle aus dem Alles Christliche mithin auch das Dogma, entspringt. Nichts kann wirklich dogmatisches Erzeugniss sein, was nicht aus diesem Geiste als dessen Erscheinung hervorgeht. Gedanken und Lehren, die einen andern als diesen Ursprung haben z.b. B. philosophische Lehren, naturwissenschaftliche Theorien, u.s.w. können nie Dogma sein. . . . Der christliche Geist aber hat seine objective und seine subjective Seite. Die objective Seite ist der heilige Geist, die Substanz des christlichen Lebens und seiner Entwicklung [sic] selbst, geschichtliche gegeben in der Erscheinung Christi. Von der subjectiven Seite is er der christliche Geist des Subjects, das vom heilige Geiste durchdrungene und bestimmte Leben des Individuums. In so fern das Dogma aus jenem hervorgeht, ist es die Darstellung der christlichen Wahrheit selbst. . . . [Es gibt] in dem geistigen Momente des Dogma einer Seits sein christlicher Character, andereer Seits aber auch sein Verhältniss zu der Eignethüümlichkeit dessen, der es geschaffen hat, und damit wieder ein Verhältniss zu der Zeit, in der es entstanden, zu dem Volksgeist und den geschlichen Verhältnissen , aus deren Mitte es hervorgewachsen/ . . ."

¹²⁵Ibid., 44.

¹²⁶Conser, *Church and Confession*, 84-5.

¹²⁶Theodor Kliefoth, "An die hochwürdige theologische Fakultät der Georg Augustus Universität zu Göttingen, " *Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (1854), 44, quoted in Conser, *Church and Confession*, 90.

series of pamphlets (1854-1855) at the Göttingen faculty who favored church confessional union.

He stated:

We came from a subjective feeling about Christianity to a new sense of the church, and indeed to a new conscious understanding of the Lutheran church. Clearly we stand here now quite different from when we left school: we did not have to dream about the church of the future, but rather to worry about the future of the church.¹²⁷

He published a second influential book, *Acht Bücher von der Kirche (Eight Books on the Church)* (1854). He saw the danger to the church of congregations becoming nothing more than free societies without faith or creed and where then atheism and irreligiosity, indifference, and immorality would be legalized. This view fit very well with Stahl's understanding of the church as the organic institution of Christ. The word of God was the essential element to join the people together, bonded by the means of grace administered by the clergy. For the congregation was brought into existence by God's action through these means. Grace was transmitted by the church. As a servant of the state or as simply an association of individuals who came together based upon mutual agreement, this sense of the church was lost, and as Vilmar would recognize, Christ was lost to the church.

Summary

It is a modern phenomenon that the church became an issue as the revolutionary passions of Europe spread over the continent following the French Revolution. The origins of this concern had a basis deep within the period of the Enlightenment which distrusted the authority of the church as opposed to reason. And since all men possessed reason, it was thought a liberating idea that men could base their beliefs on reason. As the church was weakened by over a century of such thought, a growing awareness by 1800 seemed to recognize that the Christian faith could only be found within the institution of the church although the form and origin of this institution

led to public disagreement. A broad spectrum of paths led to locating this “lost” church either as an institution of the state as Hegel did on the one hand, or it could be based simply on human choice with a government reflecting the democratic nature of human choice by individual consciousness as did Schleiermacher. This latter solution Schleiermacher sought in the interest of human freedom but ironically his solution reinforced the domination of the spiritual affairs of the church by the government as its doctrinal structure was dismissed as “positive” historical phenomena with no truth claims on contemporary believers. Such a position allowed the government of Brandenburg-Prussia to dictate the belief and cultus of the churches resulting in an alliance between the political reactionaries and the political reformers.

Many people of the time, especially those who were caught up in the Awakening Movement found this solution inadequate and even hostile since Christ seemed lost to a church which became a human institution of either voluntary association or an extension of the government. It became necessary to find the church. This the Lutherans attempted to do. They followed several paths in this quest.

They addressed issues of polity finding episcopal government by clergy most beneficial for the spiritual interests of the church (Stahl) or a security of the church and its teaching authority in a newly stated understanding of the clergy as the objective administrators of grace and thus the means by which Christians and Christian congregations find birth as the people of God. This view of the ministers of the church was not conceived in a vacuum; the state responsibility of training of pastors was met with the model of Schleiermacher where pastors were taught doctrine as an historical discipline only and found a diminished or even non-existent confessional basis for their beliefs or duties. Kliefoth probed further for a confessional basis and found it in the

unity of the church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, who gave it objective certainty throughout its history. Thus doctrine again assumed its traditional role as a basis for belief and practice.

Vilmar took the argument further to demonstrate how the Reformation was initially a reformation by the clergy, for the Reformation without Luther and his ecclesial allies was unthinkable. He saw the Reformation as a hermeneutical reformation and saw this task of interpretation with the authority of the Christ ever-present with his church as the only possible basis for authority and the only acceptable basis for the task of theology. The task of theology was essentially descriptive and Vilmar realized that the clergy had to be trained in this understanding before the church of his day could again understand itself as the true church of Christ, that is, where Christ was present with it.

Accordingly much of Vilmar's efforts and writings address educational issues, condemning the education of pastors characterized by Schleiermacher's positivism or an idealism which made the church an arm of the state. His writings also emphasized the unity of the church and its doctrine because Christ had always been present with his church and would continue to be present, with the means of grace administered with his authority. His presence through the Holy Spirit also led to an understanding of how personal and institutional understanding of Scripture came about. This led to a discussion of hermeneutics, how the church understands the Scriptures and how they teach these Scriptures with authority.

These discussions about the church, its authority, ministry, and doctrine and these struggles for the church were not an effort to reconstitute or return to a sixteenth century church. The questions raised by nineteenth century issues had to be answered in the nineteenth century. Vilmar, while treasuring the Lutheran Confessions and their understanding of the Christian church, nevertheless maintained that they did not sufficiently address the most pressing issue of

his day, the nature of the church. He believed this pressing issue made additional confessional statements necessary to clarify issues and lend a basis of authority to Christ's institution of the church.

Consequently, the metacritique, the term used to describe Vilmar's work in the preceding chapter, was part of a movement which brought something distinctively new. It sought not simply to return to an old set of presuppositions but introduced a critique of modern secularizing thought and was itself a modern phenomenon. It might be argued that certain other Lutheran theologians did indeed seek repristination with a return to the scholastic method of the seventeenth century. We can justifiably maintain that Vilmar promoted the traditional Lutheran arrangement between church and state since the time of Luther, maintaining the distinction between tasks of *iura in sacra* and *iura circa sacra*.

The developing views of the relations between church and state during the period, 1830-1866, formed two competing positions of the church and state: either the ruler who would exercise sovereignty in all affairs of the church (*circa in sacra*) or a complete separation of church and state as sought by the Frankfurt Parliament (Vormärz) in 1848 in the wake of the Revolution of that year. A consistent theme of these Lutherans discussed here was the rejection of both of these positions. Vilmar was not insisting on a return to a spiritually mandated form of government but was rather finding the best solution to the question of church polity and authority when confronted with secularizing tendencies. Following the Elector of Hesse's concessions to revolutionaries after 1848, Vilmar and his colleagues advocated a synodical form of government themselves. The irony of this position dismisses all suggestions of a church-state repristination as well.

So Vilmar employs his own understanding and that of others like him to interpret and create the understanding of Christology, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, history, and other areas of concern as needed in his own day. Though coinciding with modernism, we might describe their thinking as antimodern, leading them to a polemic against modern secularizing tendencies as they faithfully sought the Christian Church. Vilmar's interpretation of the Scriptures and of the Lutheran Confessions were a primary focus of his effort in this undertaking.

CHAPTER 3

INTERPRETATION AND THE CHURCH

A Search for Reality

One of the most unusual features of Vilmar in comparison to those other Lutheran leaders who sought a renewed confessional Lutheranism in the 19th century, was his vocation. He was trained as a theologian and ordained in 1821. Yet his formative professional years, as well as his final years, were spent largely as an educator. As we have seen in Chapter 2 he served variously as private tutor, teacher and rector in Rotenburg (on the Fulda), professor at the gymnasium in Hersfeld, and from 1833 to 1849, Director of the Marburg Electoral Gymnasium (*Marburger kufürstlichen* Gymnasium). YOU REALLY SHOULD CHECK YOUR GERMAN SPELLING THROUGHOUT, I'M SURE I'M NOT CATCHING ALL THE TYPOS. Beginning in 1855, he taught future pastors while serving as a professor of theology at the University of Marburg. It is worth noting that his famous programmatic writing, *The Theology of Reality versus the Theology of Rhetoric* (*Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider der Theologie der Rhetorik*) published in 1856, appeared as a critique and proposal to reform theological education of future pastors. One cannot grasp Vilmar's contributions to Lutheranism without examining his career as a teacher.

His years as an educator comprise only one of four pursuits in a life known for its theological dedication. Accordingly we will also examine here his passion for German literary studies as a new and controversial discipline in the academic community, his well-known dedication to the renewal of confessional Lutheranism in his land of Lower or Electoral Hesse,

and his political undertakings as legislative representative and church official in the civil administrative structure. It should here be noted that these pursuits were not discrete areas of life but complemented one another. These endeavors provided the scene from his transformation from religious doubt to a champion of Lutheran doctrine, from a revolutionary inclination as a leader in the student Burchenschaft of his university days to a conservative church politician with friends in the highest offices in the land, and from a disciple of abstract rationalism to a student of German history and literature. As one biographer noted, he did not so much move with the currents of his times as find fulfillment in them.

As we shall see he often either added something new to discussion or took what was not original to him and gave it fresh exposition in the struggles of his Hessian homeland. Indeed all his undertakings reveal key presuppositions, complementing and illuminating each other as the Theologian of Reality constructed a legacy tangible to this day in congregational life and doctrinal discernment. As we examine Vilmar's understanding of these various endeavors, we will discover a hermeneutical approach in his discernment of church, Scripture, the pastoral ministry, the nature of confessions and other doctrinal statements of the church, and a legitimate critique of government and the culture by the church. Traditionally this term, hermeneutics, was reserved for interpretation of sacred texts, but in the nineteenth century, its scope was increased to include humanistic and historical inquiry. In assessing these transformations in his life, Vilmar observed late in life that by 1840 he stood fast in all that he was to maintain and defend, God willing, to the end.¹²⁸

During these early formative years, Vilmar participated in a new academic movement promoting the study of the history of German language, literature identified simply as Germanistik, and establishing such studies alongside traditional classical studies as a legitimate

part of the curriculum of university and gymnasium alike. As a philologist he participated in research for the Brothers Grimm's monumental *German Dictionary* (*Deutsches Woerterbuch*) beginning in early 1839, an early product of the new regard and assessment of the value of German national language and literature.¹²⁹ He is listed as one of 83 researchers in the first volume of the project. This focus led to his presenting a series of lectures in Marburg to interested members of the public as a forerunner to his *History of German National Literature* (*Geschichte der deutschen National-Literature*) published in 1844. This work became the standard textbook for the topic throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century as well. It appeared in numerous editions and sold a then enormous number of 131,000 copies.¹³⁰ He published numerous articles on philology and German literature. In 1856 he received an offer to serve as Professor for Modern Language (Ordinarius für neuere Sprachen) at the University of Rostock. When appointed to the faculty of Marburg in 1855, another professor at Marburg, Wilhelm Julius Mangold, a critic of Vilmar's theological views, nevertheless, proposed that he serve as Professor for German Philology. For Vilmar it was a turn from the Kant of his earlier years to the Brothers Grimm in his mature years.

Vilmar considered German literature to be the way of making the inheritance of the past concretely present for the benefit of a world that had long ignored the past while enamored with the abstraction associated with reason and the Enlightenment. In his lectures on German literature, leading to publication, he wanted not only readers, but hearers—hearers to be persuaded that reality lay in the experiences of the German people, not in abstract constructions

¹²⁸ Wilhelm Hopf, *August Vilmar: Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1 (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1912), 371.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 334-335.

¹³⁰ Klaus-Gunther Wesseling, "Literaturgeschichtsschreibung als Vor-Schein einer besseren Wirklichkeit," *Literature Theologie und Kirche* 27, 1 / 2 (Februar 2003): 32, 44. When first published this popular work on German literary history appeared as *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der deutschen National-Literature* and was issued with its later title in the third edition appearing in 1848.

of rationalism and “scientifically” contrived theological systems, and that this experience was profoundly Christian. The German people had had an identity as such only since the time they had embraced the faith and were identified as a Christian people, he maintained.¹³¹ So Vilmar introduced into his educational program the then innovative study of German literature in the gymnasium curriculum. The study of German literature as a receiving of the inheritance of the past, offered an alternative understanding of reality to the rationalism which had dominated his own theological education and was reflected in Schleiermacher’s view of theology as a positive science. The true reality was found in the real events and experiences that had taken place in the history of the German people and were accessible in the present by the study of literature. It was a rejection of the abstract and an embracing of “reality.” On such an inheritance, the German people could reclaim their heritage as a foundation for a renewed civilization. This conviction did not find its only expression in secular literature but revealed the value of certain “critical retrievals”¹³² from the past, for example, the Lutheran Confessions.

Accordingly we must identify a third stream of interest, activity and thought not only in a general interest in the faith but in his belief that a renewal of Germany, and especially of Lower Hesse following foreign rule by France, and further withered by rationalism, would be found in a rediscovery and renewal of the Lutheran faith. In his speech on the occasion of the terrecentennial of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession held at the Hersfeld gymnasium, Vilmar celebrated retrievals from the past, retrievals that would serve as treasure for people of his day and succeeding generations. He not only participated in a widespread, renewed interest in

¹³¹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Geschichte der deutschen National Literature*, 4th ed/ (Marburg und Leipzig: N. G. Elwert’sche, 1871), 39. This theme is a common one in Vilmar’s work as he wrote about the German people and their inheritance of faith.

¹³² William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), xii, 2. I have borrowed this term as a way of expressing the rediscovery and use of pre-modern Christian insights which are not to indicate a return to a pre-modern world but to be used critically in our own time.

Lutheranism (Neuluthertum), but by 1830, it had become his passion. His speech in October 1830 turned out to be a landmark in his development as we find a statement matching this dramatic moment in German and Church history. He said on that occasion:

Presently interest in the Church is one of the most pressing of our time, and it has progressed already so far, that the greatest and the least participation which one shows for the Church, provides the measure of the genuine growth of progress shared with the age. . . . So then, one has also in our time again viewed with the right viewpoint the Lutheran Symbols, these basic pillars of the Church, long forgotten and hardly known historically and often absurdly judged. . . . What is said in the Augsburg Confession about works and about faith, about confession and mass, about forgiveness of sins and redemption, about celibacy and the power of bishops, all that is in every connection so entirely for our times—spoken for the following [generations]. If we want to be evangelical Christians, we have to make this confession ours almost from article to article.¹³³

Here we see features of Vilmar's concern for the church, features that would loom large in his activities in these formative years and later as he served as church official, professor of theology, and widely read author. The retrieval of writings from church history enriched the practice of the faith as it addressed issues of its own day. The church and theology could not be legitimately separated from the events and experiences of the past expressed in doctrinal formulations. For Lutheran Christianity (and for other confessions with similar documents as well) these documents were reality. These retrievals were not a simple re-creating return to the past but as the reality of the church continued to bear special significance in relation to the issues facing his generation and its continuing relationship to the Lord of the Church. They would serve as well for succeeding generations. The reality of doctrine and of the Church should be

¹³³ Walter Schwarz, *August Friedrich Christian Vilmar: Ein Leben für Volkstum, Schule und Kirche* (Berlin: Im Furche-Verlag, 1938), 29. "Gerade das kirchliche Interesse ist eins der wichtigsten unsere Ziet, und es ist schon so weit gekommen, dass die grössere und geringere Teilnahme, welche man für die Kirche zeigt, den Massstab der eigenen Bildung des Fortschreitens mit der Zeit abgibt . . . So hat man denn auch in unserer Zeit die lange vergessenen und kaum noch historisch gekannten, oft aber verkehrt beurteilten Symbole, dies Grundpfeiler der Kirche, wieder aus dem rechten Gesichtspunkte betrachten gelernt. . . . Was in der Augsbürgischen Confession von den Werken und von den Glauben, von der Vergebung der Sünden und der Erlösung, von Beichte und Messe, von Zölibat und Bischofsgewalt gesagt ist, alles das ist in jeder Beziehung so ganz für unsere Zeiten, für die nächstfolgende gesagt, dass wir, wollen wir rechte evangelische Christen sein, dieses Bekenntnis fast von Artikel zu

existentially known by the people. In his curriculum for religious instruction written in 1833 for the Marburg Gymnasium he recognized that he did not want to spread a purely subjective faith, nor to plant a faith of the Church in his students as a merely academic exercise, but would communicate the Holy Spirit and must himself have the Holy Spirit of Christ to perform this task. Only by growth in the faith would his students avoid the abyss of rationalism and learn to see from a different viewpoint, to know different words, and to speak with a different voice. According to his biographer, Walter Schwarz, “The reality of the Church rose from him.”¹³⁴ The objective reality (Tatsache) and the subjective reality of experience (Erfahrung) stood in conceptual tension and present us with the framework of revelation to the Church.

A fourth charge he undertook in these formative years in the early 1830s was service in political office under a new constitution following the Revolution of 1830. This activity led to an interest in education reform at the state level. His thought expressed in education, literature and theology, found a definite expression in his later activity and writings as he considered the church and its relationship to the government and culture. In 1831 he was elected to the legislature (Landtag) in the wake of the Revolution of 1830 as a liberal representative from the Lower Hessian district (Wahlkreis) Hersfeld/Melsungen. In December of that year he was called to a position in the government High Church Commission (Oberkirchenkommission). He soon became disenchanted with liberalism, and we date his change to a political conservative during this period. His term in the legislature allowed him to engage in the reform of secondary and theological education. His interests in both would find further engagement in his journalistic writings and in his later appointment into the conservative government in the consistory managing church affairs at the diocesan level. He served as Advisor for Spiritual and School

Artikel zu dem unsrigen mach müssen . . . ”

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Affairs in May 1851. In May he was also appointed as Assistant (Suppleant) to the Superintendent and influenced parish life as he promoted a renewed understanding of the value of worship, catechesis, confession, and church discipline. He proved to be very popular with the pastors in the Diocese of Kassel; in 1855 the pastors by an overwhelming majority of votes chose him as their candidate to be the new superintendent.¹³⁵

Like pastors holding a preaching office, Vilmar held the office of educator to preach the gospel. His study of literature, and specifically religious instruction in the gymnasium, served as his pulpit.¹³⁶ Here we note that his presuppositions concerning faith, revelation, and the Christian Church produced a new and noteworthy hermeneutic of reality versus what he called a destruction of the Church and Christianity through a new paganism. He pointed to the Enlightenment and rationalism as the culprit whose inheritance still corrupted Germany and its educational institutions. Vilmar did not propose a new model or paradigm to teach or to justify the Christian faith, but he recognized that Christian faith was a presupposition to education in a Christian nation, and culture and should proceed from that basis to teach the students what they otherwise could not know by themselves. Indeed human beings were incapable of knowing the revelation of God through rationalist inquiry.

We shall examine the ideas which he identified as opposed to his program of instruction with its Christian responsibilities and content. We will see his thoughts expressed at first in essays written in the conflict over his new educational undertaking as gymnasium director in Marburg. From these writings we can understand his regard for the Church and its faith which he embraced and later in life taught at the university in his mature years.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 13-14.

¹³⁶ Wolfgang Pfaffenberger, "Blütezeiten und nationale Literaturgeschichtsschreibung: Eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtung," Dissertation Frankfurt a. M./Bern/Cirencester 1981, 353, quoted in Wesseling, "Literaturgeschichtsschreibung," 51. "Für Vilmar ist Literaturgeschichte eine andere Kanzel. . . ."

Education vs. Development

In his essay, “Concerning Education Which is the Task of the Gymnasium” (Über die Erziehung, welche die Aufgabe der Gymnasium ist) published in 1841, Vilmar contrasts his belief concerning education with what had been established by the Enlightenment. He specifically cites Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and his book, *The Education of the Human Race*, and his convictions concerning education:

‘The education of the individual is the revelation to the entire human race’. With these words begin one of the smallest but one of the most noteworthy and influential books written in the preceding century that served human knowledge against Christian truth. If somehow a book has been a fact, as we like to say today, then this book was a fact of the decisive separation of human consciousness from the fundamental basis of Christianity. Now was a penetrating, striking, and fruitful expression found for the long present but unclear attempt to clothe divine thoughts in a human [thought], (though his aim was not a conscious one) to equate the divine office to a human office, to explain with human works the eternal power of the Creator of heaven and earth. Lessing’s thought was the battle flag of rational writing around which a great number have rallied for fifty years.¹³⁷

Lessing possessed an optimism concerning human ability that Vilmar believed had little warrant. Rationalism asserted that revelation from God the student learned by human reason. Not only were these truths attainable, but all had access to the same truths, and since reason led to revelation, all could be brought to agreement in grasping truth. Idealism was not new to the Enlightenment. Such convictions were not new to the era; as stated earlier, Descartes had attempted to lay to rest epistemological anxiety with just such an assertion that the truth was

¹³⁷ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Über die Erziehung, welche die Aufgabe der Gymnasium ist,” *Schulreden über fragen der Zeit*, 3d ed. (Gütersloh: Durck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1886), 94. “Was die Erziehung dem einzelnen Menschen ist, das ist die Offenbarung dem ganzen Menschengeschlechte’—mit diesen Worten beginnt eins der kleinsten, aber der merkwürdigsten und folgenreichsten Bücher, welche während des vergangenen Jahrhunderts im Dienste der weltlichen Weisheit wider die christliche Wahrheit sind geschrieben worden. Wenn irgend ein Buch eine That gewesen ist, wie man heute zu sagen pflegt, so war dieses Buch eine That: eine That der entschiedenen Ablösung des menschlichen Bewusstseins von der Fundmenten des Christentums. Jezt war ein durchgrieffender, schlagender und freuchtbarer Ausdruck gefunden für das längst vorhandene, aber unklare und seines Zieles sich nicht bewusste Streben, den göttliche Gedanken in einen menschlichen umzukleiden, das göttliche Gedanken in einen menschlichen umzukleiden, das göttlichen Amt einem menschlichen Amte gleichzustellen, aus menschlichem Wirken die ewige Kraft of allmächtigen Schöpfers Himmels und der Erden zu erklären; Lessings Gedanke wurde das Feldzeichen der Vernunftschriften, um welches sie fünfzig Jahre lang in dicten Massen geschart blieben.”

available to all. Lessing further asserted that such knowledge was indeed revelation from God, for God was known neither from history nor from the doctrines of the Church of the past, but could be known only from reason immediately available to everyone. Hence, what one individual learned by reason, all could likewise learn. It was not long before the writings of Kant left religion bereft of much certainty about anything, so others attempted to enrich the content of religion with a different system. Though Vilmar does not mention Hegel in this passage, he mentions those who took Hegel's idealism in new directions, and indicts them, along with Lessing (who he claims did not grasp the full import of his assertions) for replacing God and his revelation by the human and his ability to reason. Many were willing to take such idealism in new directions and to further dissolution of the Christian faith.

Nowadays clearly Lessing himself, who still assumed an objective, reigning and educating God, must be numbered among disciples and the idiots of the latest and most extraordinary wisdom. Overall there is no longer anyone called a God by [David Friedrich] Strauss [1808-1874], [Georg Freidrich Daumer] Feuerbach [1804-1872], [Arnold] Ruge [1802-1880], or [Bruno] Bauer [1809-1882]. Also for them there is no longer an education, only a development. But Lessing, the idiot, still saw the deep, inner connection between education and revelation; he knew yet of an 'education of the human race,' and if he erred in the concept of this connection, then he erred not in the smallest and least noteworthy fashion. If he was an opponent and destroyer of the Christian Church, a judgment he clearly cannot escape, so was he at least a strong and open and truly an enemy, without malice, without a pent-up poison and without fanatical will to destruction in his strength.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Ibid., 94–5. "Heut zu Tage freilich muss sich Lessing, welcher noch einen geständigen, einen regierenden und erziehenden Gott annahm, von den Jüngern der allerneusten und ungemeinsten Weisheit selbst unter die Idioten rechnen lassen: ihnen gibt es überall keinen Gott mehr, der nicht Strauss, Feurback, Ruge oder Baur heisse, für sie gibt es also auch weiter keine Erziehung, nur eine Entwicklung. Lessing aber, der Idiot, sah noch den tiefen inneren Zusammenhang zwischen Erziehung und Offenbarung, er wusste noch von einer 'Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts', so irrte er wenigstens nicht auf eine kleinliche und nichtswürdige Weise; wenn er ein Gegner und Zerstörer der christlichen Kirche war, als welcher er allerdings dem gerechten Urteils nicht entgehen kann, so war er wenigstens ein starker und in siener Stärke offener und ehrlicher Feind, ohne Heimtücke, ohne verhaltenes Gift und ohne fanatische Zerstörungsmut."

Vilmar's criticism is instructive of the kind of contemporary obstacles he addressed; these obstacles were not confined to educational theory specifically but dealt with systematic treatment of the world, knowledge, and the Christian faith. An examination reveals the examples Vilmar cites are extreme, and if Lessing did not deliberately undermine the Christian Church and its faith, the men he mentions in the same sentence knew no such inhibitions. Lessing did not find historical events, even those long considered divine revelation, to be convincing. "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason," Lessing wrote in 1777 *On the Proof of the Spirit and of the Power (Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft)*.¹³⁹ Lessing did not look to the past for reality but looked instead to the rational ability of the human mind for "revelation" immediately available to the mind. What took place in history was not "necessary," i.e. reasonable, so one had to discard the inheritance of the past if it were not reasonable. For someone like the Theologian of Reality, this was a false step at the very beginning. It led to attributing what can only be divine, revelation, according to the Church, to crediting the human with this unique feature. Vilmar then attributes contemporary atheism to this step of Lessing who became a standard bearer for rationalist thought. The others named by Vilmar were "radical" or "left-wing" Hegelians, e.g. David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), Bruno Bauer (1809-1882), who decided that what had been considered divine was in fact only human, and God became either unknown from Scripture, or he did not exist at all. Vilmar clearly could distinguish the difference between the idealist rationalism of the Enlightenment—Lessing—and the metaphysical idealism of Hegel. Yet he attributed this step embraced by so many as leading to the attack on the Church and its faith. It is significant that such theologians as Bauer and Arnold Ruge (1802-1880) were outspoken

¹³⁹ Gotthold Lessing, "On the Proof of Spirit and of Power" in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), 53.

supporters of the German Empire and Bismark's policies to unite Germany under an emperor by force because they found it consistent with their understanding of inevitable human progress. As we shall see in Chapter 6, Vilmar considered Bismark's model of government demonic and saw Germany advancing into an abyss of destruction by embracing Prussian ideas and hegemony.

A New Pantheism

Metacriticism in the tradition of Hamann, Jacobi, and others takes shape in the assertion that Lessing and the theorists of the German Enlightenment advocated a new pantheism. This charge grew out of the recognition that Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677), the influential philosopher of early modern philosophy, had infected and inspired rationalist thought of the era with his pantheistic system of epistemology. Before Spinoza, Descartes considered mind and body to be substances in only a secondary sense, depending upon God and upon God alone for existence. Spinoza considered them primary substances, existing from necessity. Further, Spinoza demonstrated that the only relation in reality is that of logical necessity; consequently there can be only one substance since all exists by necessity. Since God exists by necessity as all things do, he is also part of this same, solitary substance, of which all exist. By logic then, he considered the universe to be deity, ascribing to nature many of the attributes which the scholastics had ascribed to God alone. "By denial of all accidents, possibilities, and freedom, he can argue for a monistic pantheism."¹⁴⁰

As Lessing's health declined, it was clear to most that he was not long for this life; he was to die on February 15, 1781. On July 5, 1780, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi visited Lessing at Wolfenbüttel and there spent some time with Lessing in conversation. He told Lessing that he hoped to obtain help from him in opposing the philosophy of Spinoza. Lessing said to him,

¹⁴⁰ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 178–79.

“There is no other philosophy but the philosophy of Spinoza.” Jacobi was surprised by this revelation, and even though there has been much subsequent discussion over just how much of Lessing’s opinions conformed to those of Spinoza, Jacobi thought it worthwhile to state publicly that the influential Lessing had admitted to him, nearly on his death bed, that he was a Spinozist. There was a general consensus that Spinoza was either a pantheist or atheist, and the Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelsohn felt it necessary to come to defense of the late Lessing’s reputation.¹⁴¹

In 1785, Mendelsohn published *Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes* defending Lessing against Jacobi’s charge. It was followed in 1786 by *An die Freunde Lessings: Ein Anhang zu Herrn Jacobis Briefwechsel über die Lehre des Spinoza* in a public and acrimonious exchange with Jacobi. Jacobi responded to Mendelsohn with *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelsohn* (1785) and *Wider Mendelsohns Beschuldigungen in dessen Schreiben an die Freunde Lessings* (1786).

For Jacobi, and later for Vilmar who saw the threat of pantheism in like fashion, Spinozism is “‘according to its form, the system of consequent rationalism;’ according to its content, it is consequent atheism.” Jacobi and Vilmar indeed considered such works as *The Education of the Human Race* to be in error. Jacobi provided a truly original contribution to the argument: “he was able to show with forceful arguments how, strictly speaking, Spinozist atheism flows from Spinozist rationalism: to identify God with blind necessity of nature is to eliminate God as a distinct personal being and to espouse deism, which is the same for Jacobi.” Consequently he derived a more general conclusion: “. . . all metaphysical systems, because

¹⁴¹ Gerard Vallee, J.B. Lawson, and C.G. Chapple trans., *The Spinoza Conversations Between Lessing and Jacobi*, with an Introduction by Gerard Vallee (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1988), 10–11.

they rest upon reason alone, are at bottom atheistic; thus for Jacobi the philosophical enterprise as such is doomed.”¹⁴² In the ensuing debate, Jacobi came to other conclusions as well.

He maintained that his opponents, the champions of reason, would not yield to arguments in order to find the truth, but could only assert their opinions as objective truth when in fact it lacked the foundational basis they claimed. Facing intense public opposition, not only by Mendelsohn, but also by numerous defenders of the Enlightenment and its idealist philosophy, he labeled their defense not so much one of reason but “hyper-crypto-Jesuitism” and “a philosophical popery.” The philosophical attacks he endured revealed detractors to be the champions of “philosophical dogmatism and fractiousness . . . no less hot-tempered, contagious, pompous, and bombastic than priestly breeches! . . . superstition more blind and stubborn, than is the case with the priests”¹⁴³

He pointed out their own inconsistencies by demonstrating that champions of rational thought, such as Lessing and Kant, would not agree with their defense.

‘I blasphemed against reason’—because I assert that, according to the doctrine of the theists, it can neither demonstrate apodictically the existence of God nor satisfactorily refute the objections to it. They claim I said therewith ‘that all philosophy leads to atheism’ (Nicolai). I am a ‘fanatic and intend to promote blind faith or even faith in miracles.’ because I affirm that one can only believe in God and establish oneself in this faith through practice alone.

. . . And Kant, who has been teaching that same thing for more than six years, has not blasphemed against reason? Kant is not a fanatic and is not trying to promote blind faith or faith in miracles.¹⁴⁴

Jacobi concluded that, “The shouts of these men in praise and defense of reason can be in part quite innocent. They actually believe that their opinion is reason and reason their opinion.” Jacobi labels such men, who cannot be classified as “madmen [Schwärmer]” because madmen

¹⁴² Ibid., 28.

¹⁴³ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, “Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen in dessen Schreiben an die Freunde Lessings,” *Werke* IV, 2 (Leipzig), 1819 quoted and translated in Vallee, *Spinoza Conversations*, 156–58.

actually have some object in mind. But those who attacked him have no object in mind, or an “un-real object” are “daydreamers.” Here it can be said that Vilmar would substitute the name, “rhetoricians.”

Jacobi can be faulted for a characterization of Lessing which was overly-facile by seeking to dismiss a complex character with the caricature of a Sponizist, even though there lingered influences of Spinoza in a number of his works. Yet Jacobi asserted his own interpretation in this debate that reason left to its own devices could only result in pantheism. Because it tried to explain everything, “rationalism led to determinism, to fatalism, and finally to atheism. In short ‘Spinozism’ is atheism.”¹⁴⁵ His critique of Spinoza and his influence on Lessing led to a similar critique of German idealism. Pure rationalism must lead to atheism because reason by itself cannot fathom God’s existence, and those who depended solely on a system of metaphysics were naïve.

Whatever the faults of Jacobi’s assessment serving as a complete and accurate evaluation of Lessing, this eighteenth century debate “considerably shook the confidence of the German Enlightenment The pantheism debate is full of respectable efforts undertaken by worthy thinkers with a view to shaping a concept of reason that would not exclude religion and morality from the realm of intelligibility. We can still learn from it.”¹⁴⁶

Clearly Vilmar had learned from it, and he knew that he addressed a learned world familiar with these debates. So when he charged “pantheism” in the “science” of theology in the next century, he could do so with this debate having set the boundaries of the arguments and with little more explanation. He dismisses the dialectical thought of Hegel, Schleiermacher, and the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴⁵ Vallee, *Spinoza Conversations*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

theology of Martensen which “leads quickly to pantheism.”¹⁴⁷ In the same way, had Jacobi asserted that all metaphysics apart from faith must lead to this same position.

The charge of “pantheism” not only could be applied without referring to this debate, but Vilmar could credit Jacobi for the insight.

So many admit presently (since Jacobi) that faith and knowledge are equally certain, contrary to the earlier (Kant) view of faith for the true believers is explained as something subjective, and accordingly, . . . faith is depicted as something uncertain. That faith entirely comes from knowledge, is a pantheistic opinion.¹⁴⁸

So Vilmar draws the conclusion, as Jacobi had, that faith and knowledge are equally certain, based upon presuppositions, rather than the questionable certainty of an epistemology based upon metaphysics or a philosophical principle.

The Hermeneutic of Reality

The inheritance of the Enlightenment may be described as the search for truth as it is recognized and as it can be ascertained in the human mind and consciousness. It seeks an objectivity that eventually resulted in Kant’s “turn to the subject.”¹⁴⁹ This quest of epistemology, the task of which came to dominate philosophy and indeed well into the twentieth century, was manifest in analytic philosophy that dominated the discipline, and shares these features with the Enlightenment: doubt as an underlying fear which excites the quest of absolute certainty, the Principle of Contradiction¹⁵⁰ to assess truth value, and the subject-object schema in which one or the other gains the upper hand and relational concerns are not considered.

¹⁴⁷ Vilmar, *Theologie der Rhetoric*, 40. “. . . schnell zum Pantheismus führt.”

¹⁴⁸ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik: Akademische Vorlesungen*, Vol. 1 (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 34. “So viel gesteht man gegenwärtig (seit Jacobi) zu, dass Glauben und Wissen gleich gewiss seien, wogegen die frühere (Kant) Anschauung den Glauben für das Fürwahrhalten aus subjectiven Gründen erklärt, und somit, . . . den Glauben als etwas Unsicheres dargestellt. . . . Dass der Glaube ganz im Wissen aufgehe, ist pantheistische Vorstellung.”

¹⁴⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *The Subject* (Marquette University Press, 1968), quoted in George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in A Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 21.

¹⁵⁰ William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, new and enlarged edition (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 139-140. “Since the point is that if a given proposition is true its

Such presuppositions and methods were applied to Christian truth claims as well, and become problematic when God is frequently defined in this method of thought as someone who is unknowable; Christian truth claims were to be justified apart from the traditional teaching authority of the Church. Vilmar does not offer an alternative system of theology. Rather he offers what might be called a criticism of the critics, providing a therapeutic correction to theological discourse rather than a comprehensive one. Instead of an “either/or” engagement to identify the causes of Christian knowledge/faith and to justify its truth claims, Vilmar leads the church on a different playing field altogether. Instead of an analytic approach to gain discrete, propositional truth claims within the scheme of subject-object, he sought wholeness and underlying relationship as is seen in his assertions on the source of all Christian faith.

Instructive in this regard is Vilmar’s common ground with such confessional theologians as C.F.W. Walther since both deny a charge of slavish adherence to tradition by a “restitution of the confessions.” Walther defends the timeless value of the Lutheran symbols by the timeless nature of doctrine and God’s word which have always been present though clear understanding and its proclamation wax and wane with given periods of history.¹⁵¹

contradiction is false, it is not the case that the given proposition and its negation can both be held to be true. . . . According to Leibniz the denial of truths of reason,—or analytical judgments—leads to contradiction. They are, to be regarded as true in all possible worlds.”

¹⁵¹ See David Lotz, “The Sense of Church History in Representative Missouri Synod Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42, no. 9 (October 1971): 597-619. Among several theological works, Lotz examines Walther’s *The True Visible Church* (1867) and concludes that the theology there, which was typical of the theology of the early Missouri Synod, simply did not treat the historical “conditionedness” of theological statements. “The Scripture is interpreted through Luther and the Confessions, and these sources in turn are approached through the medium of 17th century Orthodoxy (p. 605).” Consequently, “such a conception of church history leads to a periodization of history. There are periods of great light and great darkness, interwoven with varying shades of gray, in accord with the degree to which the formal and material principles are apprehended and clearly set forth (p. 609).” Inextricably mixed with this understanding of church history is the absolute rejection of any ‘evolution’ in church history, that is, any *legitimate* [italics mine] development of doctrines or institutions beyond their original exhibition in the Scriptures.” Lotz identifies (p. 608, fn. 42) this tendency with what the English philosopher, R. G. Collingwood, in his book, *The Idea of History* (1956), calls “substantialism” which involves a distinction between “act” and “agent” with both terms being synonymous with “accident” and “substance” respectively”. In our case, the agent is doctrine which stands outside of history and flows into the world in order that acts may flow from it. Yet the agent exists unchanged in spite of people, acts, institutions, etc. and comes into existence without the intrusion of historical factors. Doctrine in this method remains identical with its Scriptural “deposit.” The flux of history can

By contrast Vilmar rejected a reprimination label by asserting a hermeneutic which recognized the historical manner in which the church formulated true doctrine. The extended scope of hermeneutics in his day was apparent in Vilmar's explanation of doctrine. For he considered doctrine to be the life and experience (Erlebniss und Erfahrung) of the church and thus only the church could legitimately produce doctrine or possess it. Systematic, philosophical, and "objective" theology apart from the presuppositions of faith were not legitimate tasks for secular scholars. The task of theology was exclusively the task of the Church. For the truths of doctrine and the veracity attending the work of all real theologians could not be proved but only "viewed, seen, heard, discovered." Thus doctrine is not simply true by virtue of abstract proof, but is the reality that Vilmar saw in the church's teaching.¹⁵²

His rejection of reprimination and recognition of the reality of church life was presented in 1856 in his *Theology of Fact versus the Theology of Rhetoric*:

Mercifully it is no reprimination at least not in all churches that the Holy Spirit through prayer and laying on of hands is mediated, but something proven from the apostles' time in unbroken continuation to the present day of new consummated reality. Among these fortunate territorial churches is the church in Hesse to be counted.¹⁵³

The reality of doctrine and its relation to the Church presents an unbroken continuation in its pedagogical responsibilities primarily through its pastors and other theologians who are enabled by the Holy Spirit to perform these tasks. The reality of the Church has been continuous throughout its history. It continues by the Holy Spirit's gifts into the present time. The reality which doctrine expresses recognizes what was always there as the Spirit leads the Church to a

only be overcome by doctrine, or in other words, only by "meta-history." Vilmar offers a different historical method than this scholastic method which Lotz considers an understandable reaction to the relativization of dogma by historical conditioning as promoted by Adolph von Harnack (p. 618).

¹⁵² Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, I, 2, 56.

¹⁵³ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 57. "Glücklicher Weise aber ist es keine Reprimination, wenigstens nicht in allen Kirchen, dass der h. Geist durch Gebet und Handauflegung mitgeteilt wird, sondern eine aus der Apostelzeit in unabgebrochenen Fortgang bis auf diesen Tag bewahrten und allezeit sich von Neüm vollziehende Thatsache. Zu

more complete and richer expression of the reality in which it lives. Hence we call it with Vilmar a “consummated” reality. The debate over these issues we read first in his writings on education.

The Office of Educator and the Task of the Gymnasium

In an early 1837 essay, “Concerning the Relation of Gymnasium Studies to Christian Faith and to the Christian Church” (“Über das Verhältnis der Gymnasialstudien zum christlichen Glauben und zur christlichen Kirche”), a meaningful title in itself, Vilmar provides a wide ranging and comprehensive exploration of the task of the school, contrasting it with that commonly understood in the educational practice of his day. The presupposition of Christian faith and the Christian Church directed his thoughts.

“The first requirement of the school which one places on the gymnasium (Gelehrtenschulen) is that it continuously maintain its relationship to the outside world in which it stands, not only in the realm of books and intellect, but also to real life and the course of the external world.”¹⁵⁴ This responsibility would not be carried out simply by a shallow overview of the outside world or by a one-sided course of studies, swinging back and forth from one to the other. Rather it would be accomplished primarily by recognizing the relationship of the gymnasium to the Christian faith and to the Christian Church. Other studies were to be understood and presented in this context and awareness.

In this early 1837 essay, Vilmar observes that the classical studies had always been the highpoint of the gymnasium curriculum. These studies had served the Christian faith and the Christian Church well. They were the chief means for the advancement (Hauptförderungsmittel)

diesen glücklichen Landeskirchen is denn auch die Kirche in Hessen zu rechnen.”

¹⁵⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Über das Verhältnis der Gymnasialstudien zum christlichen Glauben und zur christlichen Kirche,” *Schulreden über Fragen der Zeit* 3d ed. (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1886), 1. “Es ist eine der ersten Forderungen, welche man an die Gelehrtenschulen zu stellen hat, dass dieselben sich stets des Verhältnisses bewusst bleiben, in welchem sie, nicht allein zu der Bucherwelt und Gelehrsamkeit, sondern auch zu dem wirklichen Leben und dem Laufe der äusseren Welt stehen.”

of the Reformation, and the Reformation was rightfully praised as the mother of humanistic studies. It was unfortunate that this role changed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and especially during the eighteenth century when they became a subject only for intellectual study and served to widen a gap between the learned and the common people. Existing study of the classics portrayed paganism alongside the Christian faith and promoted an understanding of the “universal human” (“allegemein Menschen”) with original sin laughable and redemption as a superfluous topic.¹⁵⁵

Classical studies became an issue as pietists opposed the teaching of pagan literature in Christian schools. Vilmar defended these studies against those who opposed them, maintaining that they were misused but nevertheless useful. The Württemberg pastor, Eduard Enth, opposed the study of classical literature in the gymnasium. He found the ancient philosophy and profane poetry along with the history of a godless culture to be a bad influence on young students. His attacks resounded throughout pietist circles in Germany, and a call went out to replace this traditional classical study with grammar books alone to teach the Latin and Greek languages. This preparation would ready students for theological and other professions where such knowledge was required. Vilmar opposed these initiatives. In 1839 he responded in the *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* defending classical studies by comparing these attacks to those by Pfefferkorn in the Reuchlin controversy of the early sixteenth century against teaching Christian students Hebrew:

The Christian Church never excluded an art or science from its system or banned it from the examination of the faithful, insofar as it did not directly condemn Christ . . . the church could not and was not allowed to, and cannot and may not do this now, because it is its task to lead all people to the saving and redeeming word, and lead in all human trends and efforts, there, by the Holy Spirit himself, to permeate, conquer, purify, and sanctify in this way to create new, if at the same time, unregulated tools of

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 2, 5.

proclamation and spread of the gospel, new tools of knowledge of God and world redemption. Also it has never considered an art or science as directly opposing Christ. In such cases it was erring people the Church rejected, only the misuse of the subject, the form, never concerning the thing itself. The abolition of an art or science suggests something sectarian, fanatical, Mohammedan. There is nothing in the world which would be so unyielding from all sides that it in itself would oppose the Holy Spirit. [The Church] opposes and struggles against the evil will of people. . . .¹⁵⁶

On the contrary, the study of ancient languages served the Gospel. Enth and his adherents entirely overlooked:

. . . that the study of languages, including the classics of the pagan world, to which the gospel stands in a certain, very near connection and in any case in far more intimate relationship than material interests. What the gospel and the language studies have in common, the point of relationship, lies in that both deal with human concerns.¹⁵⁷

Not only were the studies of Greek and Roman classics not harmful to the Christian faith but served the gospel by addressing human concerns. Here we read of a point of view which defies a purely scientific understanding of the subject, consciously rejecting all presuppositions which might place the subject outside a context and relationship to spiritual concerns. Here we see an abiding conviction of Vilmar that the subjects should be taught within a context of

¹⁵⁶ *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* 6-8 (January 1839), quoted in Hopf, *Vilmar*, I, 278-79. "Die christliche Kirche hat niemals irgend eine Kunst oder Wissenschaft aus ihrem Systeme ausgeschlossen oder aus dem Gesichtskreise der Glaubigen verbannt, sofern sich dieselbe nicht direkt wider Christus richtete . . . die Kirche konnte und durfte, sie kann und darf auch jetzt dieses nicht, weil es ihre Aufgabe ist, das heiligende und erlösende Wort allen Menschen zu- und an alle menschlichen Richtungen und Bestrebungen heranzuführen, damit der heilige Geist dieselben durchdringe, bewältige, reinige und heilige, aus diese Weise aber neu, wengleich untergeordnete, Werkzeuge der Verkündigung und Verbreitung des Evangeliums, neu Werkzeuge der Gotteserkenntnis und Welterlösung schaffe. Auch hat sich wohl niemals irgend eine Kunst und Wissenschaft geradezu wider Christus gerichtet, vielmehr waren es die Menschen, welche sich dieser Mittel wider den Herrn der Kirche bedienten; darum soll das Verwerthungsurteil der Kirche immer nur die irrenden Personen, immer nur die Behandlung der Sache, die Form, niemals die Sache selbst treffen. Die Abolition irgend einer Kunst oder Wissenschaft trägt immer etwas Sektiererisches, Fanatisches, Muhamedanisches an sich. Es gibt keinen Stoff in der Welt, welcher so spröde wäre, dass er aller und jeder Durchdringung von seiten des heiligen Geistes an und für sich widerstrebt, dass er gegen alle und jede Dienstleistung unter der Herrschaft des Evangeliums sich unbedingt wehrt. Was da widersteht und sich wehrt, dis ist der böse Wille der Menschen. . . ."

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 279-80. ". . . dass die Sprachstudien, mithin auch die Klassiker der heidnischen Welt, zu dem Evangelium in einem gewissen, sehr nahen Verhältnisse und jedenfalls in einer weit engeren Verwandtschaft stehen als die materiellen Interessen. Das bindende Glied zwischen dem Evangelium und den Sprachstudien, der Verwandtschaftspunkt, besteht darin, dass beide sich mit menschlichen Angelegenheiten beschäftigen. . . ."

Christian and Lutheran understanding. This undertaking was the responsibility of the gymnasium in a Christian nation, or the Christian culture as Vilmar described German culture:

Who is now presently educated in the gymnasium? The Church answers, ‘The Christian leaders of the Christian people.’ Among these leaders of the Christian people we not only number the actual messengers of the faith, the clergy, but also the jurists and statesmen, yes indeed—and especially—the physicians whose calling we list close to the calling of preacher. All these determine the spiritual life, determine the way and the direction of the people. Such leaders of the Christian people should and must know the spiritual nature of people; they this they must do with the particular manifestations of the human race, with whose language, morals, culture and history they have to be entrusted. . . .

The Church understands this type of Christian-ecclesial education for its members, [the Church,] this specially qualified servant, language education, to gather together the beginning and last threads uniting all these peoples and the fabric of humanity. . .

¹⁵⁸

Such a passage joins many others in presenting themes common to his subsequent writings:

the Church as the instrument in instructing the people with the presupposition that the historic faith of the Church was God’s revelation; the spiritual welfare of a people; the role of language in discovering spiritual concerns common to all people, the value of the particular over the abstract, and the common beneficial relationship between the individual and the society.

Classical studies assumed a basic role for Vilmar to realize his intention of not only informing the future leaders of the German people but transforming them into Christian disciples. The Germans, who were Christian not only from the beginning of that time when the German people found common cultural identity, but became a people through a common confession of the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 280–81. “Wer wird nun in den Gelehrstenschulen erzogen? Die Kirche antwortet: ‘Der christliche Führer des christlichen Volkes.’ “Zu deisen Führern des Volkes rechnen wir nun nicht allein den eigentlichen Glaubensboten, den Geistlichen, sondern auch den Juristen und Staatsmann, ja auch—und zwar ganz besonders—den Arzt, dessen Beruf wir nach seiner geistigen höhern Bedeutung . . . ganz nahe an den Beruf des Predigers rücken. Alle diese bestimmen das geistige Leben, bestimmen den Weg und die Richtung des Volkes. Solche Führer des christlichen Volkes aber sollen und müssen wissen, wie es um die geistige Nature of Menschen steht; sie müssen mit den eigentümlichsten Äusserungen des Menschengeschlechts, mit dessen Sprache, Sitten, Kulture und Geschichte vertraut sein. . . .”

“Die Kirche kann sich darum für die christliche-ecclesial Erziehung dieser Gattung ihrer Angehörigen, deiser besonders berufenen Diener, der Sprachbildung, in welcher die Anfänge und letzten Fäden aller dieser Völker- und

Christian faith, he maintained. Thus the literature of the German people offered an equal if not more immediate method of making Christian disciples.

Accordingly, Vilmar not only assumed the role of champion of the traditional against religious objections but also became an advocate for something new in the curriculum.

Literature and National Christian Identity

The early study of German national literature was hailed by its proponents as the means of summoning and finding national identity to serve the society and culture. It was their claim to pursue this historical and literary study to distinguish the “course of God through the ages.” A common assessment since the days of Vilmar is that such literary research, of which Vilmar’s National Literature was the most famous example, was politically motivated during a period when society needed an identity following the Napoleonic occupation. “They sought in any event an ‘ideal’ reconstruction of German history, the ‘real’ history it wanted to assist in being or at least help prepare, sprung from the historical concrete situations of 1813 to 1871, and directly addressed them.”¹⁵⁹ The hermeneutical consequences of this study fell under the suspicion of those who sought a more liberal reform of Church and state in this age of revolution. They considered these literary studies to be largely an exercise in legitimizing the conservative Restoration effort.¹⁶⁰

Others have been receptive to Vilmar’s work. His biographer, Leimbach, assessed his National-Literatur not produced for “science or criticism, but to serve the entire and complete

Menschengewebe zusammenlaufen. . . .”

¹⁵⁹ Wolfgang Pfaffenberger, “Blützeiten und nationale Literaturgeschichte. Eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtung” (Ph. D. diss., Frankfurt a. M./Bern/Cirencester, 1981), 40, quoted in Wesseling, “Literaturgeschichte,” 39. “Die wenigstens ‘ideale’ Rekonstruktion deutscher Geschichte, die ‘reale’ Geschichte sein oder doch zumindest vorbereiten helfen wollte, entsprang den historisch konkreten Situationen von 1813 bis 1871 und beanspruchete, ihnen unmittelbar zu dienen.”

¹⁶⁰ Wesseling, “Literaturgeschichte,” p. 38-39.

life of his people. . . . “and to produce a “true folk book for the intellectuals.”¹⁶¹ Wilhelm Hopf, writing generations later, noted that “another reason for the unusual attraction of the book is attributable to the basic German consciousness and in the basic powers of Vilmar’s personality, which were born again and clarified through the Christian faith; he was able to understand the real calling and the true world position of our people in the area of its poetical works and in its entire depth and width.”¹⁶²

Calling for a new assessment of Vilmar’s work as a Germanist, Klaus-Gunther Wesseling observed that lacking a national state correlation for a national concept, Vilmar postulates a religious basis as the “Archimedean Point.”¹⁶³ He saw a correspondence between these literary achievements and periods of great historical striving and attainment. Contrary to the metaphysics of Hegel, Vilmar did not see a continuous, linear history of human progress but a period of alternate decline and rise. He observed that Germany had experienced two periods of literary blossoming marked by remarkable achievement in literature: the period from the fall of Rome until 1150. The second period began at the end of the sixteenth century and ended with the death of Goethe. This blossoming of literature had an organic connection to the culture as a whole. The purpose of the study of national literature was to “discover who we really are.”¹⁶⁴

It is clear in the view of this historian of German literature that the outpouring of poetry, epics, and the like, were not a natural result of the subjective experiences of the Germans, but

¹⁶¹ Johann Heinrich Leimbach, *August Fr. Chr. Vilmar, weil. Ritter des Kurfürstlichen Wilhelmsordens, ordentl. Professor der Theologie, Doctor der Philosophie und Konsistorialrat zu Marburg, nach seinem Leben und Wirken dargestellte* (Hannover: Buchhandlung von Heinrich Feesche, 1875), 101. “. . . nicht der Wissenschaft und der Kritik zu dienen, sondern dem ganzen und vollen Leben seines Volkes. . . .” “. . . wahren Volksbuch der Gebildeten”

¹⁶² Hopf, *Vilmar*, I, 349. “Ein anderer Grund der seltenen Anziehungskraft des Buches ist der zu den Elementarkräften des Vilmarschen Wesens gehörige grunddeutsche Sinn, der, widergeborene und verklärt durch den christlichen Glauben, ihn befähigte, den wirklichen Beruf und die wahre Weltstellung unseres Volkes auf dem Gebiete seines poetischen Schaffens in seiner ganzen Tiefe und Weite zu erfassen.”

¹⁶³ Wesseling, “Literaturgeschichtsschreibung,” 46–7.

¹⁶⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Geschichte der deutschen National Literature*, 14th ed. (Marburg and Leipzig: N.G.

rather came from outside of itself, from the conversion to Christianity. The early literature continued to sing of heroes and kings, but also of the praising of God and the glorifying of Christ. The knowledge of German literature was not simply informative but a participation in the character, the Christian character, of the nation.¹⁶⁵ The change from the outside, that is from the external word, and the subjective experience is a theme of the experience of the Church (Erfahren und Erleben).¹⁶⁶ He sought to introduce a new summit of cultural achievement and Christian faith. The inheritance of the Christian heritage was endangered by the period of revolution beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 and continuing into his own day. These revolutions were the result of ideas opposed to the Christian faith and which threatened to plunge Germany into an abyss—another common theme of Vilmar's cultural criticism.

The belief that one could and should learn the literature of the culture, that is, something not originating with the contemporary, creative individual, shows Vilmar's belief that those convictions, desires, and goals that people should have were not those whose source was the autonomous individual. Rather they were inherited by one generation and passed on to succeeding generations by means of customs and language imbedded in the German culture. There the Germany of his day would find the very best worth possessing as a culture, provide a basis for further flowering, and this basis was explicitly Christian. The Theologian of Reality did not prize individual autonomy and considered it a modern invention that would deceive people

Elwert'sche Universitäts Buchandlung, 1871), 2. "... was wir wirklich sind."

¹⁶⁵ Vilmar maintained with others such as Hamann, that the appeal to reason and the propositional, abstract reasoning it promoted impoverished the ability of people to experience life through language but also was based on a falsehood. Language must precede reason, Hamann maintained, because words and meanings are always embedded in historical context. Vilmar promoted the German epics, sagas, and verse of German troubadours as they imparted pictures of life as it was experienced, and as people found meaning in it. The inherent Christian meaning of such works were for Hamann "God language." "God is found in the God language of the past, the visions of fictions given to other men at other times, and God can be envisioned in the present as man forms new images which are related to but are not totally like the image used by the geniuses of the past. God is met in in God-language verging upon and becoming human language." Terrance J. German, *Hamann on Language and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 97.

and allow them to believe they had discovered religious truth when in fact they were in grave error. The people were forgetting the importance of their own language, customs, and laws and especially the German language as the bearer of the Christian faith; it was the language in which people had praised and sung of their Lord Jesus Christ.

Vilmar believed that becoming religious, was like learning the language and customs of a culture. Grammatical patterns, idiom, and lexical resources gave one a non-optional competence in interiorizing and describing reality. Modernity increasingly believed that religious insights were first experienced subjectively and then may find external expression in, for example, joining a church of one's choice. Vilmar stood on the opposite side of the argument. Religion, or at least true Christianity, came from outside the individual and was experienced subjectively only after it was learned. Hence he emphasized the religious instruction and literature written with Christian presuppositions. This process indeed gave people a means of expressing reality which would elude them otherwise.¹⁶⁷ It is no wonder his gymnasium activities and his study of German literature could be described as his pulpit.

The "Atheology" of Science

For someone whose legacy is a distinctive theology of church and ministry, there may be a surprise in the discovery that most of his observations and assertions, though based upon a learned approach to the subjects and with a strong conviction, were written in the context of the school and its task. Most works about Vilmar's theology focus on these areas in a systematic fashion since most of what was published on these topics was issued posthumously, as the content of his academic lectures, by his former students.

¹⁶⁶ Vilmar, *National Literature*, 5-8.

¹⁶⁷ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 22. It is unquestionably true, that at least in critique of modernism, Vilmar anticipated many questions that are being asked only in recent years, and leveled a critique of modernism and

Of these years his biographer, Wilhelm Hopf wrote that his theological development unfolded as he pursued theological studies as well as the responsibilities pursued by the Church in its mission. He reports an assessment by Vilmar himself in an autobiographical fragment:

In the year 1833 I had to undertake instruction in religion for the top form in the gymnasium in Marburg. At first I recognized in the early weeks that it was the most important thing for the entirely neglected student. The exegesis, done in an unbelieving manner, was spoiled for me by the rationalism of the university. But very soon I knew that I was not to communicate through my instruction only my own subjective faith, nor simply the belief of the Church, but that it would be in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit of Christ, that I had to bring, if I were not to lead them into an abyss of despised rationalism, only another viewpoint, mere words and voices. The reality of the Church opened to me, not all at once, because some, e.g. the reality (exhibitive working) of Absolution, were still not completely clear to me in the year 1837. But somewhere around the year 1840 I was steadfast in all things as I am today, and if God wills it, will defend to the end: the true presence and personally direct work of the Holy Spirit with his gifts, the true presence of Christ whose body the Church is—not mere indirect activity, by which one finally returns in sublime ways again to the old image and example of Christ—development of the Church through the Holy Spirit, not only through human thoughts and efforts, in organic progress, etc. Luther's writings I first began to read in 1832; actual serious study I first did around 1841 or 1842. The modern-faith dogmatics repelled me earlier; they left me cold. There was for me too many and completely unnecessary words, and the things which were important to me, I found shamefully neglected.¹⁶⁸

modernist presuppositions that are associated with our post-critical understanding.

¹⁶⁸ Hopf, I, 371-2. "Im Jahr 1833 musste ich den Religionsunterricht in der Prima des Gymnasiums zu Marburg unternehmen. Zunächst führte mich dies, da ich Lesung der Schrift für die gänzlich vernachlässigten Schüler als das Notwendigste schon in den ersten Wochen erkannte, auf die Exegese, die mir durch den Rationalismus auf der Universität in unglaublicher Weise war verleidet worden. Aber sehr bald, erkannte ich, dass ich nicht bloss meinen subjectiven Glauben, auch nicht bloss den Glauben der Kirche durch meinen Unterricht fortzupflanzen habe, sondern dass es der heilige Geist und in dem heiligen Geist Christus selbst sei, den ich bringen müsse, wenn ich nicht dennoch wieder, wie die von mir bis in den Abgrund verachteten Rationalisten, nur auf einem anderen Standpunkt, Worte und Stimmungen fortzupflanzen wolle. Die Realität der Kirche ging mir auf: nicht mit einem Male, denn manches, z.B. die Realität (exhibitive Wirkung) der Absolution, war mir noch in Jahre 1837 nicht vollkommen klar; aber etwa mit dem Jahre 1840 war ich in allen Dingen fest, die ich heute habe und so Gott will bis an mein Ende bewahren werde: wahrhaftige Gegenwart und personalische direkte Wirkung des heiligen Geistes mit seinen Gaben, wahrhaftige Gegenwart Christi, dessen Leib die Kirche ist—nicht bloss indirekte Fortwirkung des heiligen Geistes oder Christi, womit man am Ende doch wieder auf das alte Vorbild und Beispiel Christi in sublimierter Weise zurückkommt—Entwicklung der Kirche durch den heiligen Geist, nicht bloss durch menschliches Denken und Streiten, in organischem Fortschritt, etc. Luthers Schriften habe ich erst 1832 zu lesen angefangen; recht gründlich studiert habe ich sie erst etwa 1841 bis 1842. Die modern-gläubige Dogmatik stiess mich eher ab, als dass sie mich angezogen hätte. Es waren mir zu viel und noch dazu völlig unnötige Worte darin, und die Sachen, die in meinen Augen Hauptsachen waren, fand ich schmähhlich vernachlässigt".

In this context of education, the Theologian of Reality attacked presuppositions of scientific method common since his era. The role of the Church he presents in an 1844 essay, “Concerning The Relationship of Education to Religion” (“Über das Verhältnis der Pädagogik zur Theologie”). He not only asserts the unique position of the Church to teach students the faith but enters a contemporary debate over the nature of education and theology. Noting that many institutions and disciplines had freed themselves from their root institutions and disciplines from which they sprang, he questions whether one can consider theology a science. In the debate it is asserted by many educators that education and theology are two distinct sciences. Originally, the role of pedagogue as the western world had known it stemmed from the Christian Church. Now it was asserted that education should also be freed from the bonds of theology which was a science in its own right, and freed from the institution of the Church [Vilmar’s wording], and should allow the same for education. Such arguments also agreed with contemporary modern thinking that religion was a discrete area of inquiry, a new secular science according to Vilmar, and its manifestation could be seen in the privatizing of the faith, and accordingly, it should not dominate the field of education.¹⁶⁹

The author uses a quote by a deceased theologian, Johann Arnd, to show how theology can erroneously be considered a science, but how this assertion is an error:

Many think that theology should only be a mere science and linguistic study (Wortkunst) because it is a living experience and exercise; everyone studies it accordingly as it is highly regarded and famous in the world. But no one will learn to be godly. Everyone seeks well learned people to whom one wants to teach art, languages, and wisdom. But only from one teacher, Jesus Christ, will one learn gentleness of character and sincere humility, because truly his holy living example is the right rule of our life, indeed the highest wisdom and art.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Über das Verhältnis der Pädagogik zur Theologie,” *Schulreden über Fragen der Zeit* (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1886), 142–45.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 145. “Viel meinen, die Theologie sei nur eine blosse Wissenschaft und Wortkunst, da sie doch eine lebendige Erfahrung und Übung ist; jedermann studieret jetzo, wie er hoch und berühmt in der Welt werden möge,

Here a new word, “science” (Wissenschaft) enters our examination of Vilmar as he criticizes the modern understanding of “science.” The things which modern science seeks to find and to systematize by examination of detailed phenomena, are a point of contention and display the different presuppositions of Vilmar. In the next decade, as a professor of theology at Marburg, he would further examine this usage of science to show the fallacy in the modern conception of the Christian faith.

More than a decade after publishing these words on education, he addressed the subject further in the second chapter of his programmatic writing, *The Theology of Reality versus the Theology of Rhetoric* (*Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie des Rhetorik*). The reader is prepared for this discussion by an introduction to the subject in the “Introduction,” calling it a misuse of the term to apply it to theology and the result of doing so he labeled, “rhetoric.”

. . . science, a word which once almost always still used to mean in the Roman [Latin] sense *scientia*, *doctrina*, *ars*, and no special meaning implied. While today it is the label in almost every endeavor of human life, for many, and especially in the area of theology, it has become anathema.¹⁷¹

Vilmar appealed to the old usage of the word, *scientia*, meaning a presupposition of knowledge and not something to be derived from a human system of thought. In commenting on this facet of Vilmar’s thought Peter Hauptmann distinguishes the difference in science in the older sense and that of modernism. “While science in the older received sense was one of a

aber from sein will niemand lernen; jedermann sucht jetzo hochgelehrte Leut, von denen er Kunst, Sprachen und Weisheit lernen möge, aber von unserem einigen Doctore Jesu Christo will niemand lernen Sanftmut und herzlich Demut, da doch kein heiliges lebendiges Exempel die rechte Regel und Richtshnur unseres Lebens ist, ja die höchste Weisheit und Kunst. . . .”

¹⁷¹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik: Ein Bekenntnis und Abwehr* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 4. “. . . Wissenschaft, - ein Wort, welches damals fast nur noch in dem einfachen römischen Sinn von *scientia*, *doctrina*, *ars* gebraucht wurde, und keine sonderlichen Ausprüche in sich schloss, während es heut zu Tage das Bannwort auf fast allen Gebieten des menschlich Lebens, auf vielen, und verzugsweise auf dem Gebiete der Theologie ein Fluchwort geworden ist.” See also Robert P. Scharlemann, “Confessio and Scientia: Life and Truth in Theology,” *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord: Studies in*

known presupposed whole from which one examined the details, modern science seeks in the modern sense respectively the seeking of details for a still unknown whole.”¹⁷²

He elaborated further in the Forward to the third edition of this work:

What I meant with the best of intentions was to pave the way to some circles, but did not achieve, is this, that one on our side stop toying with the word, “science.” Are we strong enough to use the word science again in its usage in the old sense . . . not carelessly but to use the word ‘science’ again for ourselves with full justification for our own theology, especially for dogmatics and ethics? I believe for all that, that our strength for change of language usage hardly suffices, especially because the same undeniably qualifies in itself. . . . We confuse . . . the borders if we are not indeed the enemy, human autonomy, through the use of this term introduced unnoticed by ourselves in the midst of our own discipline.¹⁷³

A theology which worked on the presuppositions of modern science, Vilmar thought, contained within itself the means of its own destruction. He labeled such theology, “atheology” (“Atheologie”), and stated that such an atheology would never be willing to admit the truth of its own self-ordained decay, indeed if it did not provide radical results such as those of his contemporaries whom Vilmar cites: David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach.¹⁷⁴ Ironically dismissing both Schleiermacher and Hegel together, he asks: “The world spoke then of a new science of theology; then was this wild exchange science? Was it theology? All that the world had on their tongues was the word ‘research’ and the ‘progress’ in the area of theology. Was something new explored? Has a higher standpoint on this way been achieved?”¹⁷⁵

the Lutheran Reformation's Formula of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 102–4. He offers a discussion of scientia as it was classically understood in theology.

¹⁷² Peter Hauptmann, “August Vilmars Vermächtnis,” *Lutherische Beiträge* 5 (4, 2000): 282.

¹⁷³ Vilmar, *Tatsachen*, vi, vii. “Was ich woleinenden und zugeneigten Kreisen gern—nicht erreichen aber— anbahnen möchte, ist das, dass man auf unserer Seite das Spielen mit dem Worte “Wissenshaft” beseitigte. Sind wir stark genug, dem Worte Wissenschaft seinen ältern Sinn . . . im Sprachgebrauche wieder zu versachaffen, so mögen wir uns nicht allein unbedenklich, sondern mit vollem Rechte des Wortes Wissenschaft für unsere Theologie, zumal für die Dogmatik und die Ethik, wiederum bedienen. Ich glaube jedoch kaum, dass unsere Stärke zur Änderung des Sprachgebrauches ausreicht. . . . Wir verwirren . . . die Grenzen, wenn wir nicht gar den Feind, die menschliche Autonomie, durch den Gebrauch jener Bezeichnung mitten in unser Besitztum unvermerkt selbst einführen.”

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 18. “Alle Welt hatte die ‘Forschungen’ und die ‘Fortschritte’ auf dem Gebiete der theologie im Munde; ist etwas Neues erforscht, ist ein höherer Standpunkt auf jenem Wege erreicht worden?”

This effort to distinguish between theology and science assumed the nature of a recurring theme in his writing and instruction. In further analysis, he pointed out that that nature of revelation served neither science nor science revelation. The nature of revelation is recorded in his *Dogmatik*.

. . . it [human knowledge] proceeds from the details and seeks the whole, must employ thus the sharpest methods of observation (and research) of the specific subject before it includes the member in the whole, and this is arranged in a place within in a still greater complex of knowledge. The faith of the Christian proceeds directly in the opposite way: from the whole . . . to the individual parts, and encloses the entire person.¹⁷⁶

Consequently, theological knowledge can only be a posteriori because it discovers the truth already present in revelation. The inability of anyone to create a theological system based on a priori philosophical knowledge led Vilmar to comment in *Theologie der Tatsachen*:

Theology should know that there is nothing new to find, nothing new to discover, that far more its task should only be, what is recorded the Holy Scripture, to protect the means of grace in the church and to pass these on to future servants of the church.¹⁷⁷

This task is hardly a passive one. Rather the Holy Spirit leads the church and its servants to new insights and new doctrines as it lives and experiences them: erfahren und erleben. Vilmar meant that what is to be found in Scripture, the reality there, already exists; it is a matter for the church to experience these truths and express them in its doctrine. In this manner, there is “nothing new to be discovered.” Vilmar labeled this discovery of existing reality “Repetition.”

¹⁷⁶ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik: Akademische Vorlesungen*, vi, “sie geht vom Einzelnen aus und sucht nach einem Ganzen, muss folglich jede Einzelheit in der schärfsten Weise zum Gegenstand der genauesten Beobachtung (und Forschung) machen, ehe sie denselben gliedlich in ein grösseres Ganze, und diess wieder in einen noch grössern Complex von Erkenntnissen einzureihen im Stande ist. Der Glaube des Christen geht den gerade umgekehrten Weg: vom Ganzen, . . . nach den eingezelnen Teilen hin, und schliesst eine, den ganzen Menschen officierende Erkenntnis in sich.”

¹⁷⁷ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 17. “Die Theologie soll wissen, dass sie nichts Neues zu finden, nichts Neues to entdecken habe, dass vielmehre ihre Aufgabe nur die sei, das in der heiligen Schrift niedergelegte, von der Kirche aufgenommene Seligkeitsgut zur ewahren und so an die künftigen Diener der Kirche zu überliefern. . . .”

On Repetition

This term, “repetition,” Vilmar employs to explain the nature of revelation and doctrine and to correct common philosophical concepts of revelation in his own day.¹⁷⁸ He rejects Lessing’s description of revelation as something confined to what we have learned ourselves as well as what we might learn. He dismisses Fichte’s assertion in his *Critique of Revelation* (*Kritik aller Offenbarung*, 1792) that revelation is a subjective calling forth of a great movement of the spirit. Likewise he rejected Hegel’s description of revelation as an uncompleted concept finding its achievement in manifestations in history.

All of these concepts Vilmar attributes to the understanding that revelation is incomplete and continues. Accordingly the faith become Docetic and the Christian faith or any understanding of God and religion is reduced to an idea. By the term, “repetition,” he finds an alternative understanding of how revelation is made known to the church only as it is revealed in Scripture and indeed experienced by it as led by the Holy Spirit.

Against these ideas current in the 19th century, Vilmar stressed repetition as the process by which the church has found and continues to find meaning in the Scriptures and has formulated and continues to formulate its teaching. The belief describes revelation as the unveiling of reality as it already exists, and this unveiling is accomplished not through individual striving but through a process of historical events. These historical events are experienced by the church, by the people of faith, and are set forth in doctrinal formulations, thus making them the experience and life of the church.¹⁷⁹ It is not revelation that is incomplete for Vilmar; it is the body of doctrine developed by the church that grows cumulatively over time.

¹⁷⁸ Vilmar, *Dogmatic*, I, 21.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

Berhard Löhse criticized this view considering that the word of God making a posteriori reality manifest to the church rendered the word dead rather than a living word.¹⁸⁰ Yet Vilmar thought that the life of the church was manifest in the meaning found in the words of Scripture; it was the living God who brought these to the church as the people of God and thus to its individual saints as well. Without this process, if the church did not experience this meaning, this reality in its own time, then the church becomes an empty institution and is petrified.

As we have seen in the discussion of the Spinoza Conversations between Jacobi and Mendelsohn this hermeneutic did not suffer from the dialogical dispute of the day concerning the reliability of reason and revelation. In this dispute the champions of reason could not accept the truth of revelation which did not agree with reason. This presupposition favoring reason lay behind the scientific task of theology that Vilmar condemned. Surprisingly, and with original insight, Vilmar did not necessarily ally himself with those who championed revelation over reason and this observation focuses on a unique, original contribution of this Theologian of Reality. He sensed the weakness of the dialogical dispute as two sides of the same coin: attempting to demonstrate the truth claims of either side.

This dismissal of modern theology as a science brings to our attention a unique feature of the Theology of Reality that made it stand out among the others of his day. Today we might call it “intratextual.” Rather than locating meaning outside the texts of Scripture, e.g. in feelings of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher) or in philosophical truth propositions based from a standpoint outside the text (e.g. Hegel) the meaning in the statements of the various doctrines of the Church only have meaning as they are based on the texts of Scripture and consistently following the logic within these texts. These texts possess their own conceptual language and syntax which lend meaning to subjective experiences rather than the inner feelings or contrived

¹⁸⁰ Bernhard Lohse, “Kirche und Offenbarung bei A.F.C. Vilmar,” *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1957): 460.

propositions lending their own meaning to the language of the faith. In this Vilmar noted something original and primary about doctrinal statements of Christianity and the basic patterns of faith that are internalized and passed on to future generations.

The religious controversies of the nineteenth century can be divided between the two poles of reason or revelation.¹⁸¹ As Christoph Link noted, these two poles, as they existed, really are two sides of the same rationalist coin. “. . . the supranaturalists are also real children of their time. Not only is revelation used in a dialectical connection to reason, but with its fixation in the canon as well, one proves with rationalist categories, unless the Holy Spirit furnishes an independent meaning to the inner witness.”¹⁸² As Vilmar’s metacritique is examined, issues of hermeneutical method emerge and transcend the familiar arguments over the source of religious knowledge. By contrast Vilmar provides a critique of what can be known, by whom and with what authority. For Vilmar, the issue is not simply one of disagreement over conclusions based upon reason and conflicting conclusions from revelation. The original and essential part of his argument is a method presuming faith and the presence and actions of God himself within his church, denying rationalist categories, as well as presuppositions of faith which must attend the Christian theological task.

The arguments advanced are not directed to rationalist dispute of factual truth but to the methods that reason can use to find and embrace the truth. Vilmar maintained that faith must be a presupposition in any theological undertaking if it is to avoid error from the beginning (Atheology). With this understanding, the critique of Link can apply only to those who employ rationalist methods to prove truth claims, e.g. their historical truth. But with Vilmar the

¹⁸¹ Christoph Link, “Die Grundlagen der Kirchenverfassung im lutherischen Konfessionalismus des 19. Jahrhunderts insbesondere bei Theodosius Harnack,” vol. 3 of *Jus Ecclesiasticum: Beiträge zum evangelischen Kirchenrecht und zum Staatskirchenrecht* (München: Claudius Verlag, 1966), 20.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 23.

difference first must be calculated not only in method but in the presupposition of the revelation of God in the Scriptures and the faith which accepts it. In this Vilmar gives a valuable contribution to the religious discussion of his day and our own understanding as such questions arise today.

Thought and Institution

The development of Vilmar's hermeneutic sought to check and correct a trend that he found only to promise ruin for the church and consequentially a disaster for the German people. As new ideas emerged and old Enlightenment presuppositions of rationalism held sway among the intellectuals and theologians in Germany and increasingly throughout the world, Vilmar provided a metacriticism in his native Hesse that proved to be a microcosm of the wider struggle. His efforts were embedded in the struggles of institutions and thought in education, Germanistic, the political stage, and the church itself.

He sought to give Germans a renewed culture with Christian faith as he thought Germans had known in their most productive years when they had prospered as a culture and Christianity had flourished. He entered into the fray following the fall of Napoleon as the nations dominated so long by this dictator attempted to define themselves. He sought this definition not by simply returning to the past as many Restoration rulers wished to do in the security of absolutism, but facing the challenges of thought and institutions which sought to work these changes.

During these struggles of public policy, revolution, and academic activity, he joined with rest of the Christian world in its lively discussions of the church: its character, origins, basis of authority, its ministry, and the means by which it was to engage the culture in which it found itself. There were currents of thought examined in this chapter and the preceding ones which sought to place the church outside the life of its people by relegating theology to that of a

discrete, rationally pursued science. It was to assume its place alongside other academic disciplines with the church's voice of faith becoming increasingly faint as only one opinion among many. Conversely, this trend allowed other ideas to enter Christian thought from many disciplines that were alien to it. These efforts presented no unified front under one paradigm but found expression in the scientific and romantic presuppositions of Schleiermacher, the metaphysical idealism of Hegel, and the ever increasing tendency for the Christian faith to be questioned on the basis of an epistemology of doubt.

On the other hand, the church was also in danger of being subsumed by the state, justifying its sovereign governing of spiritual matters in the various state churches using these competing ideas to justify its actions. This conflict between confessional churches and states became more pressing than ever with the revolutions that visited Germany and other European states in the period of Vilmar's life. Revolutionaries wanted to disestablish the church in the interest of free thought, and governments sought to counter this move by imposing a church with no confessional basis or many officially sanctioned confessions to better consolidate state power. Both were a growing danger to church and faith as the truth of the faith became relative to so many competing priorities.

These undercurrents of history were aimed at marginalizing the church by replacing faith with ideas and the church as only another institution which less and less to say to society. Religion was to become either a merely personal conviction or a state institution with the interests of the state as paramount to its activity. If these undercurrents flowed through Vilmar's life and thought, then overarching the whole of his life was the Christian church. In Germany Lutherans sought to address the problems they confronted with a renewed confessionalism as a basis for their understanding of their life in the church that proclaimed Christ in the world and

remained faithful to this theological task. The church—that institution whose presence was ever the object of conflict—was both the source and increasingly the purpose of Vilmar's toil.

CHAPTER 4

DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Introduction

One of the most notable aspects of the new century following the fall of Napoleon was the emergence of Christology as a systematic discipline. The concern for the dogmatic discussion of the church embraced a number of different traditions. This common interest developed in a new historical context following the years of Enlightenment, revolution, and warfare, a context marked by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The century was marked the by diminishing and elimination of temporal power by archbishops whose authority was curtailed by French occupation; before another half century passed, the Papal States would be lost to revolutionary forces seeking to unite Italy. These events precipitated an self-examination of the Roman Catholic Church by a number of theologians. The ecclesiology examined here is that of the Tübinger School producing the highly influential theology of Johann Adam Möhler. His examination of the church, Catholic and Protestant, identified issues that would inform others such as Vilmar.

Lutherans were also drawn into this discussion as they turned to the past for Lutheran theology of the 16th and 17th centuries. The critical retrieval of the Augsburg and other Lutheran Confession in the anniversaries of 1817 and 1830 were milestones in the celebration of church and culture as well as lending a valuable resource to the discussion of church and ministry. Events in Germany and Europe at large provided a catalyst for these discussions as theologians met the crisis of government-enforced union of Protestant confessions, as well as the privatization of the church in the theology of Schleiermacher as religion became little more than

personal conviction. In these movements claims of truth were lost as truth increasingly lost its historical foundation, either as being unhistorical, or the conviction that the past had no claim on the present. The Silesian Church Crisis, the conflict with the established church structure in Bavaria, and the revolutions that bled from France into the other nations of Europe, make the theological task of ecclesiology not only one of long-range importance, but also one of urgency. Vilmar joined Julius Stahl, Theodor Kliefoth, and others as they addressed the church question within the context of their own lands and established churches.

Vilmar would learn from these men, Lutheran and Catholic, and present an ecclesiology, though lacking systematic precision, was informed by the awareness of the richness of the past and the on-going discussion in the quest to identify that glorious reality that was the church.

A Period of Ferment

The Beginning of the Trajectory

At no other time had the doctrine of the church, as it existed among the various Christian denominations, been so passionately taken to heart, Vilmar often observed. And this teaching provoked the bitterest opposition by what Vilmar termed the forces of “science.” He assesses its magnitude in his address on the 1830 commemoration of the Augsburg Confession. The passage of twenty-five years only reinforced his assessment repeated in *Theologie der Tatsachen*. At the beginning of the chapter, “Church,” he wrote:

No other article of Christian doctrine and of Christian life has been discussed in recent times and with more fruitfulness than the article of the church—indeed so in the domain of evangelical theology and in no way like it had been discussed quite like now—but also against no other article rages from the rhetorician such sharp expressions of antipathy and loathing as this one.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik: Ein Bekenntnis und Abwehr* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 49-50. “Kein Artikel der christlichen Lehre und des christlichen Lebens ist in der neuesten Zeit mit mehr Eifer und mit mehr Fruchtbarkeit discutiert worden als der Artikel von der Kirche—ja es ist derselbe in dem Gebiete der evangelischen Theologie noch niemals in nur

But its time had not come for Vilmar during the period encompassing the years following his ordination and early years as a gymnasium teacher. He remained an opponent of confessional and church renewal. Later, having become a champion of confessionalism and the church, Vilmar knew his opposition very well, having once been a vocal member of those opposed to a renewed life of the church and the witness of its doctrines. His open letter to Sartorius serves as an example.

In 1824, Professor Ernst Wilhelm Christian Sartorius (1797-1859), professor of theology at Dorpat, having left Marburg from a like position that same year (he had begun in Marburg only after Vilmar's graduation), an opponent of rationalism and an advocate for a renewed Lutheran church, returned to Marburg for a visit. He stood opposed to the kind of theology learned by Vilmar at the university there. Vilmar used the opportunity to write an open letter to him challenging him to defend his controversial convictions.

You have, honored professor, already so often shown yourself through word and deed as the bitterest enemy of 'rationalism' and the most passionate defender of the old Lutheran ecclesial system in dogmatics and expounded of late so loudly and explicitly, you would make the battle against rationalism sharper, with less constraint and with a lack of consideration, that it cannot fail; rationalism has to rise to its feet and fight and indeed directly fight with you. But it appears before this fight can begin, a larger need has to be met. It is this: a strong, unshakeable foundation. This is universally as necessary as it is difficult, but necessary and difficult for you, because you appear arbitrarily to connect concepts with many words and to privilege ideas over other points. In order to smooth the playing field for a future fair fight, that is to lead to a fair assessment of the contested points, allow me, honored professor, to submit some questions¹⁸⁴

annähernd, nur ähnlich bedeutender Weise erörtert worden wie jetzt—aber gegen keinen Artikel regt sich auch mit so scharfem Nachdrucke die Abneigung und der Widerwille der Rhetoriker, wie gegen diesen.”

¹⁸⁴ *Monatschrift für Predigerwissenschaften*, ed. Ernst Zimmermann and August Hendenreich, vol. 6, (Darmstadt: Karl Wilhelm Leske, 1824), 43–9, in Wilhelm Hopf, *August Vilmar: Ein Lebensbild*, (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag: 1912), 119. “Sie haben sich, verehrter Herr Professor, schon so oft durch Wort und Tat als den bittersten Feind des 'Rationalismus' und als den eifrigsten Verteidiger des altlutherisch-kirchlichen Systems in der Dogmatik gezeigt und erklären neuerdings so laut und ausdrücklich, Sie würden den Kampf gegen den Rationalismus immer schärfer, freier und rücksichtsloser fortführen, dass es nicht fehlen kann: es müssen sich die Rationalismus zum Kampfe, und zwar gerade zum Kampfe mit Ihnen, erheben. Nur aber scheint, um diesen Kampf beginnen zu können, noch vorher einem grossen Bedürfnisse abzuweichen zu sein. Es ist dieses: feste, unwandelbare

The article then asked four questions. The first three demanded to know what was meant by science and scholarly method, by rationalism, and the asserted relationship of rationalism with Catholicism. The last question asked, “Do you recognize a religious doctrine or theology as a rational science, as part of philosophy? And would these be, as you determine, according to their sources, limits, and main points?”¹⁸⁵ Then asserting that everyone must answer this last question in the affirmative because whoever would answer in the negative “would immediately deny familiarity with the philosophy of both former and present times, all knowledge of self, to be sure, all sound ability to think, and in a theological issue not allow him to enter [into discussion] at all, without making himself laughable.”¹⁸⁶

The hoped for printed exchange never took place since the newspaper in which it was planned inexplicably closed. Vilmar soon thereafter lost the enthusiasm for his cause, and even began to doubt his own rationalist system. He was not inclined to move immediately toward the position Sartorius championed, but he was troubled exceedingly by the great spiritual “nothing” to which he had arrived. It was in 1825 that we see the arrest of his radical development and the beginnings of his conversion.¹⁸⁷ The great spiritual void, of which he admitted, began to be filled. The trajectory leading to his mature convictions concerning the church dates from this period.

Though his positions would shift dramatically in years to come, the identity of the main issue at the heart of public discussion was that of the foundation of certainty. As we have seen, the contending idealism of Hegel, and the opposite concerns of Schleiermacher’s romanticism,

Konstantierung der Standpunkte. Es ist dieses schon im allgemeinen so nötig als schwierig; nötiger aber und schwieger noch bei Ihnen, da Sie mit vielen Worten ganz eigene Begriffe verbinden und über mehrere Punkte ganz besondere Vorstellungen zu hegen scheinen. Um einem künftigen Feststellung der streitigen Punkte hinzuleiten, erlaube ich mir, Ihnen, hochverehrter Herr Professor, einige Fragen vorzulegen . . . ”

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 120. “Erkennen Sie eine Religionslehre oder Theologie als eine Vernunftwissenschaft, als Teil der Philosophen an? Und wäre das, wie bestimmen Sie dieselbe auch ihren Quellen, Grenzen und Hauptmomenten?”

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., “denn, dem, welcher dieses leugnen wollte, wäre geradezu alle Bekanntschaft mit der Philosophie älterer und jetziger Zeit, alle Selbsterkenntnis, ja alles gesunde Denkvermögen abzusprechen, und auf irgend einen theologischen Gegenstand könnte man sich mit ihm gar nicht einlassen, ohne sich selbst lächerlich zu machen. . . . ”

lent identity to contending parties. The latter might assert that the liberty of the individual was at stake; religious truth had more to do with conscience and sensibility than objectively asserted truth. The former group might contend that the task of the church was that of sustaining public morality and stabilizing society with good and loyal citizens, thus the church's task largely became that of assisting and legitimizing the state. Such assertions would form the basis for contention in this age of revolution. Yet, "On what foundation do you assert your convictions?" Vilmar challenged. Though his conclusions would differ dramatically, at this early date he identifies the key issue knowing, epistemology. As we have seen, the hermeneutical issue would be one closely identified with his theology of the church.

Attending A University

His brother, Wilhelm, wrote that he must "attend a university" in effect with his free time. Together, they "unlocked" the Lutheran orthodox theologians, Calov, Gerhard, especially his *Loci*, and Hollaz, as well as the Church Fathers: Tertullian, Augustine, Ignatius, and Iranaeus. He included in his study Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith (Die christliche Glaube)*, and at this point he might have accepted it, he but realized now that he already had far more than anything Schleiermacher had to offer. Vilmar identified the book by the theologian Tholuck, *The Doctrine of Sin (Die Lehre von der Sünde)* as decisive in bringing about his conversion. Study of the early German epic saga, *Heiland*, also proved a moving experience as he saw there praise of the Redeemer Christ depicted allegorically in this product of earliest German Christian culture.

Here the growing faith of Vilmar still lies more in the abstract than would its later expression. There is little or no mention of "church." In his attack on Sartorius, the problem he identified was one of epistemology. The task for the future Theologian of Reality lay not only in

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 121-22.

discovering the treasures inherited from the past. He learned from an on-going discussion throughout Germany concerning the church, a discussion that crossed confessional boundaries. It would be difficult to attribute his developing views to any one writer, or to identify him with any distinctive school of thought. At this point the facts are these: Vilmar knew a great spiritual void. His rationalist training did not offer an alternative theology of the church, a theology that he would critique and change, so much as a great spiritual void to be filled. In the place of this void Vilmar's distinctive theology emerged over time as an organism grows and matures rather than a sudden mutation from one kind of thing to another.

A decade and more would be needed following his 1830 speech for his mature church theology to emerge in all of its distinctive parts associated with the name of Vilmar: the church as institution of Christ; a visible church and rejection of an invisible church;¹⁸⁸ the doctrine possessed and passed on to future generations as the very "life and experience" (Erfahren und Erlebnis) of the church; the reality of this life as opposed to "science" and "rhetoric;" the "exhibitive" nature of the means of grace which are a "word act" imparting what they speak; the objective church as the source of subjective faith; a dynamic church which is the only source of personal faith; the special role of the church as a critic of society, and the particular role of the office of the ministry instituted by Christ himself.

¹⁸⁸ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik, Akademische Vorlesungen*, ed. R. W. Piderit, vol. 2 (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 198. Vilmar attributes the introduction of these distinctions to the period of Orthodoxy. For him the issue was not so much against a hierarchy and its claims to be the one true church, but against the atomization of the church into a society of aggregate, individual believers. Hence the visible church he asserted was that where Christ gathered people together around the means of grace, hence the church came from above and was visible by the administration of the sacraments and the preaching of the word. These terms can be located in Lutheran literature from the Orthodox period, for example, in the work of Johann Konrad Dietrich from that period; see, J.C.W. Lindemann, ed., *Evangelische Katechismus-Milch: 75 kurze Katechesen über Dr. Martin Luthers Kleinen Katechismus, nach der Erklärung Joh. Konr. Dietrich* (St. Louis: Druck und Expedition der Louis Lange Publishing Co., 1885), 242. "Was haben wir von ihr unter anderem auch gelernt? Dies, dass sie [the church] unsichtbar sei."

During this decade of “attending a university,” his writings reveal the church emerging as the central feature of his attention. As it had filled a void in his own life, he perceived a void in the corpus of church doctrine that needed to be filled: specifically, a pressing need to complete the still incomplete doctrine of the church. However these ideas were germinating even as he came to the faith that he unashamedly identified as Lutheran. The rejected, abstract arguments of philosophical foundations, he replaced with the concrete fact of the church.

Ferment: The Tübingen School

An Early Ecclesiology

The Hessian brothers’ research came at a time when discussion of church theology occupied not only the emerging Lutheran theologians but also Roman Catholics who sought “new understanding of the meaning of the Gospel, the nature of the Christian life, and the church’s mission and structure,” and “in their styles of spirituality, attitudes toward communal and private prayer; types of preaching, sacramental celebrations, and pastoral priorities they presented not competing theologies [to the Enlightenment view of the church] but contrasted worldviews.”¹⁸⁹ Vilmar wrote of one leading figure who moved him profoundly.

In a letter of October 11, 1832, Vilmar reported to Wilhelm from Marburg;

I am presently occupied with a work which stirs up again from its deepest causes the age old conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism. More than all Protestant books, has this one opened for me a consciousness of these things, and if I remain here this winter and am only moderately occupied, I will continue to occupy myself with it as much as I can.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Michael J. Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation: Johann Adam Möhler and the Beginnings of Modern Ecclesiology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 2.

¹⁹⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, “Vilmar’s ‘Theologie der Tatsachen’ und die ‘Symbolik’ Johann Adam Möhlers,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 70, no. 3-4 (1959): 254–5. “Ich beschäftige mich jetzt mit einem Werke, welches die uralten Grundstreitigkeiten zwischen dem Protestantismus und Katholizismus wieder vom tiefsten Grunde aufrührt: Möhlers (Professor der katholischen Theologie in Tübingen) Symbolik. Mir hat dies Buch, mehr als alle protestantischen, den Sinn für diese Dinge geöffnet, und wenn ich diesen Winter hier bleibe und mässig zu tun habe, werde ich, soviel ich kann, daran fortarbeiten.”

That winter, in a letter dated January 10, 1833, Vilmar wrote to his sister:

The storm raged in my heart, and the current dug its course through the depths of my life; but it was a blessing—many lies were swept away—of course not all of them—and much arrogance—again, not all of it—the crown broken; many loose words stuck in my mouth and delusions exposed.—The main point is: I have done nothing, but it has been given to me by grace, and I hope that it happens even more,—and if it happens, with even greater pain.¹⁹¹

In this work, *Symbolik*, by Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838) Vilmar had encountered the Roman Catholic Tübingen School whose theologians introduced new themes concerning the church in the wake of the Enlightenment. German Romanticism offered an alternative worldview. It offered new insights into these pressing issues: the relationship of the individual's faith to the community of faith, its ecclesial offices, and its polity. The influences of philosophers such as Friedrich von Schelling (1775-1854) who sought to overcome the closed universe of Immanuel Kant by examining the relationship of idea to its finite, concrete expression. By understanding the incarnation of God as always having been incarnate in humanity, from eternity, and with the Christ only manifesting it perfectly in the Incarnation of Jesus, Schelling embraced a Pantheism given concrete form in theologies of the period.¹⁹² The influence of Schelling and other philosophers like him can be seen not only within Catholic circles, but also among Protestants such as Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher in turn influenced Möhler in his early publications, but provided Möhler a position to refute later in his *Symbolik*.

Theologies of the church, developed from post-Enlightenment perspectives, cross denominational boundaries and interest this study because of the exchange of ideas between

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 255. The "pain" spoken of in this letter, likely speaks of the death of Vilmar's first wife, Karoline, in this same year. "Der Sturm hat meinem Herzen gewühlt und der Strom sich in meinem Lebensboden sein Bette gegraben; aber er hat wohlgetan;—viele Lügen hat er ausgefegt—freilich noch lange nicht alle—und vielen Hochmutsbäumen—auch nicht allen—die Krone ausgebrochen; viele lose Worte mir im Munde erstickt und Gaukelbilder mir von den Augen vertrieben.—Die Hauptsache ist : von alledem habe ich nichts getan, sondern es ist aus Gnaden an mir getan worden, und ich hoffe, es geschieht noch mehr,—und wenn das, gewiss mit noch grösseren Schmerzen."

¹⁹² Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation*, 243.

Catholics and Protestants. An early expression of this trend is to be found in the Tübingen School, which began forming its influential theology of the church when Vilmar was yet a rationalist, and it had defined the framework of many of the arguments when Vilmar became a Christian educator and began to explore his own theology of the church.

Enlightenment thought had reduced the Catholic Church to a school of morality in the assessment of many Catholic theologians. Rejecting this arid, limited, and inadequate assessment, Tübingen sought to locate and define the faith relationship between the individual and the community, the inner and outer life, the ideal and the organic manifestation, and sought to identify the nature of the church beyond the narrow limits of an authoritarian institution. Rather they explored the church as it was manifested in the world, as the community of faith—a pronounced rejection of the abstractions of the Enlightenment.

Second, the offices of the church stood in need of examination as these Catholic professors sought new insights and justification for spiritual offices as more than simply hierarchical supremacy by divine fiat. The permanent secularization by Napoleon of the great archbishoprics in Germany of Speyer, Würzburg, Trier, Mainz, Cologne, and Worms shook the foundations of ecclesiastical organization in Germany and the “major support for the ecclesiology that had been their theoretical justification.”¹⁹³

Finally, this school examined the polity of the Catholic Church, examining the hierarchy in light of Romantic thought: was the governing organization of the Church an institution of Christ and existed by necessity or was it a process of evolution and could be modified as the inner spirit of the community found need?¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Michael J. Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation*, 4.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 147–49.

This latter term, “institution (Anstalt),” would become a term to defend the church against the theology of Schleiermacher, who described it as an association of like-minded believers. It emphasized the objective nature of the church uniquely.

Möhler recast the church as an intergral part of the mystery of the faith and not merely the bearer of the mysteries. . . . Möhler made the church one of the truths which it proclaimed. It was no longer the bearer of revelation but the embodiment of revelation, no longer the possessor of God’s self-communication but the extension of that communication.¹⁹⁵

The discussion they framed was not confined to Roman Catholic circles but received widespread circulation, either indirectly through their students, or in a number of significant books, and in the periodical, the *Tübinger Theologische Quartalschrift*, launched in 1817. The Tübingers framed the discussion of church even as the Lutheran renewal was in its infancy. They identified terms and insights used in later discussions, recognized issues extending across denominational boundaries, and developed many of the theological possibilities to launch a spirited and fruitful debate over the meaning of the church. Lutheran confessional renewal was yet in its infancy, and it was perhaps inevitable that many of the insights offered by Rome would be appropriated by Wittenberg and given new meaning or serve as a point of departure to fresh insights, especially when considered with the lens of the Lutheran Confessions. This Catholic school of thought would in turn find itself influenced by the Protestant writings of Schleiermacher.

Johann Michael Sailer

An early member of this school was Johann Michael Sailer (1751-1832) who deviated from post-Tridentine and Enlightenment Catholicism with the insights provided by Romanticism. Maintaining that true faith that gives life must be based on individual experience, he became the

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 326–27.

most distinguished representative of the Catholic Pietist movement at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the next century. This movement of which Sailer was the most prominent member characterized a movement for spiritual renewal in southwestern Germany.¹⁹⁶ Though a Jesuit he discovered the Ingatian tradition only late in life, and believed that one comes to religious experience only through the use of the imagination. “The senses must be stimulated if there is to be any experience. This is the method behind all his widely read devotional writings.” Sailer increasingly began to demonstrate a need for the visible church with an emphasis on the community of believers as the bearer of tradition. For example, one must not only hear the preaching but must also experience it. That is to say, it was not simply the content of preaching, but preaching is itself the revelation. He may have emphasized such theology to discourage the extremes of individual piety, and extremity that led to the resignation of his former students, Martin Boos and Johannes Gossner from the priesthood. They became Lutherans.¹⁹⁷

Experience results, he maintained, not from individual endeavor but is the individual’s reception of divine activity. The human grasp of salvation comes only as a secondary step in the human being grasped by the Almighty. Theology may discuss this experience in rationally controlled terms, but the experience precedes this reflection and remains transcendent to this endeavor. As some Catholics gave way to Romantic excesses, Sailer increasingly demonstrated the need for a visible church for the living proclamation of the apostles. The power of this message was the Holy Spirit. “The same Spirit who gave the living force to the preaching made ready the ears of the hearers.” In the theology of Sailer we find an advocate of experiential

¹⁹⁶ This movement’s most extreme representatives were actually two of Sailer’s students, Martin Boos (1762-1825) and Johannes Gossner (1773-1858). Sailer unintentionally opened a path for these men to join others in denying any significance to the church or the religious life of Christians other than as a gathering of like-minded individuals for the purposes of mutual support and encouragement. Sailer defended these men against the Roman Catholic authorities, but he did not participate in these extreme measures.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 23, 26.

theology (Erlebnistheologie) with the continuing influence of the Enlightenment emphasis on the individual. It was the individual's personal experience that validated the community in this ecclesiology where the Holy Spirit stood as its basis.¹⁹⁸

Johann Sebastian Drey

Another leading figure, remembered as the “father” of the Catholic Tübingen school, and another advocate of Erlebnistheologie, and who also had a far-reaching influence was Johann Sebastian Drey (1777-1853). To illustrate what was wrong with contemporary rationalist theology, Drey compared contemporary writings with those of the Middle Ages. In that earlier period, theology had emerged from a culture marked by the interpenetration of the Christian faith and life. As such, historical Christian faith assumed a role greater than historical facts remembered, but rather was embraced as a reality vividly experienced. He acknowledged that scholastic theology appeared to be hair-splitting word-games. But a “game of words must be judged,” he wrote in his essay, “Toward the Revision of the Present State of Theology” (Revision des gegenwertigen Zustandes der Theologie), “in terms of its own time if it is to be judged rightly. If this is done, it will still ever appear to be a game, but a game, like those of children, has life's earnestness and a real sense to it.”¹⁹⁹ It was in experience or in the heart (Gemüt) that religion was grounded, not in reason (Verstand), thus he developed Erlebnistheologie beyond what Sailer had offered..

Drey sensed that it was in an environment of mystical and contemplative spirit that the theology of the Middle Ages had emerged. There one found a synthesis between life and religion, of reason and experience, but it fell apart because of the divorce between reason and life. Reason alone could not grasp experience and appreciate the church as a community united

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 22-7.

on the basis of common experience. No longer, Drey maintained, could the Catholic Church then rely on shared tradition for unity but only on institutionalized authority. Theologians were compelled to appeal to the only source of objective thought left to them, the Scriptures. The dry scholarship of reason made salvation history appear to be a set of discrete events explained by appeal to God's will or reduced to contingent causes rather than the magnificent, organic unfolding of a positive, spiritually enlivening reality across history. The lifeless analysis of discursive reason (Verstand) had replaced the insights of intuitive reason (Vernunft) and the reality of history.²⁰⁰ Drey considered it the task of the theologians in his day to bring theology back to its vitalizing source.²⁰¹ In this analysis we see a common Romantic feature of research: history became for them revelatory of Christian life.

A Hermeneutical Moment

The philosophy of Schelling sought the connection between Kant's metaphysical noumena and the phenomena of the physical universe. This effort sought a connection between the ideal of the former and experience in the latter. In Schelling's scientific method, the ideal existed a priori and the evidence of it existed a posteriori. The church thus became the phenomenon of the ideal of doctrine and served as the true basis of all theological knowledge.²⁰² In like fashion, doctrine could be inductively posited a priori based upon the parts known a posteriori. With this understanding, Drey could posit then a unity between all doctrine as it was expressed in history.

¹⁹⁹ Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation*, 33.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 232–3. This distinction became common coin among post-Kantian philosophers and was given its most influential formulation for Catholics from the friend of Hamann, and German philosopher who criticized Kant's system, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 34–5.

²⁰² Ibid. 38–9. "The ideas of religion directed toward the intuition of the infinite in the finite must be expressed pre-eminently in existing reality. . . . It must accordingly be represented through a similarly infinite and yet limited manifestation, which is itself not simply real, like the state, but ideal, and which proclaims as a presence the unity of all the spirit in the midst of their separation into individuality. This symbolized intuition is the church as a living work of art. Schelling, *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums*, 5: 292–3, quoted in Hime, *Ongoing Incarnation*, 127.

This organic concept considered the Church to be based upon the Holy Spirit who filled the Church and gave it the illumination of the a priori unity of all doctrine. Such an understanding presented Möhler with the problem of the presence of the Spirit and the problem of panentheism that was inherent in subsuming all doctrines into this one ideal explanation, and the life of the church community as one and the same as the Holy Spirit.

Möhler and the Symbolik

Drey's student, Johann Adam Möhler, sought to resolve the tension between Sailer's Erlebnistheologie and the existence of an ecclesial community and between the Christian community spirit (Gemeingeist) and the historical church.²⁰³ At an early stage, Protestant thought influenced this Catholic theologian just as, in return, he would affect Protestant ecclesial thought. Möhler's writings revealed the profound influence of Schleiermacher in the Tübinger's early *Unity of the Church (Einheit der Kirche)* (1825). Under Schleiermacher's influence, he identified in effect the Holy Spirit and the life of the Christian community as one and the same. Eventually he realized that such an understanding, like Schleiermacher's exposition of the church, could not avoid falling into panentheism. The divine became the spirit of the community itself, and thus, there no longer remains any essential difference between the two. Within this concept the Spirit is present essentially in the church, and from this common community spirit emerges the offices of the church, its polity, and its theology. This notion offered an organic explanation of Romanticism where the material surfaced from the spiritual within the individual and from within the community. This organic principle explained the evolution of church history and was the key to understanding the present church according to early romantic thought.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation*, 150–1.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 119–21.

Möhler and the Tübingen school were an early effort among others soon to follow in an attempt to locate and explain existing tensions: the relationship between inner and outer, ideal and organic manifestation, the community and the individual. In Möhler's early work, *Unity of the Church*, there was no clearly distinguishable moment between a priori and a posteriori. After further reflection and study, especially study of the church father, Athanasius, Möhler was to revise his earlier understanding described above by placing Christ as the origin, basis, and center of the church.

Another Hermeneutical Step

The inseparable but unconfused union of the two natures of Christ becomes the paradigm for the understanding of the union of the divine and the human in the church.

The institution of a visible church was not only suitable in view of the manner of the union of God and humanity in Christ, for suitability implies that another possibility could have been chosen that might have been less adequate. Today, to say that the form of the church is suitable to the form of the Incarnation is to say that those doctrines are independent of one another and only extrinsically related to one another. The denial of that independence, that extrinsic relationship between doctrines, is at the heart of Möhler's thought. Such an extrinsic relationship would completely undermine the 'scientific' character of theology. For science, *Wissenschaft*, means the logical and organic interrelatedness of knowledge. To isolate doctrines from one another would deprive them of their a priori necessity. Möhler certainly does not intend to claim that doctrines are deducible one from another with a necessity that denies the freedom of God who is the revealer of doctrine. Rather doctrines, once discovered, are to be interrelated in an organic system.²⁰⁵

Hence there is organic connection between doctrines though individual doctrines can only be revealed by God before they can be known. Yet once discovered, they are seen to be part of one idea. For Drey, that one idea was the kingdom of God as it unfolded in history. This notion found expression by Möhler most often in the God-humankind relation. The Incarnation and the

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 257–8.

church are not isolated facts; rather the former implies the latter. Leading humanity back to full communion with God, the Incarnate Word spoke as human to human.

This was decisive for the character of those means through which the Son of God after his withdrawal from the eyes of the world would still work in the world and for the world. Since divinity had shown itself active in Christ in an ordinary human way, so with this the form was likewise designated in which his work should be carried forward.²⁰⁶

The Symbolik explored three areas of inquiry: the nature of the church, its function, and its means for effecting those functions. He answered these questions by asserting that the church was a visible community created by Christ. “The ultimate basis for the visibility of the church lies in the Incarnation of the divine Word; he had the heart of man, without assuming his bondage, and if he had not appeared in the flesh, he would only have founded an invisible, inner church.”²⁰⁷

In this context, Möhler locates the “visible” church in the means of grace. Noting that if Jesus had not appeared in the flesh, but only filling men’s hearts in a spiritual fashion, there would be only an invisible, inner church:

But not the word made flesh, it spoke in an expressible, pleasing human way; it talked as human to human, and suffered and acted according to the way of humans, in order to win back humanity to the kingdom of God. Accordingly, the means chosen to achieve this result, which through nature and the need of humanity suited fully necessary normal instruction and educational methods. This was decisive for the character of those means, through which the Son of God after his withdrawal from before the eyes of the world still ordained to work in the world and for the world.

²⁰⁶ J.A. Möhler, *Symbolik, oder Darstellund der dogmatischen Gegensätze der Katholiken und Protestanten nach ihren öffentlichen Bekenntnisschriften* (Regensburg: Druck und Verlag von Georg Joseph Manz, 1871), 332. “Dies war entscheidend für die Beschaffenheit jener Mittel, durch welche der Sohn Gottes auch noch nach seiner Entrückung aus den Augen der Welt in der Welt wirken wollte. Hatte sich die Gottheit in Christo in gewöhnlicher menschlicher Weise thätig erwiesen, so war damit die Form, in welcher sein Werk fortgesetzt werden sollte, gleichfalls bezeichnet.”

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 332. “Der letzte Grund der Sichtbarkeit der Kirche liegt in der Menschwerdung des göttlichen Wortes; hätte sich dasselbe den Herzen der Menschen eingesentkt, ohne die Knechtsgestalt anzunehmen, und somit überhaupt ohne auf eine leibliche Weise zu erscheinen, so würde es auch nur eine unsichtbare, innere Kirche gestiftet haben.”

Since divinity had shown itself active in Christ in an ordinary human way, so with this, the form was likewise designated in which his work should be carried forward.²⁰⁸

Möhler goes even further. The church is not simply the best possible means for the supernatural to be communicated to humanity through human means. Möhler continues:

So from the point of view advanced here, the visible church is the Son of God appearing within mankind in human form in a continuous fashion, constantly renewed, eternally rejuvenated, his ongoing incarnation, just as the faithful are also called in Holy Scripture the body of Christ.²⁰⁹

So from Christology Möhler asserts a church based upon theologies developed long before in the debates of the early church. Considering the two natures of Christ in one man as the paradigm for the church, he sought to counter heresies developing in his own day. The extremes of these heresies he described as classical christological heresies. The church must avoid ecclesiologies that are Nestorian on the one hand and Monophysite on the other. The former described the church as one where the separating of the supernatural mission from the human organization resulted in a separation of a visible from and an invisible church. The second constituted an opposite extreme where the divine so merges with the institution that the human disappears in a divinized community. The battle for him in his day was most clearly that of combating the Monophysite ecclesiology. For Möhler one community existed in two modes and must be examined accordingly. Möhler would then of course reject an invisible church.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., “Indem nun aber das Wort Fleisch geworden ist, sprach es sich selbst auf eine Äusserung vernehmbare, menschliche Weise aus, es redete als Mensch zu Menschen und litt und wirkete nach Menschenart, um die Menschen für das Reich Gottes wiederzugewinnen, so dass das Mittel, das zur Erreichung dieses Zweckes gewählt wurde, der durch die Natur und die Bedürfnisse des Menschen bedingten allgemeinen Unterrichts—und Erziehungsmethode völlig entsprach. Dies war entscheidend für die Beschaffenheit jener Mittel, durch welche der Sohn Gottes auch noch nach seiner Entrückung aus den Augen der Welt in der Christo in gewöhnlicher menschlicher Weise thätig erwiesen, so war damit die Form, in welcher sein Werk fortgesetzt werden sollt, gleichfalls bezeichnet.”

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 332–3. “So ist denn die sichtbare Kirche, von dem eben entwickelten Gesichtspunkte aus, der unter den Menschen in menschlicher Form fortwährend erscheinende, stets sich erneuernde, ewig sich verjüngend Sohn Gottes, die andauernde Fleischwerdung desselben, so wie denn auch die Gläubigen in der heiligen Schrift der Leib Christi genannt werden.” Also Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation*, 258–9.

Vilmar would find these arguments compelling. Late in life his posthumously published *Dogmatik* would describe the church in a fashion reminiscent of Möhler's paradigm, an institution with a divine nature: "So . . . the church is a continuation of the presence, life, and work of Jesus Christ, an expansion of his person, it is his own I, depicted in a communion for the redemption of called men."²¹⁰ This theology acted as a stimulus for Vilmar and has been examined before. F. W Kantzenbach attributes the overall understanding of church as institute and the high view of the office of the ministry to Möhler's influence.²¹¹ This single source theory or reception explanation does not do full justice to the development of Vilmar's theology over the remaining years of his life, where changes in his own responsibilities and the revolutions from both above (e.g. Prussia) and from below (e.g. the Revolution of 1848) would serve as catalysts for further explication of his theology.

Ulrich Asendorf points out the facets of Vilmar's theology yet to be developed counter this interpretation of Kantzenbach. Also when the theology found expression there was little mention of Möhler or his Symbolik. Kantzenbach sees clear lines of reception in the concepts of the church as the ongoing incarnation, the explanation of the church by means of organic philosophy, and the continuing presence of Christ through the office of the ministry. This concept of the church as ongoing incarnation has only peripheral meaning in the *Theology of Fact*; organic is not overly significant but more descriptive than conceptual, and the association of the ministry with the presence of Christ elucidates *Apology VII*, 28 more than Möhler.

²¹⁰ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik: Akademische Vorlesungen von Dr. A.F.C. Vilmar*, vol. 2, ed. K.W. Piderit, (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 183. "So ist auch die Kirche eine Fortsetzung des Daseins, Lebens und Wirkens Jesu Christi, eine Expansion seiner Person, sie ist sein eigenes Ich, dargestellt in einer Gemeinschaft zur Erlösung berufener Menschen."

²¹¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, *Gestalten und Typen des Neuluthertums: Beiträge zur Erforschung des Neokonfessionalismus im 19. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh: Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1968), 122.

Asendorf does concede that Möhler may have contributed to his understanding of the Confessions.²¹²

Further, Kantzenbach fails to credit the hermeneutical approach of these theologians such as Vilmar and Möhler in the insight of historical development of doctrines while yet defending their divine truth. This critique levels an idealist challenge to the historical development of the church while failing to address the fact of the development of doctrine as the witness of the church and its Scriptures to the pressing issues of the contemporary life.

The Emergence of a New Lutheranism

Friedrich Julius Stahl and the Paradigms of Church Polity

As Lutheran theologians began to address concerns arising from the Protestant unions, many of the insights presented by Möhler in the *Symbolik* took shape as these Lutherans nevertheless assumed their own course. Lutherans were intent on countering the unionist tendencies, correcting the hermeneutical error that they considered so destructive of church and society, and to augment and complete what Vilmar would consider an incomplete doctrine of the church as confessed by Lutherans. He considered historical development and the development of doctrine to be inseparable. Without this “organic” concept, to maintain the objective validity of Lutheran Confessions was beyond defense.²¹³ Fellow Lutherans offered groundwork of their own, lending Vilmar some of their insights and proposals, just as Möhler influenced them all.

Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861) provided an early assessment of the church question in Germany and influencing the wider discussion, revealed the influence of Möhler, and in turn, were reflected in the writings of Vilmar and others concerning the church. Stahl was born in

²¹² Ulrich Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise und Amt der Kirche: Voraussetzungen der Theologie von A.F.C. Vilmar* (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967), 92, fn. 170.

²¹³ Christoph Link, *Die Grundlagen der Kirchenverfassung im lutherischen Confessionalismus des 19. Jahrhunderts insbesondere bei Theodosius Harnack* (München: Claudius Verlag, 1966), 49.

Munich to a Jewish father and attended the universities at Würzburg, Heidelberg, and Erlangen where he became a Lutheran in 1819. An early conflict with his fellow student, Feuerbach, prefigured the church and hermeneutical struggles of his mature years as a theologian. He was first appointed as a professor at Würzburg, then Erlangen, and then was called to the University of Berlin in 1840 along with Schelling to combat the influence of Hegel.²¹⁴

He soon became an adherent and advocate of the Lutheran symbolic books. He served in the role of a very influential politician in the conservative monarchist circle of the kingdom. When comparing his political sympathies with Vilmar's conservative political sympathies, it should be remembered that the government in Berlin ruled over a far different religious arrangement than that found Lower Hesse where Lutheranism was established in the Diocese of Kassel. Though that region knew the religious debate of so many other regions, an established union did not become a reality until Prussian annexation in 1866.

Stahl was known early for his works, *Philosophy of Law According to the Historical Viewpoint* (*Die Philosophie des Rechts*, 1830), and *Church Polity According to the Doctrine and Law of Protestantism* (*Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten*, 1840). It was in this latter book that we learn his view of church and ministry that would remain consistent throughout the remainder of his career and which offered alternatives to Schleiermacher's understanding of the church. We can organize them in three key theses.

First, the term introduced by Möhler becomes prominent. The church is the visible, revealed institution (*Anstalt*) for the Kingdom of God. . . .” Second this institution contained the invisible and visible church in one indissoluble bond. This organic organization could not be divided without a false understanding since there was a unity in both these sides of the church, a

²¹⁴ F. Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. and ed. by W. Hastie

unity of the communion of saints and the “true doctrine of the Gospel and the true administration of the sacraments.” Finally, he insisted that the visible church was distinguished by its confessional statements and constitutional polity.²¹⁵

Further he identified three types of church polity known and practiced in Lutheranism: the episcopal, the territorial, and the collegiate. His analysis also identified each with a particular period of history. The episcopal system he identified with the independence of the church as it was maintained throughout the land. The territorial system corresponded to the era of political absolutism by princes. Finally, the collegial system, identified with the ecclesiology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, developed as the masses established authority over their own rulers, and was extended over the church as well.²¹⁶

The episcopal system is a reflection of that time, in which the independence of the church, as with all other corporate bodies, was maintained throughout the land. The territorial system belongs to the period in which the authority of the prince was all-powerful. The collegial system, finally, is of that period in which the masses and their authority were established as rulers, it is in the church the analogy of popular sovereignty.²¹⁷

Additionally Stahl assessed both the territorial and collegiate systems with inner subjectivity of the pious life, opposed to any organically conceived and institutionally grounded understanding of the church. The territorial system granted to the prince authority over the external church structure to obtain social tranquility and tolerated freedom of undisturbed, individual religious belief and practice. This view of the church Stahl ascribed to Pietism which was conceived under this system. Accordingly the church became a free association of believers. The dignity and true nature of the church was in danger of compromise. The church stood before

(Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 425.

²¹⁵ Friedrich Stahl, *Die Kirchenverfassung nach Lehre und Recht der Protestanten* (Erlangen: 1840), 49–53, quoted in Walter H. Conser, Jr., *Church and Confession: Conservative Theologians in Germany, England, and America, 1815-1866* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 46–7.

²¹⁶ Conser, *Church and Confession*, 47-48.

the danger of reduction to little more than an association of believers. On the other hand, the prince was poised to exercise illegitimate power over the church thus surpassing his powers. The former danger Stahl feared the most.²¹⁸

It comes as no surprise then that Stahl would oppose the collegial system even more than the territorial system. In this system, an innovation attributed to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the church was an association of individuals much like any other association in form but with a different goal in mind (“Nicht das Wesen, sondern allein der Zweck unterscheidet diese von anderen Vereinen.”²¹⁹). “It consisted of individual personalities, and was to bring forth and rule believers’ lives with this model of common life.”²²⁰ Through a common confession, the individuals were knit together in a visible assembly. He offered German Protestants an alternative to the ecclesiology of Schleiermacher which added up to little more than a social contract, or the territorial system threatening the integrity of the church. The church rather was an organic institution established by Christ. This institution had prospered most, he thought, under the episcopal system.

Here, then, were two clear theological alternatives on the interpretation of the Protestant church. The church could be seen as an institution divinely established and preexistent to any given congregation or parish, unified in both its visible and invisible natures and ordered in a hierarchy of properly constituted offices. Or it could be seen as an association that had special membership requirements and whose very process of association testified to the important part it played in society as the harbinger of the message of salvation and the moral life.²²¹

The result is a church surrendered to the state as in the unions established in this period. Indeed the invisible church concept became the “way station to the ethical state.” Individuals,

²¹⁷ Stahl, *Die Kirchenverfassung*, 46, quoted in Conser, *Church and Confession*, 48.

²¹⁸ Conser, *Church and Confession*, 48–9.

²¹⁹ Rudolph Sohm, *Kirchenrecht*, vol. 1 (München und Leipzig, 1923), 672 in Link, *Die Kirchenverfassung*, 43.

²²⁰ Link, *Grundlagen der Kirchenverfassung*, 43.

²²¹ Conser, *Church and Confession*, 50.

exercising their own choice joined a confession of those in agreement with them, and by living the life of pious individuals, made the state a place not only of moral citizens, but also obedient subjects.

Stahl faced opposition from many quarters by his assertions and their implications. Critics disapproved of his describing the church much like the state as an institution directly from God, not the result of natural sovereignty (and revolution). Using legal concepts derived from Savigny, he identifies the law of the state as emerging from culture and society and thus manifests itself in the state. The church, also an institution, manifests itself as the institution of salvation, and indeed acts in a civil capacity with church discipline. The church thus becomes much like the state mediating God's rule in the world. Using this legal model, Stahl maintained that the visible church is perceived in its constitutional polity and its confession.²²²

Stahl's understanding to the church was criticized for making the church an *ius humanum* where the visible polity and the office of the ministry separated the congregation from the church itself, since the congregation was relegated to the invisible part of the church. Others would criticize Stahl for not recognizing the forward-looking social currents of the day because of an abiding fear of revolution. Consequently the Lutherans became identified in many circles with the forces of political reaction, not only against communism and socialism, but against democracy itself, all considered instruments of revolution.²²³

Such criticism mirrors the critics of many historians of Lutheranism examining both the nineteenth century and the Reformation which are often presented as a missed opportunity for reform of government and other aspects of society, and thereby resulted in securing the absolutist territorial system of princes. Yet this criticism often overlooks the context of both movements.

²²² Link, *Gundlagen*, 74.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 45–6.

As Stephen Ozment has noted, German history is “not a steady stream flowing in only one direction.”²²⁴ Far from the experience of other countries, the German experience was not one in favor of absolute or totalitarian rule. “Historical experience has instead left Germans more fearful of anarchy than tyranny, inclining them to hedge, if hedge they must, on the side of good order. This they have done in a compelling belief that it is not freedom, once attained, but discipline, carefully maintained, that keeps a people free.”²²⁵

Thus the experience of the Germany of the sixteenth century where foreign domination by pope and emperor were seen as great dangers, so did foreign domination in the early nineteenth century—recently experienced from France—remain a concern as well as the domination from other emperors such as the Hapsburgs. In the nineteenth century another sixteenth century concern, separatism and revolution, were coupled with the French fear and gave the Lutherans great concern. The French Revolution of 1789 resulted in the defeat and occupation of German nations. The Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 began in France as well, and spread to the German lands, serving as a continuing reminder of the ever-present danger of anarchy.²²⁶

Likewise the great social reforms owed to the Reformation and the Lutherans are often overlooked. The Lutherans of the nineteenth century were closely engaged in social issues. Stahl served as a member of parliament in Berlin. Kliefort spent his most productive years as the Superintendent of the churches in Mecklenburg. Vilmar served in the legislature of Lower Hesse and remained close to the seat of political power in the capacity of advisor the Ministry of the Interior. The reform he undertook in education has already been examined. Lutherans thought it

²²⁴ Stephen Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: Harper & Collins Publishers, 2004), 13.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

was a rejection of Christian responsibility to avoid engagement on social issues.²²⁷ Likewise in the church questions of the day, they sought reform built on a foundation of ecclesiology for a church, suffering under the double charged danger of a panentheistic theology of Schleiermacher and the danger of domination by princes. Stahl identified a third way to understand the church. He forged the path that led to a church governed by its churchmen though maintaining long-standing collaboration with the established governments. If the Lutherans could not support human liberties by illegal uprising, then they could support a society where the princes gained their powers by the law. Other theologians further refined Stahl's approach.

Vilmar, though building on Stahl's thought, placed "institution" at center stage of his theology of the church. Also unlike Stahl, he would completely reject sovereignty of the state over the church in spiritual matters.²²⁸ In an 1863 essay in his periodical, *Pastoral-theologian Blättern*, published from 1861-1866, gathered into the collection, *Kirche und Welt*, Vilmar would discuss the conflict that had developed within the German lands with church union.

Moreover, as we cannot tire of saying, it is beneficial for the church and for ourselves, it is high time that we finally stop relying totally on the civil authority (auf den weltlichen Arm) that we will on the contrary point entirely to ourselves, or more correctly, toward our Lord Jesus Christ.²²⁹

Theodor Kleifoth of Mecklenburg

Theodor Kleifoth (1810-1895) joined Stahl in his portrayal of the church as an institution (Anstalt) and in opposition to the collegial system. Yet the Mecklenburg theologian was far more than an imitator of Stahl, having contributions of his own to make to an emerging theology of the church. Born in the Mecklenburg village of Körchow, he served as head or Superintendent of the

²²⁷ Ibid., 100.

²²⁸ Bernhard Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung bei A.F.C. Vilmar," *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1957): 465-466.

²²⁹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt*, vol. 1, 39. "Es ist indes, wie wir zu wiederholen nicht müde werden können, für die Kirche und für uns selbst äussert heilsam, übrigens auch hohe Zeit dazu, und dass wir dagegen ganz

church there while in the role of a vigorous defender of Lutheran confessionalism. Attending the University of Berlin, he demonstrated academic ability and recalled an early ambition to be a professor of theology. Leaving Berlin after one year, he returned and completed his education at the University of Rostock. Appointed as instructor to Duke Wilhelm of Mecklenburg in 1833, in 1837 he was appointed tutor to Grand Duke Friedrich Francis. This appointment lasted until 1839, and was followed by service as a parish pastor. In 1844 he was surprised by appointment as Superintendent of the Mecklenburg church by his former student and now ruler. In this position he was known as a defender of the Lutheran cause as well as a participant in the wider effort to reinvigorate the church.²³⁰

Ever a student of history, his famous *History of Dogma* (*Dogmengeschichte*) appeared in 1839. In this widely read work, he dismissed the scientific approach to theology, as “crude empiricism,” incapable of finding the unity and “laws” within history. Rather, theology must give an account of the “Christian Spirit” from which spring dogmas. This Christian spirit he depicted as both objective and subjective. Its objective side was the Holy Spirit, mediated by the preached word of Christ; the subjective side resided in the spheres where the Spirit was active: among the Christian people.²³¹

The church found unity even though historical movement brought new developments. In contrast to Hegel’s philosophy, the resulting church was not synthetically changed so much as receiving additions to what had previously been added. This additive view of development explained the development of doctrines. Unity within a developmental framework explained how Protestantism for example could modify certain doctrinal emphases rather than replace all with a

auf uns selbst, oder genauer auf den Herrn Jesus Christus, gewiesen werden.”

²³⁰ Conser, *Church and Confession*, 82-84.

²³¹ Theodor Kliefoth, *Einleitung in die Dogmengeschichte* (Parchim und Ludwigslust: Verlage der D. C. Hinstorffschen Hofbuchhandlung: 1839), 10-11.

new system. The inheritance of past doctrines was received and passed on, reflecting a unity within the church.²³² The ages of history which produce dogma are productive, additive, accumulating new dogma while appropriating the old:

The dogma-forming stage [of history] is productive and by means of a prevailing quality of striving, it possesses living movement, creating power. This productive quality of this stage proves to be in another connection influential. The dogma-forming stage is the beginning of a new period of dogma. It joins thus to the preceding period, an earlier time. . . . a new period forms its own ecclesial and temporal life. . . .²³³

This new period forms an antithesis to the concerns of the preceding period but it is a two-sided antithesis:

The later period is the continuation of the earlier. Every period manifests an essential side of Christianity and brings it to awareness. And the later always adopts the results of the preceding earlier development in a fitting manner. . . . Only insofar as the developments of the earlier period were pure will the results be adopted into the new period.²³⁴

As enlargement of church doctrine occurs by successive addition, the historian can judge these different periods. This assessment avoids the system of Hegel, for example, because the doctrine was not “synthesized” into new doctrine, replacing what had preceded it, nor was there a “conflict” to achieve such a synthesis. The effect was additive to what had gone before. For Kliefoth these periods were those of the Greek church responding to Judaism and paganism; the period of the Greek church was succeeded by the Roman church that in turn was then succeeded by the era of the Reformation and Protestantism. So for example, the Reformation appropriated content of Roman doctrine, e.g. Augustine, the Synod of Orange, while rejecting other tendencies such as Scholasticism, Pietism, and Roman Catholic “unbelief.”²³⁵

²³² Conser, *Church and Confession*, 84–5.

²³³ Kliefoth, *Dogmengeschichte*, 132.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

From this cumulative effect of the formation of the church and its dogma, Kleifoth contrasted the endeavors of rationalism which had sought to negate doctrines rather than add to them or correct them. It had elevated the abstract over the historical, and sought the good and true apart from and in opposition to the revelation of God in Christ. One cannot locate the historical moment in rationalism because it rejects the historical moment, and the Spirit becomes a speculative Spirit, and rationalism becomes true objectivity. Seeking what the working of the Spirit among the church by reason was a futile undertaking with the result of negating doctrine rather than adding to its truth.²³⁶

Kliefoth takes the lead in at least two directions that Vilmar's theology would follow: first, doctrine become descriptive of the reality, the life and experience of the church in history, developing not to negate what had come before but to add to it. The close observation of history makes the task of theology primarily descriptive of this reality or fact. For Kliefoth and Vilmar perceived periods of history were facts in the life of the church, and these periods were delineated by dogmatic development, dogma made larger by accumulations as the church experienced its Spirit-guided life in the world. Yet the theory of history stood not by itself in this thinking. As we have seen, Kliefoth also added a hermeneutical element that sought to show how current thought was opposed to this experience of the church and its guiding by the Holy Spirit. His critique extended not only to Enlightenment rationalists, but also to those who came after, the school of Hegel and those identified with his school, e.g. Strauss, whose presupposition were rationalistic and sought to destroy doctrine.²³⁷ The exclusion of scientific method and rationalist foundationalism places both Kliefoth and Vilmar within the same Lutheran confessional effort to reassert theological presuppositions and method into the church in order to strengthen it and

²³⁶ Ibid., 220.

²³⁷ Ibid., 43-4, 215-19.

oppose church destroying currents which in their view sought to overwhelm the faith. Secondly, the distinction between the objective and the subjective church, in Vilmar's thought, rests with such recognition of the church and rejection of a false, artificial distinction between a visible and invisible church.

Vilmar: The Objective and Subjective Moments of the Church

Bernhard Lohse contrasts these two distinctions in Vilmar's theology of the church as he describes both the "objective moment" and the "subjective moment" in this theology of the church.²³⁸ The objective nature of the church was founded upon the very presence of Christ with his church, a presence mediated by the Holy Spirit. Yet this objective church was visible in the means of grace (Seligkeitsgut), word and sacrament, found only in the church, whereby all successive generations would be led into the certainty of salvation as the first generation of Christians had been.²³⁹

According to the Holy Scripture the church has to be grasped as that arranged structure from the Trinitarian God of the continuing, unchanging attendance or the living presence and activity of the Holy Spirit on earth, and through this presence, the mediated living presence of Christ, just as through this presence the contingent mediation of the Holy Spirit and of Christ to human beings.²⁴⁰

Accordingly, the church cannot be considered as simply a society (Gesellschaft) or an association (Gemeinschaft) of individuals. Rather the church comes to us as an institute of fact (Tatsache) or reality, whose objective reality is generated from above, and whose reality is manifested in faith. The means of grace, the sacraments and the proclaimed word, are not only found in the church, but the church is the purpose (Zweck) for which they operate. Consequently,

²³⁸ Bernhard Lohse, "*Kirche und Offenbarung*", 448. Also Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, 186.

²³⁹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Lehrbuch der Pastoraltheologie: nach dessen akademischen Vorlesungen herausgegeben* (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von G. Bertelsmann, 1872), 6.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-6. "Die Kirche muss nach der Hl. Schrift aufgefasset werden als die von dem dreieinigen Gott getroffene Anordnung der steten unveränderten Anwesenheit oder lebendigen Gegenwart und Wirksamkeit des Hl. Geistes auf Erden und der durch diese Gegenwart vermittelten lebendigen Gegenwart Christi, sowie der durch diese

the institutional understanding, that might strike many as distancing God from his people with a mediating church and ministry; has the opposite effect and goal for Vilmar.²⁴¹ By this objective church, he sought to describe the church as the “I of Christ,”²⁴² an intimate presence by which he embraces us with his hands.²⁴³ He seeks to form the church as his body because he is the Savior.²⁴⁴

This Word of God was rightly then conceived as a “means of grace” (Gnadenmittel), yet according to Vilmar’s theology of the church as institute, such means do not exist outside the church. The means of grace do not find expression outside the church because their goal is the church: for the conversion of unbelievers and for the benefit of believers. To perceive the means of grace outside the church would be a contradiction in Vilmar’s understanding and his theology. Thus the chapter, “Concerning the Word of God” (Vom Gottes Wort) constitutes not a chapter or subject by itself in his famous *Dogmatik*, but is to be found as Chapter 2 of the fourth major section, “The Doctrine of the Church” (Lehre von der Kirche).²⁴⁵

Vilmar asserts his view that AC VII is not incorrect in its identification of the church as the communion of saints (communion sanctorum), but believes, again in accordance with the cumulative notion of the development of doctrine, that the doctrine was incomplete and in need of further development. The church should be identified as the true believers and the means of grace, for these constitute the church: the means and the result. Additionally, since the communion of saints were the true believers, he proposed refining further the language of AC VII: “where the gospel is rightly taught and received and the Sacraments rightly administered

Gegenwart bedingten Mitteilung des Hl. Geistes und Christi an die Menschen.”

²⁴¹ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, 215.

²⁴² Vilmar, *Ibid.* 192. “*Ich von Christi.*”

²⁴³ Lohse, “Kirche und Offenbarung,” 449.

²⁴⁴ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, 118.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 179, 215.

and accepted.”²⁴⁶ For the saints can only be those where these means of grace have had this effect. Consequently, Vilmar rejects Möhler’s observation that the Catholic Church is visible and the Protestant Church invisible. Rather the church comes into being through the means of grace and the church is thereby visible.²⁴⁷

Consequently, it would be a vain undertaking to seek the word outside of the church as scholars might if they find the church essentially invisible. Therefore this objective moment constitutes a hermeneutical moment where meaning in the Scriptures is found in the presupposition of faith and the doctrines of the faithful church. Seeking truth of revelation outside of the church would be folly. Here we note a tension in this theology of the church. The means of grace precede the believing members and the congregation. There is no congregation without the office of the ministry and the means of grace they deliver. Meaning in the Scriptures is only found where faith has been produced by the proclamation of these same Scriptures. The faithful, individually and congregationally, therefore, constitute the subjective part of the church.

This subjectivity is found in experience. Without this experience, as Lohse also notes, the church constitutes little more than a dead institution. This institution constitute the place where experience is continually present among individuals and the congregation.

It would be a mistake to reduce Vilmar’s theology of the church to a single formula as did Fagerberg and Haussleiter for example.²⁴⁸ The objective must be brought into experience, both individually and collectively. The institution without such experience would be dead; the place where the arrangement is realized remains the congregation.

Church objectively expressed this arrangement of the Trinitarian God, through which the means of salvation are assured for all following generations and in the same

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 200-201. “. . . in qua Evangelium recte docetur et accipitur, et recte administrantur et accipiuntur Sacramenta.”

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 205.

²⁴⁸ Lohse, “Kirche und Offenbarung,” 454.

manner are delivered and appropriated, as these happened to the first Christians . . . Just as one expresses this subjectively, so the church is in this form also called congregation, this human association, in which this arrangement is fulfilled.²⁴⁹

Thus the congregation also constitutes the subjective side of the church and this fact cannot be reversed where the congregation would constitute the church. Here again we see the influence of Kliefoth. The subjective manifestation in the church of objective doctrine experienced, he identified with different epochs of the church as well, but described them differently. The first he classified as the doctrine of God the Father and Creator, second, the doctrine of the divinity of the Son, third, the doctrine of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, fourth, the doctrine of the divinity and humanity of the Son, fifth, the doctrine of the nature of sin and salvation, and now in his time, the doctrine of the church remained to the epoch in which he lived.²⁵⁰ So doctrine is within the history of doctrine, “the expression of the experience of the faith of the church.”²⁵¹

The facts or reality existing in doctrine, in the confessions of the church, reflect the a priori reality, discovered only a posteriori through the experience of the church. When the church understands a new reality through its collective experience, then it also realizes that this reality existed even before it was discovered.²⁵² Vilmar made three points concerning this existence beforehand and its discovery within the church.

1. “Christian doctrine is in the person of Christ, in the foundation of the church through the apostles . . . implicitly completely contained.”²⁵³

2. “In the ancient doctrines of the church all doctrines, chiefly the symbols, all realization [of these doctrines] is already bestowed.”²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt. oder die Aufgaben des geistlichen Amtes in unserer Zeit*, II (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872), 203.

²⁵⁰ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 1, 8.

²⁵¹ Karl Ramge, *Vilmar's Bedeutung für die Kirche in der Gegenwart* (Publisher? 1941), 45. See also Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt*, 205. [The confessions of the church are the] “Resultate grosser Erlebnisse, welche die Gemeinde von den Erlösungstatsachen in einem von dem Herrn selbst geordneten Zusammenhang und Fortschritt gemacht hat.”

²⁵² Lohse, *Kirche und Offenbarung*, 456.

3. This experience, which includes Luther's experience of justification, can only be realized within the existing church.

And salvation does not take place outside the church, as Luther experienced and taught it [as if] the individual could set himself up in place of the church, assuming 'the objective power of grace' to oneself . . . the assumption of salvation takes place solely as a result of the sacrament of holy baptism . . . justification by faith alone is completely nothing other than the return to the sacrament of Holy Baptism . . . mediated through the preached word, which does not exist outside the church . . . mediated through the power of absolution and the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, which both, like the word, do not exist outside the church.²⁵⁵

This subjectivity did not extend to those who sought to tear free of the church and establish an entirely "new" church as was done with the union efforts in the German lands. He denies that the church could be built anew "purely out of the Holy Scriptures." The misuse of the formal scripture principle had led to a number of misuses by "radicals, heretics, and the muddleheaded (Wirrkopfen)." Such an independent move rejected and possessed none of the content of revelation made plain to the church in its experience.

Thus Vilmar sees these two moments of the church in close connection though distinct from one another. In Jesus Christ, the foundation of the church, the future is guaranteed in the subjective faith or experience of the members and in the objective, or the continued duration (Bestand) of the church.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 1, 49.

²⁵⁴ Lohse, *Kirche und Offenbarung*, 456. "Die Kirche sind in den altkirchlichen Dogmen, vornehmlich in den Symbolen, bereits alle Erkenntnisse zuteil geworden."

²⁵⁵ Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt*, I, 85. "Und die Aneignung des Heiles, wie sie Luther erfahren und gelehrt hat, vollzieht sich nicht etwa ausserhalb der Kirche, so dass 'die objective Gnadenmacht' derselben aufgelöst, darangegeben und das Individuum an die Stelle der Kirche gesetzt worden wäre . . . the Aneignung des Heiles vollzieht sich nur in Folge des Sacramentes der heiligen Taufe . . . die Rechtfertigung allein aus dem Glauben ist durchaus nichts anderes als Rückkehr zum Taufsacrament . . . vermittelt durch das gepredigte Wort (welches ausser der Kirche nicht vorhanden ist . . . vermittelt durch die Kraft der Absolution und des Sacraemtnes des Leibes und Blutes Christi, welch beide, gleich dem Wort, ausserhalb der Kirche nicht existieren."

²⁵⁶ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 1, 56.

Early Developments Approaching the Theology of Reality

Vilmar's Introduction to Matters of Church-State Relations

Into this world of Christian thought, Vilmar entered, and entered it not only as a theologian but also as elected public official, seeking to enact the reforms prompted by the Revolution of 1830. The lessons from the early 1830s informed his theology of the relations proper between state and church.

While serving in the post-revolutionary government in the 1830s, Vilmar began to grasp the issues attendant to the tasks of the church vis a vis civil government. Clearly he knew of the unions established by government fiat in a number of lands in Germany, but unions do not loom large in his discussions or concerns in the 1820s or even when he gave the landmark address on the Augsburg Confession in 1830. With his work in the legislature and his committee efforts there on behalf of education, he became aware of issues attending relations between church and state. Church affairs came under the administrative oversight of the Ministry of the Interior.

Considering the questions discussed in the constitutional process, Vilmar observed in a letter to his brother on February 27, 1831: "The improvement [of the church] has to come from within, and it is the decline of the church, if it absorbed into the state, without resting on the secure basis of independent faith."²⁵⁷

Following his 1830 address on the Augsburg Confession with its stress on the prominence of the church as a focus of the faithful, his theology of the church developed in the wake of the many influences in this pressing interest. The implications of this confessional norm become evident in his personal communications. In the same letter to his brother, Wilhelm, February 27, 1831, he wrote, "it becomes even clearer to me that we have to come forward right now in behalf

²⁵⁷ Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 174–5. "Das Besserung muss von innen heraus kommen, und es ist der Untergang der Kriche, wenn sie in den Staat hineingeschoben wird, ohne auf dem festen Grunde selbständigen

of the church.”²⁵⁸ In the context of his political responsibilities in the Landtag, active on various committees dealing with church-related issues, and in light of the struggle of Lutherans under the Prussian Union, Vilmar asserted, “the one single theme in which all variations come together is that any improvements must come from within the church. It is the downfall of the church if it is placed within the state without equal attention to the church’s own independent resources of faith.”²⁵⁹

Vilmar’s critique placed him within the political sphere of reaction and conservatism in response to contemporary calls for reform. Whatever truth lies in these assessments, we observe an early rejection of unionism and a conviction that not only was the strengthening of the church necessary for Christendom, but that it’s spiritual underpinnings were not to be found essentially in the state apparatus. Here we read of a true distinction between the two realms proposed by Luther, and though they complement one another in the world for justice and salvation, they cannot be confused in the tasks of reform or restoring spiritual health.

Vilmar attributed much of the confusion over legitimate authority in the church to the concept of the triple-ordered hierarchy (*ordo triplex hierarchicus*) as it developed in the early seventeenth century. Already he noted the theology of three orders, the ministry of the church (*ministerium ecclesiamsticum* CHECK SPELLING OF LAST WORD), the political magisterial (*magistratus politicus*), and the economic, including the family (*status or ordo oeconomicus*), emerged in the Lutheran Church as early as 1552 as an attempt to reinforce Christian morality. Vilmar noted that this concept left much confusion and resulted in an assertion of the political and economic orders against the ecclesial order.

Glaubens zu beruhen.”

²⁵⁸ Walter H. Conser, Jr., *Church and Confession: Conservative Theologians in Germany, England, and America, 1815-1866* (Mercersburg: Mercer University Press, 1984), 74

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74–5.

Consequently the three orders were ordered as a hierarchy (Gerhard) and the other two orders ruled asserted authority over the church. This well intentioned theology assumed that the worldly authority not only protected the Christian gospel, but subscribed to it. Vilmar noted wryly that this assurance was in some doubt among present day rulers. "Good intentioned but stupidly enough did the old dogmaticians presume that the political authority would always accept the right teaching of the gospel, while who should discern whether the right doctrine is still held by them—they do not want to talk about that."²⁶⁰

Vilmar attributed to this doctrine the confusion that led to the misunderstanding of the Augsburg Confession. Lutheran theologians did not realize that by embracing the *ordo triplex hierarchicus*, they could no longer expect pure doctrine to be taught in the church. The "deep night" in which the evangelical church stood was in jeopardy, and since 1645 when the doctrine of the Episcopacy of the Secular Rulers (*Episcopat der Landesherren*) was introduced by Carpzov, from J.H. Böhmer the establishment of the territorial churches (*Territorialkirchen*), and then with Pfaff the doctrine of the collegial system where the church is reduced to nothing more than a free society (*Gemeinschaft*). He noted that it was Grotius in 1617 who had proposed the recognition of the omnipotence of the state, and that this omnipotence should also embrace the church.²⁶¹

Extending into the nineteenth century, these teachings led to the absorption of the church into the state with the blessings of such theologians as Rothe and Bunsen. The opposing doctrine of the separation of the church from the state rests on the same principle, he maintained. For those who sought this separation wanted a state without religion and the abandonment of the task

²⁶⁰ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, 209–10. "Gutmütig aber albern genug setzen die alten Dogmatiker zwar voraus, es werde zumal der magistratus politicus allezeit die recht Lehre des Evangeliums haben, indes wer nun entschieden solle, ob die recte Lehre daselbst noch vorhanden sie—davon müssen sie nichts zu sagen."

²⁶¹ Ibid.

of the church. In the wake of the next revolution in 1848, he would advocate a formal break with the government. But for the moment he was content to seek reform in education, work for reform in the church to return it to confessional standards, and develop the theology that would emerge in the years before this upheaval.

1830s: Theological Development and Insights

Throughout this decade, Vilmar dedicated himself to his educational pursuits and government service. His writings on the church still lay in the future, but from some of the developments around him, we gather fragments of his thought. As the *Erweckungsbewegung* surfaced in Lower Hesse, controversy between more rationalist interests and Pietistic preaching, prompted comment between August and his brother, Wilhelm. August hoped for a renewal of the church from within but he lamented pietistic preaching where “‘Thou shalt not dance’ and ‘thou shalt not go to the theater’ proclaimed so it sounds like ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not kill.’”²⁶² To August, such arguments offered only a weak, narrow Christianity which should be suited for public action and pronouncement not simply a weak, private faith (*Privatskese*). Vilmar recognized that the Augsburg Confession established the legitimacy of the church in Lower Hesse and that an emerging church conflict would be between a church whose authority stood on the Augsburg Confession and a rationalist church. In a letter to Minister Hasenpflug, he wrote on February 26, 1835:

The world spins false stories; it would have happened because of (the no longer modern) doctrine. In these lies lie unfortunately a horrible truth. The majority will in fact no longer recognize the old symbolic [i.e. confessional] doctrine, and if our religious authorities no longer are able or want to defend this [doctrine], so then the split in the church is certain. We approach on this path of a legitimate, symbolical evangelical church or a revolutionary-rationalistic church, from this last probably will

²⁶² A.F.C. Vilmar, letter to Wilhelm Vilmar, December 18, 1834, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 375.

have the majority of members on their side. The Lord hinder by his hand this sinful wrong from our land!²⁶³

The public debate occasioned by the appearance of David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus (Das Leben Jesu)* in 1835, brought into sharp focus both the need for sound presuppositions to oppose such contrary teaching. Vilmar complained to his brother, Wilhelm, about the weak opinions expressed by both opponents and defenders of Strauss' Hegelian assessment of the New Testament.

The anti-Strauss writings . . . are almost throughout weak, and it disgusts me, only to read one of these things. Often it is only theory against theory; as little is offered for as against. Where the terrified heart is missing, there has to be finally Straussism, Reimarianism, Lessingism, and whatever has not yet emerged, if they be written or not yet written, and so long as I cannot terrify a heart—and that I cannot do so long as I do not have a terrified soul, I cannot show him that he is in the wrong.²⁶⁴

Here we see an early expression of Vilmar's distaste for a purely "objective" theology that excludes faith in those advocating various systems. As we have read in his writing on education and schools, he hopes to impart faith to his students. He expects the same from those who would seek to instruct others in the faith. Here is an early example of his contempt for a theology of rhetoric" as he would term it. He points toward not only an objective truth but one apprehended by those who claim to understand it and instruct others.

²⁶³ A.F.C. Vilmar, letter to Ernst Hasenplug, February 26, 1835, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 378. "Die Welt fabelt, es sei wegen der (nicht mehr zeitgemässen) Lehre geschehen, In dieser Lüge liegt leider eine schreckliche Wahrheit. Der Haufe will in der Tat die alte symbolische Lehre nicht mehr anerkennen, und wenn unser geistlichen Behörden diese nicht mehr schützen können oder wollen, so ist die Spaltung in der Kirche unausbleiblich. Wir gehen auf disem Wege einer rechtlichen, symbolisch-evangelischen und eine revolutionären rationalistisch-evangelischen Kirche entgegen, von denen letzte voraussichtlich die Glieder auf ihrer Seit haben wird. Der Herr wird diesen Sündenschaden in unserem Lande durch Ihre Hand verhindern!"

²⁶⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, letter to Wilhelm Vilmar, February 1835, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 383. "Die Anti-Straussia sind fast durchaus schwach, und es ekelt mich, nur eins dieser Dinge zu lessen; oft ist's nur Theorie; wie Wenige haben dagegen zu zeugen vermocht. Wo es an den erschrockenen Herzen fehlt, müssen ja am Ende konsequent Straussiaden, Reimariaden, Lessingiaden und was nicht noch sonst für iaden entstehen, gleichviel ob sie geschrieben oder nicht geschrieben werden, und so lange ich einem das Herz nicht erschrecken kann—and das kann ich nicht, wenn ich nicht selbst ein solches erschrockenes Gemüt habe, kann ich ihm auch nicht beweisen, dass er Unrecht hat."

The Lower Hessian Confessional Conflict

Henkel: Pamphlets and Synod

Further developments in the Hessian church mark his developing theology of the church. In 1839 it was proposed to the Interior Ministry by Professor Dr. Wilhelm Scheffer of Marburg in his capacity as Konsistorialrat (advisor) to the Marburg Kirchenrat (church advisory authority) changing the confessional subscription of evangelical pastors from subscribing to Holy Scripture and “according to the exposition of the Augsburg Confession” to “conscientious regard of the confessions of the evangelical church.” Ensuing debate came to be known as the Electoral Hessian Symbol Dispute (kurhessische Symbolstreit). Vilmar took an active part in the public debate which foreshadowed future religious controversy and marked Vilmar as a champion of confessional Lutheranism, a position he found essential to the identity and faithfulness of the evangelical church.

In response to the proposal, the advisor to the High Court of Appeals, Johann Wilhelm Bickell, one of Germany’s most distinguished authorities on church legal matters, issued an opinion that the Augsburg Confession—and the Invariata version—formed an essential part of the identity and confession of the evangelical church in Electoral Hesse. It was this tie that made the subscription to the Augsburg Confession essential to the pledge of the pastors’ subscription.

The storm that his opinion loosed went far beyond the simple question of the actual document a pastor had to sign in connection with his ordination, and brought together the parties who would support the confession and those who were violently opposed to any mandatory subscription to the old confessional documents. The issue was superficially one of state laws governing the establishment of the church; yet as would become clear, the issue was far more a matter of the nature and practice of the faith itself. One of the outspoken leaders of the anti-confessional party was a high court lawyer in Kassel, Henkel. He wrote two pamphlets attacking

those of the confessional party. The main points made there express the widespread convictions among the anti-Augustana subscription movement:

In his pamphlet, “Some Words Against the Enemies of Reason and Freedom of Belief” (Einige Worte wider die Feinde der Vernunft und der Glaubensfreiheit), Henkel maintained that human knowledge had progressed in the three hundred years since the Reformation and that this was true of religious knowledge as well. The Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith was “the favorite theme for a number of years among the upstart old-believing sects.”²⁶⁵

. . . for three hundred years human knowledge also in religious matters has progressed so that much of what the reformers thought to be true Christianity, today would be believed by no rational people. While these sects still believe such or under the pretext of believing, should close the mouths of our pastors, forbid the free understanding and confession of the gospel, should they be reduced to parroting the reformers. . . .²⁶⁶

After naming his opponents “false prophets,” he defines what a Protestant truly is, “A Protestant is one who protests against all irrationality and against all tyranny in matters of belief, who allow the gospel to be obstructed by neither the pope nor anyone else, even if it be Doctor Luther. . . .”²⁶⁷ Interestingly, Henkel not only notes a difference of opinion concerning the “understanding and confession of the gospel, but he further sees the actions of those who support Bickell’s assessment as making a manipulative play for power. He considers the confessional

²⁶⁵ Henkel, *Einige Worte wider die Feinde der Vernunft und der Glaubensfreiheit* (Kassel, 1839), quoted in Hopf, I, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 388. “. . . das Lieblingsthema der seit einer Reihe von Jahren unter uns aufgestandenen altgläubigen Sekte.”

²⁶⁶ Henkel, *Einige Worte*, 6, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 388. “. . . seit drei Jahrhunderten die menschliche Erkenntnis auch in religiösen Dingen fortschritte gemacht hat und dass eine Menge von dem, was die Reformatoren für wahres Christentum hielten, heutzutage von keinem vernünftigen Menschen mehr dafür gehalten wird, während jene Sekte solches noch glaubt oder zu glauben vorgibt, soll unsern Geistlichen der Mund gestopft, das freie Verständnis und Bekenntnis des Evangeliums verboten, sollen sie zu geistlosen Nachbetern der Reformatoren herabgewürdigt werden . . . ?”

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, “Ein Protestant ist, der gegen alle Unvernunft und gegen alle Tyrannei in Glaubenssachen protestiert, der sich das Evangelium weder durch den Papst noch durch sonst jemand, ware es auch der Doktor Luther, versperren lässt. . . .”

symbols as “these old laws, which Bickell has gathered out of the junk room of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. . . .” He continues,

If the Ministry wants to furnish these [Bickell’s] promptings a hearing, ‘the entire educated world would be in opposition, and the next result would be that the better part of the pastors of the preaching office would be driven away and only hypocrites who pretend crass faith and do not fear to burden themselves, or bigots who really believe it, would contrive to preserve what Almighty God wants.’”²⁶⁸

Henkel enlisted the assistance of Professor of Philology, Karl Theodor Bayerhoffer, in two Critical Elucidations of the Writings of Bickell written in 1839. Bayerhoffer presented an argument revealing the influence of Schleiermacher and his understanding of the church.

What then is the real Spirit, the real substance of the evangelical church according to its true reality? The evangelical church has historically struggled as a breakthrough of the Spirit of immanence through the external form and the blunt antithesis of spiritual authority of Catholicism. So the church is the free inwardness of the Spirit, who before the absolute glory of the God-Man and his spiritual depiction in the gospel has shattered the human bonds of men and has revealed the new birth of spirit from the Spirit.²⁶⁹

The second publication of Henkel, *The New and the Old Church or the Phoenix and the Ashes (Die neue und die alte Kirche oder der Phönix und die Asche)*, continued in the polemical vein of the earlier document but carried its arguments further. Raging against the theology of justification by grace through faith, Henkel asks, “How could there be a more difficult and more terrible faith, seizing with horror the most inner basis of human nature? Why do you indeed want everything from God, and attribute to him that by which he is further away than one end of the

²⁶⁸ Ibid., quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 389. “. . . jene alten Gesetze, welche Bickell aus der Rumpolekammer des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts zusammengelesen habe . . . ;” “Wenn das Ministerium jenen (Bickells) Einflüsterungen Gehör geben wollte, so ‘würde es sich mit der ganzen gebildeten Welt in Opposition setzen, und die nächste Folge würde sein, dass gerade der bessere Teil der Gesittlichen vom Predigtamt ver scheucht werden und nur Heuchler, welche den krassen Glauben vorzugeben und zu beschwören sich nicht scheuten, oder Finsterlinge, die ihn wirklich hätten, dazu gelangen würden, was der allmächtige Gott verhüten wolle.”

²⁶⁹ Karl Theodor Bayerhoff, *Critical Elucidations of the Writings of Bickell (the first)* (Kassel, 1839), 12, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, I, 390. “Was ist denn nun eigentlich der Geist, die Substanz der evangelische Kirche nach ihrer wahrhaften Wirklichkeit? Die evangelische Kirche hat sich historisch als ein Durchbrechen des Geistes of Immanenz durch die äusserliche Gestalt und die schroffen Gegensätze und geistlose Autorität des Katholizismus herausgerungen. So ist die Kirche der freien Innerlichkeit des Geistes, die vor der absoluten Herrlichkeit des Gottmenschen und seiner gesitigen Darstellung im Evangelium die menschlichen Fesseln zerbrochen und die freie

world from another?"²⁷⁰ Having appealed to human nature in general, he then relies on what he deems to be a majority opinion:

Well now, you and we want to be pure, so emigrate or build yourselves a small chapel for yourselves, and there serve God according to your own dark wisdom, because our churches are much too large and bright for you. So we both will be pure, you from us and we from you. . . . Truly, I say to you, the new protestant church after the rebirth of the Spirit is shining as the Phoenix rising from the ashes; but your church will be like a little derelict house.²⁷¹

On August 3, 1839, Henkel called, by a notice posted in all the inns of Kassel, an informal "synod" of his supporters to meet; "All friends of reason and the freedom of faith" were invited. A petition, "A Petition to His Majesty the Elector and Regent From the Convocation of A Synod for the formal Removal of These Old Church Laws" (i.e. the confessional writings) wherein it is recommended to seek to hinder the darkness was formulated and signed by 350 of the 500 people attending and addressed to the authorities. It called for "without compromising the oath of allegiance" to gather a synod to where all clergy would affirm their understanding of the Bible as the source of faith and that minimal requirements be imposed on clergy and that congregations approve pastors for installation after they have heard him preach and were pleased with him, the congregations declare articles of doctrine they want neither preached nor instructed to children on pain of the pastor being removed, and that parents be free to have their children instructed in faith by clergy of their choice.²⁷²

Wiedergeburt des Geistes aus dem Geiste offenbart hat."

²⁷⁰ Henkel, *Die neue und die alte Kirche oder der Phönix und die Asche*, 12 (Kassel, 1839), 12, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, 391. "Was mag es schwereres und unerträglicheres geben als ein so unnatürlicher, fürchtlicher Glaube, vor dem sich die Menschennatur in ihrem innersten Grunde entsetzt? Warum machet ihr doch alle aus Gott, und was dichtet ihr ihm alle an, wovon er entfernter ist, als das eine Ende der Welt vom andern?"

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20; quoted *Ibid.*, 391–2. "Wohl an, wir wollen uns und euch reinigen, wandert aus oder baut euch eine kleine Kapelle, und dienet darin Gott auf eure finstere Weise, denn unsere Kirchen sind doch viel zu gross und hell für euch. So werden wir beide rein, ihr von uns und wir von euch. . . . Wahrlich, ich sage euch, die neue protestantische Kirche nach der Wiedergeburt des Geistes wird glänzend wie der Phönix aus der Asche steigen, euer Kirchlein aber wird einem altverfallenen Häuslein gleichen!"

²⁷² Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 392–3.

In Defense of the Augustana

Vilmar responded to such overtures with a pamphlet of August 28. In this exchange are found the foreshadowing of the strife to come in the next decade, both during, and in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848. The polemical nature of those demanding significant change in the relationship and between church and state were largely the same. The answer of Vilmar was also polemical but relied on theological assessment and argument instead of rhetorical persuasion and sloganeering. The pamphlet, “The Relation Between the Evangelical Church in Electoral Hesse to Its Recent Opponents” (Das Verhältnis der evangelischen Kirche in Kurhessen zu ihren neuesten Gegnern), went to press on September 4 when Vilmar wrote to his brother-in-law concerning the public discussion on this issue, “If only the people would learn to grasp that it is not only a legal question, but first of all it is a question of faith.”²⁷³ This short observation expressed the theme of his pamphlet.

In its first section, “The Manifesto Against the Church” (die Erklärung gegen die Kirche), the author asserted that his opponents in the present debate sought to abolish the doctrine of justification by grace, the foundation and cornerstone of the evangelical church—along with other doctrines, e.g. the doctrine of original sin, the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, etc. He denied that this doctrine was justifiably the cause of an “irreparable schism in the church.” Rather the Lutheran confessions, especially the Augsburg Confession, were not to be considered changing church law in Electoral Hesse, but constituted the “basis, the statute of the evangelical church communion itself, by which it stands and falls.”²⁷⁴

One can abrogate in Hesse the presbyterial and oldest regulations, the reformation orders, the consistorial orders, or the so-called church orders too; these are church

²⁷³ Ibid., 393. “Wenn nur die Leute begreifen lernen, dass die Frage vor allen Dingen eine reine Rechtsfrage, erst hinterdrein eine Glaubensfrage ist!”

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 394. “. . . die Grundlage, das Statut der evangelischen Kirchengemeinschaft selbst, mit dem diese steht und fällt.”

laws, to further the establishment, to be sure, of the already existing church which in any case to some extent can become obsolete, not the foundation of the church. I may not lay a finger on the Augsburg Confession without on my part to destroy itself the communion of the evangelical church.²⁷⁵

In the second part, Vilmar asserted that the evangelical church had no basis in law apart from the Augsburg Confession. In attacking this confession, he noted that in contrast to all the struggles experienced by the church, the issue now was revelation itself: “[This is] the distinguishing difference of the conflict from that conducted or a hundred years in the church. Now it is about the basis of the entire Christian church; it is about the pillars of Christian church; it is about the pillars of revelation itself that shake from human rage.”²⁷⁶

The pamphlet pointed out that the proposed synod and its outcome were unattainable anyway because the constitution of June 5, 1831 that a synod would only be recognized from congregations whose confessional subscription stood on the Augsburg Confession, and a synod made up of people who had already rejected this confession was therefore illegitimate. However Vilmar was unwilling to confine the issue to a simple legal position. He observed that he would not willingly suppress the opponents with the power of the state.

We will not bear . . . profound guilt for the falling away of our brothers through our earlier ill-temper, through our lack of true conviction and Christian experience, through our often neglected, often half-hearted witness of evangelical truth, through our petty knowledge, finally from the status and privilege of the evangelical church—and finally we will . . . not once within our hearts sit in judgment over those who have gone their way, but to leave the judgment to him who judges the thoughts and motives of men, who also will judge us after the resurrection on the last day. As for us, we want in the first place to sit in judgment of ourselves only so that we are will

²⁷⁵ Ibid., “Man kann die Presbyterial- und Altestenordnung, die Reformationordnung, die Konsistorialordnung oder auch die sogen. Kirchenordnung in Hessen abrogieren; dies sind Kirchengesetze, bestimmt zu weiterer Einrichtung der bereits bestehenden Kirche, Kirchengesetze, welche allerdings teilweise veralten können, nicht Grundlagen der Kirche. An die Augsburgischer Konfession darf ich auch nicht einen Finger legen, ohne zu meinem Teil die Gemeinschaft der evangelischen Kirche selbst zu zerstören. . . .”

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 395. “. . . die Grundverschiedenheit des Kampfes, welcher seit hundert Jahren in der Kirche geführt wird, von allen früheren Kämpfen; es sind jetzt die Grundlagen der gesamten christlichen Kirche, es sind die Säulen des Christentums, es sind die Säulen der Offenbarung selbst, an denen der menschlichen Titanenfrevell rüttlet.”

not be judged, and through this give our opponents witness that the beginning of the gospel is, ‘Repent.’²⁷⁷

Prophetic Insight

Vilmar even at this early date saw far-reaching consequences which Wilhelm Hopf described as “prophetic” in this dispute. Beyond the question being simply a legal issue, beyond the question of simply who was right or wrong in their theology, the question had far-reaching consequences. Vilmar observed that only through a true self-knowledge, and repentance and confession, might a genuine peace be found. The alternate course of feeble weakness and dim thoughtlessness could easily result in the substitution of lies and deceptions for words such as justification, original sin, Trinity, etc. and entirely new concepts of half belief and unbelief replace them.

Too late we will in such a case recognize that we did not see the time of witness and affliction, and without a doubt we will deservedly carry fetters to our end, these unbearable chains, which bind us together with rotting corpses, but we will also have laid them on our children and grandchildren, which they will have to drag for centuries through the inextinguishable mockery of their throng.²⁷⁸

The Approaching Storm

As revolution approached Europe in the next decade, one is amazed at the foresight of this theologian who was also an insightful social critic. Like a prophet who sees the distant future as

²⁷⁷ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Das Verhältnis der evangelischen Kirche in Kurhessen zu ihren neuesten Gegnern* (Marburg: Elwert, 1839), 265–6, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, 395–6. “Wir werden nicht . . . durch unsere frühere Lauheit, durch unsern Mangel an Überzeugungstreue und christlicher Erfahrung, durch unser oft versäumte, oft halb abgelegtes Zeugnis der evangelischen Wahrheit, durch unsere geringe Kenntnis endlich von dem Stande und Recht der evangelischen Kirche sehr viel Schuld an dem Abfalle unserer Brüder tragen—wir werden endlich . . . auch nicht einmal im Innern unseres Herzens zu Gericht sitzen über die, die ihres Weges gegangen, sondern das Gericht Dem anheimstellen, der da richtet die Gedanken und Sinnen der Menschen, der auch uns richten wird nach der Auferstehung am jüngsten Tage. Über uns, über uns wollen wir zuerst, wollen wir allein zu Gericht sitzen, damit wir nicht mögen gerichtet werden, und dadurch unsern Gegnern Zeugnis davon geben, dass der Anfang des Evangeliums der ist: Tut Busse.”

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 28, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, I, 396. “Zu spät werden wir in solchem Falle erkennen, dass wir die Zeit des Zeugnisses und der Heimsuchung nicht erkannt haben und zwar für uns verdienterweise Fesseln tragen Leichnamen zusammen binden, aber auch unsern Kindern und Kindeskindern angelagt haben, die sie schleppen

mountains on the horizon but cannot distinguish the distance they actually lay apart, Vilmar draws Hopf's amazed observation of the future which became true: "To this prophetic view of a yet distant future was attached another future already drawn nearer in a revolution from below."²⁷⁹ As the Revolution of 1848 drew to its close, Vilmar would attribute this upheaval to unbelief and more specifically, to the loss of faith among the German people, that is a rejection of their character and identity as they moved toward a different and ominous future. Vilmar addressed those governing the nation:

Here they want, those who only up to now want to test the political sphere for certain air currents of their sensibilities, but against the ecclesial simoon [a hot, sand-laden wind from the Sahara] they are yet still little sensible, yet coming to the recognition, that these winds both from the same region, blow only in different layers of air, and that both can easily swell to a storm, to which comparable political steadfastness or ingenuity has yet to equal. Such signs show, what we have to expect in our future; it shows us that while the challengers in the legal sphere can achieve nothing, sooner or later, will have to rely in a tumultuous assault in use of force.²⁸⁰

One result of Vilmar's religious defense of the received faith was the hostility it provoked from the petitioners. The ruling prince and his regent, as well as the Minister of the Interior, Hanstein, revealed an indifference to the issues that reflected the opinion of much of the public who failed to be as excited as these public opponents. In resolving future strife, the actions of the government would permanently change Vilmar's relationship to this ruler and his professional future. In future revolutionary strife, Vilmar's ardent defense of the evangelical faith would earn him not only reproach but physical assault as well.

müssen Jahrhunderte hindurch zum unauslöschlichen Hohngelächter ihrer Dränger."

²⁷⁹ Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 396. "Diesem prophetischen Blick in eine damals noch ferne schliesst sich ein anderer in die bereits näher gerückte Zukunft einer neuen Revolution von unten an."

²⁸⁰ Vilmar, *Verhältnis der evangelischen Kirche*, 30, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 397. "Hier mögen die, welche bisher nur auf dem politischen Gebeite für gewisse Luftzüge ihre Empfindlichkeit erprobt, aber gegen den kirchlichen Samum noch wenig sensible gewesen sind, zu der Erkenntnis gelangen, dass diese Winde beide aus einer Gegend, nur in verschiedenen Luftschichten wehen, und dass beide zusammen leicht zum Sturme anschwellen können, dem keine noch so grosse politische Standhaftigkeit oder Kunst gewachsen ist. Solche Zeichen beweisen, was wir in der Zukunft zu erwarten haben; sie beweisen, dass wir, während die Gegner im Rechtskreise nichts ausrichten können, früher oder später auch auf ein tumultuarisches Anstürmen, auf Gewaltshandlungen müssen

The crisis passed with the government rejecting any synod or change in the present law. Their position was helped as the arrest of a radical activist, Sylvester Jordan, around this time, an event that put liberal parties at a temporary disadvantage in the public eye. The government's rejection of a general synod or any change to the existing laws on which the church organization was based, was purely from an assessment that did not affirm the evangelical faith confessed in the Augsburg Confession, but simply stated that a legal assessment showed no changes were necessary. The indifference of the government to the church question, and ignoring the question of the church, resulted in what proved to be a temporary check to forces that would become increasingly restless in the next decade.²⁸¹

This struggle marked the beginning of the polarization of church parties in Lower Hesse, a division that would last into the next decade and beyond. The opponents were identified with the "Lichtfreunde," who not only questioned the confessional subscription of the church, but also the legitimacy of the state. The Restoration (Restauration) party of Vilmar favored the restored state system following the Napoleonic Wars and the monarchy. The Lichtfreunde would remain in opposition to both the state and the evangelical church until the Revolution of 1848 where demands for liberalization would be temporarily successful.²⁸²

It would be a mistake to identify the confessing Lutherans like Vilmar as a strictly political party. Their victory was not decisive as the government made no statements to support the confession of the established evangelical church. Events would prove that these confessing Christians would not hesitate to separate themselves from the government if necessary to retain confessional purity in their congregations.

gefasst sein."

²⁸¹ Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 1, 397–9.

²⁸² Renate Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer: Von der fürstentreuen kirchlichen Restaurationspartei zur hessischen Renitenz, Quellen und Forschungen zur hessischen Geschichte* 59 (Darmstadt and Marburg: Selbstverlag der

Vilmar and other Lutherans were disappointed that the government spoke with a political voice only and not one affirming the faith legally established since the Reformation. Such a public confession could hardly be expected from a government whose officials were not only indifferent to the issue but whose personal beliefs and practices revealed a sympathy more in line with the petitioners than those embracing the “old religion.” This refusing to address the issue as a religious one, and replying only as if it were a legal matter, would change the relations between church and state in the next decade when the Revolution of 1848 broke onto the scene.²⁸³ As Renate Sälter notes, this struggle marked the polarization of the differing church parties who would emerge again and more stridently during the Revolution of the next decade.²⁸⁴

Political Upheaval and the Church

The Revolution of 1848

The 1840s saw Vilmar pursuing his interest in German literature, resulting in his *Literaturegeschichte* of 1844. Along with others he sought to reinforce the political and religious positions of conservatives in Lower Hesse by taking steps to publish a periodical attacking both the religious and political tendencies from below in popular revolution as well as abusive exercise of power by state bureaucracies and police power.²⁸⁵ Neither of two undertakings came to fruition before the revolution, but they foreshadowed the publication by Vilmar of *der hessische Volksfreund* intended to oppose revolutionary principles in both Hesse and to a wider audience as well. This effort involved both a defense of the church and monarchy.²⁸⁶

Hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der Historischen Kommission für Hessen, 1985), 73–4.

²⁸³ Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, I, 397–9.

²⁸⁴ Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 73–5.

²⁸⁵ Hopf, vol. 1, 418.

²⁸⁶ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Culturegeschichte Deutschlands: Zerstreute Blätter*, I (Frankfurt a/M.: Verlag von Heyder & Zimmer, 1858), iii–iv. This work published in 1858 consisted of collected essays from the periodical that Vilmar launched and edited from the beginning of the Revolution of 1848 until 1853. In the Introduction to the collected essays in *Culturegeschichte*, he identified its purpose as opposing the “spiritual basis of that revolution. . . .”

Shortly before the revolution, in 1847, he provided a preview of what he would develop further as Europe slid into conflict. His essay of that year, “Concerning the Future of the Church” (Von der Zukunft der Kirche) gave a preview of how far his thought had progressed on the eve of the conflict. Asserting that the church had entered a “new time of faith,” not “a time of new faith,” he described the present age of the church as one where the doctrine of the church would be “experienced” (erfahren) by the church so that it could become its own “possession” (Eigentum), and thereby the church could “witness” (zeugen) this reality.²⁸⁷

Additionally he connected the church and its doctrine to eschatology. Kliefoth had proposed the same connection in his scheme of doctrinal development, but Vilmar’s depiction differed from Kliefoth’s. The life and experience of the church disclosed and manifested in its doctrine, were part of the scheme of the seven seals portrayed in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 6. The first seal opened was the recognition of God of the Father in a struggle with the many gods of paganism, as well as the sects of Gnostics, had won it as a living and safe possession of the church. Thereby the Christian community was strengthened as the second and third seals were opened: the truth of the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Quickly after the opening of these seals came the doctrine of Jesus as both true God and true man. Then from the time of Augustine in the fifth century and extending to the sixteenth, Vilmar reckoned the opening of the next seal coincided with the doctrine of justification in the church of the Reformation, as the church slowly came to an awareness of the mystery of confession, repentance, and grace. Presently, he asserted, the beginning of a new period identified with the sixth seal opening: the age of the church. What the church had recognized and confessed in the Reformation concerning

²⁸⁷ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Von der Zukunft der Kirche,” *Schulreden über Fragen der Zeit*, 3d ed. (Gütersloh: Druck and Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1886), 215, 218.

the church was still incomplete.²⁸⁸ This schematic assessment of the church history would remain in his theology and appear in various writings, e.g. his *Dogmatik*.²⁸⁹

Vilmar then advocated three steps the church should follow in the present age. First, it should reject all rationalism and systematic theology based on a false use of science or philosophy, and abstract theory in exchange for the real Christ and his genuine redemption. The two were opposed to one another. Second, he urged the church to hold fast to the old symbols as a witness to the truth. Vilmar considered the church's confessions the "pound" given it by the Lord (Matt. 25: 14ff.). Finally, perhaps anticipating the triumph of political forces opposed to the church, he condemned any rule of the church by secular power or authority, a move that would make the church prey to the anti-Christ. Rather the church must learn to exercise ecclesiastical organization, government, and discipline.²⁹⁰

Notably, Vilmar cites Ephesians at length to support his presentation; hence, there are references to Eph. 5: 26-27; 4: 13; 4: 14-15; 4: 11. According to Ulrich Asendorf, this feature of Vilmar remained consistent in his theology of the church. In his theology of the church he notes that it depends more on the Epistle to the Ephesians than, say, the Epistles to the Corinthians. Paul's letter to the Ephesian church depicts Christ as the head of the body in opposition vis a vis the body. Emphasis in Ephesians remains on the giving of gifts by Christ to his church. Receiving these gifts enables the church to rise to the stature of Christ. By contrast, the Corinthian epistles emphasize the church as the body of Christ. The polemical nature in public discourse of the day can be seen here, as well as the developing thought of Vilmar as he found expression in public debate where the stakes for church and state were very high, blood was to be

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 217–18.

²⁸⁹ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 1, 72-90.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

shed, and the very structure of Western, Christian civilization was in doubt.²⁹¹ The developing political situation would not allow the polemical nature to diminish and would expose Vilmar's view of the church and its ministry to charges of being inexact and unsystematic. Yet Vilmar proceeded from his presuppositions with a detailed outline to follow, if indeed one were to follow at all. From his theological writings we gather what was important and needed to be emphasized at the time. Vilmar's printed works always seemed to bear the mark of occasional writings.

The Revolution spread from a movement for reform in France, thus in many German eyes, following a familiar pattern from 1789 and 1830. The German chapter of this movement was preceded by an agrarian and economic crisis in 1846, rousing local parliaments to demand that rulers convene a national parliament to write a national constitution. Workers and students took to the streets demanding political reforms. By March 1848, with growing uprisings across Europe, these forces drove rulers from their capitals while the Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, was placed under house arrest and later compelled to hold elections for a new national government.

National Assembly in Frankfurt

On May 18, a national assembly met in Frankfurt. Among their goals was the largest possible German confederation. Austria, however, refused to give up its non-German lands as a condition to this union. In March 1849, the assembly voted for Prussian Hohenzollern leadership. But the major European powers remained silent in recognizing this move, and they were joined by the major German powers such as Hannover, Prussia, and Bavaria who would not recognize the assembly's new imperial constitution over their own.

²⁹¹ Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Europäische Krise und das Amt der Kirche: Voraussetzungen der Theologie von A.F.C. Vilmar, in Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums*, vol. XVIII, ed. Max Keller-Hüschemenger, Wilhelm Mauer, Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, Ernst Somerlath, and Walter Zimmerman (Berlin und Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlaghaus, 1967), 143.

Notable in their efforts was the adoption of the Basic Rights legislation that in line with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment segregated church law from civil law. There had been precedents in the German lands for this initiative since the Reformation, but the Germans of the Reformation never envisioned an entirely secularized state. Rather than rivals, earlier rulers and clergy saw themselves as exercising authority from the same divine source. The church would in effect become a department of the state. According to Stephen Ozment, 1848 ran counter to mainstream German history where Germans had preferred a dualistic, “distinct, but linked and cooperative civic and religious spheres.”²⁹²

The Lichtfreunde, among those who had opposed Bickell and Vilmar in the Symbolstreit of 1839, opposed the church and confessional loyalty, not simply as a means to attack the state, but considered the basis of confessional subscription to be illegitimate, just as the basis of the state was illegitimate, that is, neither rested on the authority of those in the church and the state.²⁹³

The refusal of the Prussian King to accept a crown from the Frankfurt Parliament unhinged its efforts, and the assembly disintegrated. Ozment notes out that sympathetic historians have blamed the forces of conservatism for the failure of the Frankfurt experiment. Yet this assessment ignores the actual fright that the liberals in the assembly caused the middle class and the vulnerable working class beneath them. The account of the Revolution of 1848 in Germany was a story of social and political reconstruction as well as repression by both kings and revolutionaries. Rulers had been put to flight and arrested; parliaments and constitutions were arbitrarily overturned. If monarchs and conservatives were more powerful following this revolutionary movement,

The German middle class had become even more so, henceforth the solid center of a society seeking increased opportunity and security. Many German lands still had

²⁹² Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress*, 174–5.

²⁹³ Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 73.

constitutions under which rulers and parliaments shared a common power of governance. . . .

That the Frankfurt assembly did not get its way calmed as many fears as it raised. Most Germans were relieved to know that their country had not jumped onto high-speed tracks of a highly experimental sociopolitical and economic future. . . .

The Revolution of 1848-1849 faltered for the same reason as many an earlier German reform or revolt—because contemporaries believed it had not gotten the proportions of authority and freedom, security and equality, right.²⁹⁴

Vilmar's outspoken opposition against the revolutionaries and the beliefs he saw them promoting, unbelief and the destruction of society and the broader culture, earned him attacks on his house and caused him to arm himself when he ventured out. He remained popular with his students, however, who saved his house from mob violence on one occasion and continued to support him thereafter. His *Volksfreund* also provoked attacks by many of the learned in university and elsewhere.

The Aftermath in Lower Hesse

If the political solutions proposed by the liberals of Frankfurt were unacceptable to many, the religious innovations were equally unsuitable to many including Vilmar and like-minded Lutherans in Lower Hesse. The Revolution and its aftermath were to manifest themselves in two significant ways in Vilmar's career. The first of these was the Jesberg Conference where Vilmar provided the spiritual leadership to no longer recognize the episcopacy of the civil ruler in Lower Hesse. The resulting founding of a free church signaled a break with the relationship between church and state that had existed since the Reformation. This change in polity would not last long, and Vilmar would again find himself within the church structure administered by the state. However it prefigured the direction these Lutherans would take in 1866. The second effort, the aforementioned publication, *der hessische Volksfreund*, published by the Hessian Lutheran

provided a venue to elaborate on the positions concerning the state that he had developed since the Confessional Crisis of 1839. This publication addresses political and social issues rather than specifically church matters. Here Vilmar expounded his mature view of church, state, and society, and served as an organ for the conservative party in Lower Hesse. His career as an editor, writer, and publisher resumed in 1861 with the publication of the periodical, *Kirche und Welt oder die Aufgaben des geistlichen Amtes in unserer Zeit* (*Church and World or The Tasks of the Office of the Ministry in Our Time*). Both of these publications serve as a useful source in following chapters on the Ministry and Social Criticism.

Initial revolutionary successes resulted in the Elector's government to make concessions with freedom of religion and conscience for all. The nature of the connection between church and state remained undefined in this period. Yet in response to this "neutral" position of the state to religious confession, those who embraced the Lutheran confessions, who became known in some circles after their champion, the Vilmarianer, considered this accommodation to be something other than neutrality and assumed a position against the developing "Godless state."²⁹⁵ The proponents of Lutheranism and its legal position in the state, assembled first in Kassel in 1848, and met again in Jesberg in 1849. This latter conference became known for the declaration of a free church, assuming the role formerly held by the prince and the state. They acted in response to a synodical organization of the church under a new constitution. Vilmar in effect became the leader of this movement.

The meeting convened at Jesberg on February 15, 1849 with 87 clergy attending of whom 60 were serving a parish. An additional 50-60 laymen participated of whom 28 submitted their names for official recognition. After discussion, an overwhelming majority voted that the Elector

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 177-8.

²⁹⁵ Sälter, *Vilmarianer*, 75.

would no longer serve as the bishop of the church; the authority exercised by the Elector should be transferred to the Superintendent and Inspector of the diocese and who would exercise episcopal authority. In the absence of legitimate authority based on the confessions of the ruler, the clergy present denied that the ruler could then exercise legitimate control over the church.²⁹⁶

In the assessment of biographer, Walter Schwarz, Vilmar's move to make this separation resulted from the failure of the prince to understand that the gospel and government each had their realms of calling and authority, and considered "governmental servitude and political slavery as directly dangerous for the state and its government, destructive of the people, and deadly for the church itself."²⁹⁷ Vilmar believed in the God-given authority of both church and government and did not want the church ruled by those who were unbelievers, and in the case of the revolutionaries, had neither commission from God to govern or to run the church.²⁹⁸

The Jesberg initiative is further discussed in the chapters on the ministry and social criticism where Vilmar's presuppositions in these areas as well as concerns over the governing authority of the church found expression. Eventually the tide of liberalism attending the initial success of the Revolution receded in the wake of the failure of the Frankfurt assembly. The members who voted to establish a free church at Jesberg withdrew their request as proposals for further separating the government from confessional endorsement were withdrawn. The whole chapter reveals that if Vilmar was a conservative politically, his conservatism was not a conservatism in lockstep with the monarchy or repression of liberalism at any cost. Vilmar's Germany had never known a total separation from church and state and hesitated to see it

²⁹⁶ Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2, 70–73.

²⁹⁷ Walter Schwarz, *August Friedrich Christian Vilmar: Ein Leben für Volkstum, Schule und Kirche* (Berlin: Im Furche Verlag, 1938), 66–7. ". . . der Staatliche Knechtschaft der Kirche und politische Sklaverei der Kirche gerade für den Staat und die Staatspolitik als gefährlich, für das Volk zerstörisch, für die Kirche selbst tödlich ansah."

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67–9.

enacted in a context of revolution and rule by those who opposed the traditional confessions of the church. Vilmar opposed a conservative complacency that would accommodate reform so long as there was peace. He saw the possibilities for despotism from individuals in authority or alternatively from the masses of people. Consequently his view he considered not so much political as ethical.²⁹⁹

As revolutionary fervor receded under pressure for stability in society, and conservative governments no longer found themselves in a position to be dictated to by rebels, Vilmar and his party moved away from the demands of Jesberg. He was given the position of Inspector to the diocesan Superintendent, who served under the Interior Ministry. At this time the minister appointed was the conservative, Hasenpflug. Vilmar's duties entailed supervision of the diocesan pastors. In this capacity he sought to strengthen his Dioceses of Kassel in a number of ways. His work was very satisfying to him and to his fellow clergy as well.

A Mature Ecclesiology Emerges

Service in the State Church

Vilmar was appointed in 1850 to the double position of Advisor (Derzernent) to the Minister as well as Deputy to the Superintendent the church diocese of Kassel. His responsibilities embraced thirteen regional parish organizations (Pfarreiklassen) and one hundred thirty-six pastors. In the course of his duties, he visited nearly all the parishes, examined forty-three pastoral candidates with the Consistory exam following university exams, installed forty-five pastors, and ordained twenty-five candidates. In this office, where he served much like a bishop, he did much to gain the confidence of his pastors, encouraged the recovery of a vibrant parish life following the Revolution with attention to confirmation instruction for example.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

When his superior, Superintendent Ernst, died in April 1854, the popularity was demonstrated by the pastors of his diocese; they elected him to be the new Superintendent by a vote of one hundred ten out of one hundred twenty-four votes cast. Naturally, the Elector had reservations about elevating someone to such an office who had voiced such public criticism only a short while before at Jesberg.

Consequently, he consulted other theologians to determine Vilmar's suitability for the position. Two opinions were solicited and submitted, that of Heinrich Heppe, Professor of Theology at Marburg, and Ludwig Richter of Berlin. Heppe, in representing the majority the theological faculty, had written extensively and had led the party in Hesse to oppose recognition of the Lutheran Confessions as authoritative for the Electorate. He favored a historical interpretation that recognized Lower Hesse as traditionally Reformed, and favored a Protestant church in the region that would accurately be named "German-Reformed" since "the Confession of the Electoral Hessian Church" only "could be grasped as the inner development of German Protestantism."³⁰⁰

Asserting in a Hegelian fashion that the present condition of the church reflected legitimate historical development, Heppe maintained that to assert that Lutheranism was rightfully the confession of the land was an historical artifice, and that duly, the Reformed confessions were the true church confessions of the Electoral church. He questioned the insistence of Vilmar that the Lutheran Confessions were the historical, legitimate, and true confessions of the land. Even more he questioned what he termed the "Catholicizing tendencies" of Vilmar and the "hierarchical efforts" of the Superintendent Elect.

³⁰⁰ Heinrich Heppe, "Einige Worte zur Beurtheilung der von dem Herrn Pfarrer Ruckert zu Kassel veröffentlichten Schrift: 'Beiträge zur Geschichte der am 20. Oktober 1852 zu Ziegenhain gehaltenen Diöcesansynode'" (Darmstadt, 1856), 18, quoted in Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 131-2. "... Bekenntnis der kurhessischen Kirche' nur 'aus der inner Entwicklung des deutschen Protestantismus zu begreifen sei."

Doctor Vilmar has not simply in his *Volksfreund* but officially proclaimed the doctrine of the pastoral ministry as the spiritual office of hierarchical priesthood, confirmation as a sacrament, and absolution as an act of judgment and even a sacrament. And Lutheranism only favors these because these offer of course various points of support for his hierarchical [tendencies]. These would be sought in vain in Reformed confessions. Thus Doctor Vilmar rightfully sees himself the true mortal enemy of Reformed confessions.³⁰¹

Richter agreed with the arguments of Heppe which were included in the written opinion of the Marburg faculty. His criticism is further reserved for the next chapter when his position of the office of the ministry is discussed.

The Elector accepted the criticism of Vilmar as sufficient to reject his election. To placate the conservative church party, he appointed the Inspector to the position of Professor of Theology on the Marburg faculty. Vilmar was greatly disappointed. The election by the pastors was the right governing of the church as he understood it; he expressed disappointment that the pastors did not protest the Elector's decision.

The Theologian of Fact

The first work he published after his appointment as professor was the book for which he likely may be most famous. This programmatic work published in 1856, *The Theology of Fact versus the Theology of Rhetoric: Confession and Defense (Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr)* to reply to the critics who had managed to prevent his election as Superintendent, and to present the theological basis of his position. This small work proved quite popular as it went into three editions in its first year.³⁰²

³⁰¹ Heppe, *Sendschreiben*, 119, in Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 154–5. “Herr Dr. Vilmar hat nicht blos in seinem *Volksfreund*, sondern auch amtlich die Lehren vom geistlichen Amte, von der Confirmation und von der Absolution in einer Weise verkündigt, dass das geistliche Amt zum hierarchischen Priesterthum, die Confirmation zum Sakrament und die Absolution zur richterlichen Handlung und ebenfalls zum Sakrament wird. Und das Luthertum wird von demselben nur darum bevorzugt, weil dasselbe allerdings für seinen Hierarchismus allerlei Anknüpfungspunkte bietet, welche derselbe in dem streng evangelischen Protestantismus des reformirten Bekenntnisses vergebens suchen würde. Mit richtigem Blicke nimmt daher Herr Dr. Vilmar in dem reformirten Bekenntniß den Todfeind seines Hierarchismus wahr.”

³⁰² A.F.C. Vilmar, *Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr*

Hermann Sasse assessed the book in a forward penned for a reissue in 1938 when the German church faced new challenges from a hostile regime.

This message of August Vilmar was never clearer, [more] concise, and more powerfully gathered than in the first writing which he as [a] Marburger professor wrote and which in 1856 appeared from Elwert in Marburg, *The Theology of Fact versus the Theology of Rhetoric*. . . . The critical theological reader may find it not only an important document of theological history of the preceding century, but also as a strong witness of the faith of the fathers. . . . Finally Vilmar's work may warn us all as a voice of the confessing, struggling Lutheran church of the past, that it remains to us the preservation of this church and its confessions, not because we are confessional particularists, but because we know what Gospel is and what we confess, if we with the our fathers and with the church of all time with heart and mouth say: *Credo unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*.³⁰³

Here the new Marburg professor brought together many themes that had appeared in earlier writings, and presented a summary or epitome of what would appear in more detail in his posthumously published lectures from his students' notes, the *Dogmatik*. In this work Vilmar begins his discussion of the church as if the church were in doubt. He proceeds in a rhetorical progression, outlining his argument:

The church is a matter of great debate and goes to the very center of the church itself and does not consist of merely peripheral items of doctrine, and remains opposed to those whose concepts of church were achieved "scientifically," contrasting with those who knew with certainty their salvation.

Salvation can only be delivered by Christ.

(Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), v-vii.

³⁰³ Hermann Sasse, "Einführung," *A.F.C. Vilmar, Die Theologie der Tatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr*, in *Stimmen der Väter*, 2d vol., (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1938), 7-8. "Diese seine Botschaft hat August Vilmar nirgends klarer, knapper und kraftvoller zusammengefasst als in der ersten Schrift, die er als Marburger Professor schrieb und die 1856 bei Elwert in Marburg erschien: *Die Theologie der Tatsache wider die Theologie der Rhetorik*. . . . Möge sie aufmerksame Leser finden, die sie studieren nicht nur als ein wichtiges Dokument der Theologiegeschichte des vorigen Jahrhunderts, sondern zugleich als ein Zeugnis des starken Glaubens der Väter. . . . Möge Vilmars Schrift schliesslich als eine Stimme aus der bekennnistreuen kämpfenden Lutherischen Kirche der Vergangenheit uns alle mahnen, das Unsere zu tun zur Erhaltung dieser Kirche und ihres Bekenntnisses, nicht weil wir konfessionelle Partikularisten sind, sondern weil wir wissen, was Evangelium ist und was wir bekennen, wenn wir mit unseren Vätern und mit der Kirche aller Zeiten mit Herz und

Likewise certainty of salvation can also only be transmitted by Christ.

Such certainty experienced by Christians posits a community.

Such community remains in itself a subjective phenomenon.

Therefore the salvation and its certainty possessed by the community rests in the institution of the church, where the objective reality of salvation and its life precedes the congregation

The discussion within the church concerning the doctrine of the church begins necessarily with the objective means of grace. These he describes as pure doctrine (reine Lehre) and sacrament.

If these two are the means God uses to deliver salvation, then a third means of grace embraces them both: the church whose task includes the preservation of the means of grace. The church is thereby a third means of grace to preserve pure doctrine and the right administration of the sacraments. This recognition of the church as an institution also recognizes that the preservation of the means of grace is here completely assured (“ . . . durch welche jene Erhaltung in vollster Zuverlässigkeit gesichert wird.”)³⁰⁴

Refuting the assertions of many that the concept of an invisible church emerges from the Augsburg Confession itself, he asserts that no confession could possibly emerge from Christianity at large or from a single congregation unless the church were already in existence where such a confession were confessed. This reality he labels “a fact of church life.”

Indeed it was an unmistakable sign of the time that the church was now experiencing this fact and living this fact (erfahren und erleben) as it came to the attention and awareness of the church. In contrast he lists the scientific or systematic speculation of those who oppose “hierarchical” and “catholicizing” tendencies in the new understanding of the church. They show

Mund sprechen: Credo unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam.”

³⁰⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 49–50.

disdain for the pastoral office, dismissing the informed opinion of the clergy as not scientific. They address their objections and opinions to the very lowest level of the “mob” as they seek popular, revolutionary endorsement. They believe “Union” is the answer to the problem of church based upon what the Reformed and Lutheran churches have in common (Gemeinsame). Yet as Vilmar notes, where their commonality ends, that is precisely where discussion of the church question begins.³⁰⁵

Rejecting church union, he points out that the union of confessions results not in unity in any appreciable degree, but turns the churches into discussion or debating societies. Unions in various German states resulted in numerous small churches with a great deal of disagreement among themselves but with little confession. He identifies such initiatives as the Prussian Synod’s 1846 adoption of a common “General Confession” and a “General Ordination Rite” as in full agreement with such revolutionary groups as the German Catholics. He dismisses the popular religious writer, Bunsen,³⁰⁶ as a shallow rhetorician and one who embraces [Hegelian] dialectic instead of the life and history of the church.³⁰⁷

From such “empty letters, words, and phrases,” Vilmar contrasts the genuine, real life of the church found in its practices, liturgy, and confessions. Such real life he contrasts with the presence and bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the church and its members. This his opponents cannot tolerate, he maintained because it would lend the Christian faith known and practiced for

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 49–53.

³⁰⁶ Christian Carl Josias Bunsen (1791-1860); in 1855 he published a popular and influential series of letters, *The Signs of the Times (Die Zeichen der Zeit)*. He believed the true priesthood to be individual, spiritual, immediate, and universal. Communion among believers was initiated and achieved by common adoration of God. He thought it contrary to nature to have different confession of faith that distinguished different churches from one another. He supported popular election of synodical officers to govern churches. He emphasized that the religion of Christ is spirit and life, not formula and hierarchy. See F. Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 528–41.

³⁰⁷ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsache*, 53–6.

centuries, an authority that could not be challenged by dialectic development or by individual intuition.³⁰⁸

Later Developments in Ecclesiology

1866: A Revolution from Above

So the course of Vilmar's teaching of new pastors at the Marburg University would find its reach. The posthumous works published by his former students would not have the reach and influence that this short work would gain throughout the German-speaking world. The posthumous theological works to appear would appeal to a narrow and increasingly isolated group of pastors and congregations of the Lower Hessian free church identified with Vilmar's theology.

In 1866 conflict between the Prussians and Austro-Hungary, Lower Hesse sided with the Vienna in the hopes of curbing growing Prussian influence. After the Austrian disaster at the Battle of Königgratz, Vilmar's nation was absorbed by Prussia and its Union church was imposed on Lower Hesse. Finding this condition intolerable, the Renitenzkirche was formed and remained a bastion of the Theology of Fact long after Vilmar's death in 1868.

The Purpose of God's Word: The Church

Prolegomena

The strength of Vilmar's theology of the church as well as his hermeneutical insights are revealed in nuce by his theology of God's word. He reveals his peculiar hermeneutic in his Dogmatik. Unlike other theologians who might address the word of God as a topic in a

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 54–69.

systematic text as a topic unto itself, Vilmar remarkably includes it in his discussion of the church.³⁰⁹

Vilmar prepared his students for this organization in his “Introduction” where he presents his prolegomena. Addressing the perspicuity of Scripture, he distinguishes between an absolute and ordained perspicuity. The latter is the perspicuity that Lutherans speak of, he maintains, because it depends upon knowledge of language, association between words, applicability, etc. He asserts that the meaning and clarity of Scripture that lead to salvation is only accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Then he emphasizes that this comes only through proclamation. And as this suggests, the perspicuity of Scripture does not come without the office of the ministry.

We step entirely in another direction . . . in that of Christian doctrine and the pastoral office and maintain really the clarity of Holy Scriptures for this office, whereby then the clarity of Holy Scripture devolves on the individuals of the congregations. This the foremost dogmatician of the Lutheran Church maintained; among them he was certainly the chief authority of the group: Johann Gerhard, who very specifically taught that the exposition of Scripture belonged to the ministerium ecclesiam, wherein it is in complete agreement with the A.C. [Augsburg Confession]. . . .³¹⁰

This assertion takes the student into the experience and life of the church rather than relinquishing to each believer the challenge of finding a completely independent meaning in the Bible. Anticipating criticism if this assertion were misunderstood, he quickly denies that the

³⁰⁹ In contrast, for example see Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924) where the section, “The Holy Scriptures,” appears early in volume I, extending from pages 233–444. Appeal is there made to individual ability to read the Scriptures and gain meaning from them, e.g. in the English translation of this work in 1950, the reader learns that “It is clear for the unlearned,” (p. 320); “Even children can understand it. . . .” (p. 320). Individuals are called on to grasp the meaning of the Scriptures with no appeal to church teaching or the role of the pastor or theologian. This feature in itself is remarkable in a church body that emphasizes catachesis as essential of preparation for mature Christians. While the perspicuity of the Scriptures might include the referents of the text, such works as Pieper’s *Dogmatics* do not address the elements of discourse for example, See James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 85–104.

³¹⁰ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. I, 111–12. “Damit aber schreiten wir schon in ein ganz anderes Gebiet hinüber: in das des christlichen Lehr- und Hirtenamtes, und behaupten also eigentlich nur bei Deutlichkeit der heil. Schrift für dieses Amt, welchem dann die deutlich Machung für die Individuen der Gemeinden obliegt. Diess haben auch die vornehmsten Dogmatiker der lutherischen Kirche bestimmt anerkannt, unter Ihnen am bestimmtesten die oberste Auctorität unter Ihnen allen: Joh. Gerhard, welcher sehr ausdrücklich lehrt, dass die Auslegung der Schrift dem ministerium ecclesiasticum zustehe, worin er sich denn mit der A.C. in vollen Einklange befindet. . . .”

Bible is a document for clerical use only (“ein Preistercodex”). He observes that most of the New Testament was written for the congregations and not intended only for the clergy. Yet this fact does not eliminate the call of the pastoral office: “We only maintain the indispensable claim that the teaching office consider one unrelenting exposition of the entire Holy Scripture as the first responsibility of its calling, hereby binding himself to the entire experience of the church.”³¹¹

The Church: Institution of Grace

Consequently, in the *Dogmatik*, the Theologian of Reality recognizes the word of God as a means of grace, and as a means of grace can only be found in the church.

It is certainly erroneous to designate the word of God alongside the church as a means of grace, while the church is the institution of grace, in which and through which the means of grace, word and sacrament, manifest their activity; the church is the purpose for which word and sacrament operate. . . . The word works only from within and out of the church (outward for the calling of the pagans) and in the church for the calling, illumination, and the baptized. Outside of the church, the word of God is not present.³¹²

In this argument, Vilmar asserts why the church is necessary to salvation—only in the church are the means of grace to be found. Only in the church is the word proclaimed in the context of the doctrine developed cumulatively in the real life of the church. There is no room for individual interpretations that conflict with this life of the church. Also the doctrine cannot be changed at will by a prince or government for the sake of political expediency. Here, Vilmar illustrates the truth of the ancient slogan that no one who does not have the church as its mother can have God as their Father.

³¹¹ Ibid., 112. “Nur machen wir herbei die unerlassliche Forderung geltend, dass das Lehramt eine unablässige Auslegung der ganzen heil. Schritt zu den ersten Pflichten seines Berufs zähle, sich hierbei an die Erfahrungen seiner Kirche binde. . . .”

³¹² Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, 213. “Irrtümlich aber ist es, das Wort Gottes neben der Kirche als Gnadenmittel zu bezeichnen, indem die Kirche die Gnadenanstalt ist, in welcher und durch welche die Gnadenmittel, Wort und Sacrament, ihre Wirkungen äussern; die Kirche ist der Zweck, für welchen Wort und Sacrament operieren. . . . Das Wort wirkt aber nur aus der Kirche heraus (zur Berufung der Heiden nach Aussen) und in der Kirche zur Berufung,

In a direct slap at Hegel and his belief that history was God coming to “self-awareness” (“Selbstbewusstsein”), Vilmar denies any validity to this claim and asserts that the word makes Christ immediately present to the human heart and the Holy Spirit personally present to the realm of believers’ lives, i.e. the heart.³¹³

Further the word operates in every case not simply in written form but proclaimed; the promise of the gospel is found only in the preached word.

. . . and so we have to maintain, also that written word transmitted to us manifests its full impact, for the gathering and sanctifying of a church, only being proclaimed, spoken, exactly as it was written and transmitted to us, it should be spoken in order to overflow into the power of the Holy Spirit, and the reading of the word of God is only the preparation, in a manner of speaking, or the repetition of the spoken and heard word of God. Sharing the Bible without at the same time preaching the word through living speech—which in the church is to observe God’s arrangement—is therefore only a very inferior and not in itself a suitable practice, and what is more, a trust in the magical power of printed books, so to speak.³¹⁴

By contrast, Vilmar refuses to see the word and its work of salvation outside the church, but considers its treatment there resulting in the detriment of all. In *Theologie der Tatsachen*, he introduced a theme that he would use consistently to criticize modern theology. This criticism labeled modern theology as “science” (“Wissenschaft”). Comparing revelation as water collected in mountain streams and flowing in fountains and streams to give life to creatures below, he concludes:

And thereby there is nothing else remaining to do, nor anything necessary, than to grow and to enjoy these streams of divine life with our entire inner being, to measure its depths and breadth as far as our powers reach, and to watch over and protect

Erleuchtung, u. der Getauften. Ausserhalb der Kirche ist das Wort Gottes nicht vorhanden.”

³¹³ Ibid., 216.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 219–20. “. . . und so müssen wir behaupten, auch das uns geschrieben überlieferte Wort äussert seine volle Wirkung, zur Sammlung und Heiligung einer ecclesia, nur dadurch dass es, sei es auch eben nur so wie es geschrieben überliefert ist, wörtlich, verkündigt wird; es soll gesprochen werden, um in die Herzen Kraft des heiligen Gesites überzugehen, und das Lesen des Wortes Gottes ist nur gewissermassen die Vorbereitung oder die Repetition des gesprochenen und gehörten Wortes Gottes. Die Bibelausteilung ohne gleichzeitige Wortverkündigung durch die lebendige Rede ist deshalb nur ein sehr untergeordnetes und der in der Kirche zu beobachtenden Gottesordnung an sich nicht entsprechendes Verfahren, gewissermassen sogar ein Vertrauen auf magische Kraft des gedruckten Buches.”

ourselves and others, that we are not torn away from these living streams, the prerequisite of our being, and die of thirst on the dry banks.³¹⁵

Theology as an a Posteriori Task

In theology, “the part develops as a member of the whole” and not first “the part then the whole” much less that we can know the whole part by simply observing the parts. Yet the scientific pursuit of theology, devising comprehensive systems based upon a limited knowledge of theology. “This is much more the operation of science with which theology has nothing to do, and whose name is joined to it in unreal—for theology dangerous—certainly destructive sense.”³¹⁶ Who are those who employ this false use of words and concept (Worte und Begriff)? They are those who employ dialectic in explaining progress and development, and specifically he takes to task the radical Hegelians, Strauss and Feuerbach. The result is abstraction, speculation and uncertainty as theories change based on academic fashion. Hence Vilmar labels it as empty “rhetoric.”³¹⁷

‘In the hand of science’ rhetorical theology all too gladly discovers something new, gladly makes new discoveries, gains new ‘insights,’ or arriving at a comprehensive systematic [theology] on the least [pretext]. The appetite for this new discovery, the longing for discovery it is, from which the theology of rhetoric is constantly tormented, and from which it indeed cannot free itself.³¹⁸

In the realm of Biblical scholarship he is equally critical:

³¹⁵ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsache*, 11–12. “Uns ist dabei nichts Anderes zu thun übrig, auch nichts Anderes nützlich, als dieser Ströme des göttlichen Lebens mit unserm ganzen Dasein inne zu werden und dieselben zu geniessen, ihre Tiefe und Breite so weit unsere Kräfte reichen, zu ermessen, und uns an Andere zu hüten und dagegen zu schützen, dass wir nicht diesen Lebensströmen, den Bedingungen unseres Daseins, entrissen und dem Verschmachtungstode am durren Strande preis gegeben werden.”

³¹⁶ Ibid., 13. “Diess ist vielmehr die Operation der Wissenschaft, mit welcher die Theologie nichts zu thun hat, und deren Name ihr nur in sehr uneigentlichem, für Theologie gefährlichem, ja verderblichem Sinne beigelegt wird.”

³¹⁷ Ibid., 13–14.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 15. “An der Hand der Wissenschaft’ fände die rhetorische Theologie gar zu gern etwas Neues, machte gern neue Entdecken, gewänne ‘neue Einblicke,’ oder gelangte auf das Wenigste zu einer über schaulicheren Systematik. Der Kitzel dieses Neues-Findens, der Kitzel dieser Entdeckungen is es, von dem die Theologie der Rhetorik unaufhörlich geplagt wird, und den sie doch nicht befriedigen kann.”

The area of Biblical literature it picked out in order to make in the same way their ‘discoveries;’ it is sustained but by cleverness with words and artful grammar: by the distinction of Pauline and Petrine use of language, by the conflict of the Jehovahists against the Elohistes, by the shifting of the order of the Biblical books, of the eras, etc.: today Matthew was first, and the Gospel of the Hebrews, tomorrow Luke, on a third day a source gospel, and on a fourth day Mark; today Deuteronomy entirely first, tomorrow entirely last, today the Book of Judges first, tomorrow placed last, the Psalms stroll from David to the Maccabees, again back to David, to Debora, to Moses, etc. etc., these are the results of this ‘science’ of rhetorical theology, the results of their ‘discoveries.’³¹⁹

Vilmar sneers at them not only with his quotation marks but also by comparing rhetorical theologians to a woman who must rearrange her home every four weeks, and when all combinations of possessions have been made, then moves to a different apartment as the only means to enjoy her home.

In this vein he lamented that theology students in universities received little in the way of exegesis but instead concentrated on introductory or isogogical material to find meaning in the text. This method he complained had become very common in secular literature with appalling results. “The soul of the author no longer itself lies with the soul of the teacher . . . and so then the souls of the listeners and students come into almost no contact with the souls of earlier times.”³²⁰ With a combination of fracturing the text by philological examination and historical reality lying “behind” the text, Vilmar observed that one side used these means to attack the authenticity of the Biblical books while others used them to defend their authenticity. “On this way is the speech of God to us more and more pushed into the background, and the speech of

³¹⁹ Ibid. “Das Gebiet der biblischen Literatur hat sie sich herausgesucht, um auf demselben ihre ‘Entdeckungen’ zu machen; es ist aber bei Vocabulistenweisheit und Grammatistenkünsten geblieben: bei der Unterscheidung von paulinischem und petrinischem Sprachgebrauch, bei dem Widerstreit des Jehovahisten gegen den Elohisten, bei der Umstellung des Ranges, des Zeitalters u.s.w. der biblischen Bücher: heute Matthäus voran, und das Evangelium der Hebräer, morgen Lucas, am dritten Tage ein Urevangelium, am vierten Marcus; heute Deuteronomium ganz vorn, morgen ganz hinten, heute das Richterbuch vorn, morgen hinten hin zu stellen, die Psalmen spazieren zu fahren von David bis auf die Makkabäer, und von den Makkabäern wieder zurück zu David, zu Debora, zu Moseh u.s.w. u.s.w., das sind die Resultate dieser ‘Wissenschaft’ der rhetorischen Theologie, die Resultate ihrer ‘Entdeckungen.’”

³²⁰ Ibid., 24–5. “Die Seele des Autors berührt sich nicht mehr mit der Seele des Lehrers . . . —und so kommt denn auch die Seele des Zuhörers und Schülers in fast gar keinen Contact mehr mit der Seele des Altertums.”

men is exchanged for the word of God, often with the rags of men, placed over the word of God., are pushed into the foreground.”³²¹

In this approach, Vilmar defends the church as the sole possessor of the word of God, presupposing faith in its reading and preaching. These words deliver what they promise when preached; these moments of proclamation, whether read or heard, belong to and are only found in the church. The meaning of the word is to be found in the text and not in unrelated details leading to new theories of historical development of a basically unreliable text. “This word God himself speaks by the Holy Spirit by which we the living Christ and the eternal, living God the Father recognize, hear, and possess.”³²²

The Synchronic Method

At an early date, Vilmar saw the danger of a diachronic method of finding meaning in Scripture. He advocated a synchronic method of locating meaning in the Bible text.³²³ Such methods presuppose faith. His assertion that the word existed only in the church by virtue of God’s institution and its proclamation there, earned him much criticism in a modern era that valued essentially atheistic methods of analysis, believing that only the reasonable individual could find meaning and truth by casting aside all presuppositions, especially that of faith. Vilmar was a rare voice seeing the validity of faith as a presupposition to scriptural study and receiving all the benefits of the word of God. Few would agree with him; even those who shared a

³²¹ Ibid., 26. “Auf diesem Wege wird die Rede Gottes zu uns je mehr und mehr in den Hintergrund gedrängt, und die Reden der Menschen untereinander über das Wort Gottes, oft der Hader der Menschen über Gottes Wort, werden in den Vordergrund geschoben.”

³²² Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 2, 220. “. . . Gott selbst, es spricht der heilige Geist, in welchem wir den lebendigen Christus und den lebendigen ewigen Gott Vater anerkennen, hören, und haben.”

³²³ Keegan, Terence J., *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 24–5, 30–2. The diachronic method begins with the events behind the text, e.g. sources, events, and works its way forward to the text as in the Historical-Critical Method. The synchronic method begins with the text itself and may be associated with such hermeneutical methods as narrative criticism.

confessional or other orthodox view of scriptural authority took the direction that Vilmar lamented and defended the Bible using the same questionable methods employed by their enemies.

Assessment

Vilmar's theology of the church suffered attacks from such diametrically opposed forces as liberals, who with revolutionary fervor to restructure society, considered this Theology of Reality a conservative reaction to their hope to liberate mankind from the chains of dogma that had spiritually and temporally held them in bondage under prince and priest. On the other hand, Prussian conservatives, and others like them, considered his opposition to a union of the confessions a hindrance to efficient government over a people who lived responsible lives in a unified society. In either case, Vilmar labeled any scheme, whether the former prompted by a revolution from below, or the latter, a revolution from above, as nothing less than a revolutionary act. His attempt to bolster the church had nothing else in mind than the preservation of the church by recognizing it as an institution of Christ, the institution of grace, instituted by Christ himself. His theology of the word bolstered this theology as he asserted the word of God existed no where else but there. In such fashion he answered the question of the church in true Lutheran fashion by describing where God was to be found for his people's salvation.

In no way did he disparage government, but only opposed its designs to control the spiritual aspects of their respective churches. Few in the 19th century, if indeed there were others, served to remind the theological world of Luther's theology of the two realms, of church and state, with such erudite passion; he reasserted Luther's position that both were established by God for different purposes. Part of his difficulty in persuading others lay in the inheritance of Pietism from the 18th century where the Christian faith was reduced to a personal relationship

with God, far removed from confessions, ministerial office, or other external authorities. Such an influence prepared Germany for Schleiermacher's theology of religion as a free association of individuals whose faith was a personal matter.³²⁴ Likewise he opposed the conceptual understanding of Hegel whose view of history and God's activity in history legitimized the church as an instrument of the state. If this arrangement were true, then the church could hardly be expected to carry out its commission of salvation or have its nature understood at all. Believers would be at the mercy of the winds of change, proposing one theology after another, but a certain knowledge of Christ and their salvation would remain tenuous. Consequently, Vilmar found it necessary to expand ecclesiology.³²⁵

Yes, this ecclesiology met with sharp attacks by those who saw a conservative opponent to their social and political objectives. It can be said that his understanding of the church could not be separated from his conservative political agenda. However, as we have seen, this critique makes no provision for explaining his opposing the Hessian government following the Revolution of 1848. Nor does it explain the opposition to conservative political forces in Prussia whose takeover of Lower Hesse in 1866 resulted in a permanent separation of the church into the name by which it known today, the *Renitenzkirche*, or the "Stubborn Church." So we read those who dismiss Vilmar's theology out of hand. Lichtenberger, commenting on the issue which resulted in the confessional struggle in Lower Hesse decries Lutheran beliefs imposed upon the church in that land. Further, he equates the political sympathies of the theologian with his ecclesiology following the revolt in 1848.

In concert with his friend the Minister [of the Interior], Hasenpflug, he was the head of the political and ecclesiastical reaction in Electoral Hesse. . . . A man of cultivated mind, well versed in classical and German philology, the author of the esteemed

³²⁴ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 144–5.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

History of German Literature, and a distinguished and beloved professor, Vilmar yet threw himself with a passion verging on fury, into the arms of the reaction.³²⁶

In vain do we find an assessment of those circumstances that led to separation of church and state in Vilmar's thought and actions. There is no concern in these comments for Luther's theology of the two realms. In vain do we see a judgment assessing just what Vilmar was trying to accomplish. The expressed admiration for Vilmar's championing of German literature is disingenuous or based upon ignorance, for the very people who opposed Vilmar in his early days did so because they deemed it a conservative project.

Sälter, in assessing the Vilmarianer conservative religious party she sees developing as early as the 1830s, emphasizes the parochial sympathies of fellow Lutherans, politicized to avoid revolutionary dismissal of the Augsburg Confession, as well as the promotion of politically conservative sympathies of the Lutherans.³²⁷ Throughout this lengthy study, her depiction of political and economic factors dominates the motives of the Lutherans, but the passion for the church and the ecclesiology that comes to the forefront of the struggle is largely ignored. Just what were Vilmar and others of similar mind attempting to do in the larger context of the church question into the 19th century and indeed into the next century where Vilmar saw the ultimate consequences of contemporary trends? We read in vain for this analysis. Sälter joins others who would attribute Vilmar's ecclesiology to civil, conservative, political motivations and not the theological considerations he professed. These are not unusual criticisms and are discussed in Chapter 1, "On Reception," from such authors as Reiner Strunk and Renate Sälter.

Here have been identified two motives among those who dismissively reject the ecclesiology of this Theologian of Reality: those who disagree with the historical fact of Hessian Lutheranism (Lichtenberger) and those who consider this Lutheran ecclesiology an extension of

³²⁶ F. Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology*, 438.

political objectives, e.g. Lichtenberger, Strunk and Salter. Other critics appeal to different aspects of this theology.

Gerhard Müller believes that, “. . . Vilmar’s understanding of theology as a church discipline was insufficient. We cannot return to an uncritical positivism, confessionalism, or Biblicism that would reject the inheritance of the Enlightenment.”³²⁸

In response to these objections concerning hermeneutics, theological presuppositions, and political persuasion that often overlap one another, the response and criticism of Hermann Sasse points us in the right direction. Writing in 1938, seventy years after Vilmar’s death, he considers the message of this theologian whose works were appearing again in Germany in new editions. Writing an introduction to a reissue of the third edition of *Theologie der Tatsache*, he observes:

If today seventy years after the death of August Vilmar, his books are read again, if the inquiry about him is so great, that at the same time as the new edition of his Dogmatics . . . this new printing of his powerful theological programmatic writing can appear, then it is certainly the best proof that his doctrine of the church has something yet to say to our time. The obstacles that hindered our fathers to enter into the core of his thought, remain for us no longer. There is for us today no more conservative and no more liberal politics. There is no more conflict between Prussian and Hessian, since the sovereignty of the Prussian state is extinguished just as the Hessian state was. There is no longer conflict between the greater Germany and the small Germany solution to the basic political question of our people. And in the same fashion are certain church and theological controversies through history itself resolved.³²⁹

³²⁷ Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 90.

³²⁸ Gerhard Müller, *Die Bedeutung August Vilmars für Theologie und Kirche* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969), 45–6. “. . . Vilmars Verständnis der Theologie als einer kirchlichen Disziplin nicht zureichend ist. Wir können nicht in einen unkritischen Positivismus, Konfessionalismus oder Biblizismus zurück, der das Erbe der Aufklärung verleugnen würde.”

³²⁹ Hermann Sasse, “Einführung,” A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 3d ed. (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1938), 6–7. “Wenn heute, seibzig Jahre nach dem Tode August Vilmars, seine Bücher wieder gelesen werden, wenn die Nachfrage nach ihnen so gross ist, das gleichzeitig mit der Neuauflage seiner ‘Dogmatik’ . . . dieser Neudruck seiner machtvollen theologischen Programmschrift erscheinen kann, so ist das gewiss der beste Beweis dafür, dass dieser Lehrer der Kirche auch unserer Zeit noch etwas zu sagen hat. Die Hindernisse, die unseren Vätern den inneren Zugang zu seinen Gedanken versperrten, bestehen für uns nicht mehr. So gibt heute keine conservative und keine liberale Poltik mehr. Es gibt keinen Gegensatz mehr zwischen Preussen un Hessen, seitdem der souveräne preussische Staat aus der Geschichte ebenso ausgelöscht ist wie einst das Kurfürstentum Hessen. Es gibt keinen Gegensatz mehr zwischen einer grosdeutschen und einer kleindeutschen Lösung der poltitischen Grundfrage unseres Volkes. Und ebenso sind gewisse kirchliche und theologische Streitfragen durch der Geschichte

Having filtered from the consideration of Vilmar the social issues of the past, he enumerates these theological questions that need no longer concern us:

We need no longer argue whether Vilmar and Löhe were right when they recognized that civil rule of the church after 1848 was untenable. We need no longer discuss whether Vilmar was a real or a false prophet in his prophesying the future development of our people and the demanding struggles through which the church would have to pass. Because before our eyes lies indeed what from his predictions came to pass and what did not come to pass. Moreover we need no longer to wrack our brains whether the scientific concept of the 19th century is still applicable to our theology today or not. Because that idea born from Enlightenment idealism of free presuppositionless research which Vilmar disapproves in the exposition of the second chapter of the present writing, what the spiritual scientific disciplines relate to today, belongs in the past. So we have an entirely different possibility than our fathers, to listen unbiased what this great teacher—and in his time, lonely teacher of the Lutheran Church said to us today about the essence and mandate of the church.³³⁰

Sasse likely wrote disingenuously in consideration of the censors of his day as he published in a time when the government of the Third Reich sought to absorb Protestant churches into the state controlled German Christian movement. Yet, while he hesitated to comment on other issues, he found that Vilmar's teaching of the church was completely relevant to his time as churchmen sought theology to resist the absorption of the various Landeskirchen into the state apparatus.

May our present generation of theologians expect today not the idyllic pastor's office of past times, but a demanding life in office, full of hard work and serious conflict, whose help for understanding is real theology, a theology not of speculation of the literari, not blessed feeling and pretty words, but a down-to-earth theology, resting on the eternal and almighty word of the living God and which, because it rests entirely

selbst erledigt worden.”

³³⁰ Ibid., 7. “Wir brauchen uns nicht mehr darüber zu streiten, ob Vilmar und Löhe recht hatten als sie seit 1848 die Unhaltbarkeit des landesherrlichen Kirchenregiments erkannten. Wir brauchen nicht darüber zu diskutieren, ob Vilmar mit seinen Prophezeiungen der künftigen Entwicklung unseres Volkes und der schweren Kämpfe, in welche die Kirche würde hineingehen müssen, ein Schwarzseher war oder rein echter Prophet; denn vor unseren Augen liegt ja, was von seinen Voraussagen eingetroffen ist und was nicht. Wir brauchen uns darüber nicht mehr den Kopf zu zerbrechen, ob der Wissenschaftsbegriff des 19. Jahrhunderts auf die Theologie heute noch anwendbar ist oder nicht. Denn die aus der Aufklärung und dem Idealismus geborene Idee der freien, voraussetzungslosen Forschung, mit der Vilmar sich im zweiten Kapitel der vorliegenden Schrift auseinandersetzt, gehört, was die Geisteswissenschaften anbelangt, heute der Vergangenheit an. So haben wir ganz anders als unsere Väter die Möglichkeit, unbefangen das zu hören was dieser grosse, in seiner Zeit so einsame Lehrer der Lutherischen Kirche uns heute über das Wesen und den Auftrag der Kirche zu sagen hat.”

on this basis, also can look in the eye the reality of the world with undaunted, courageous faith. Finally, may Vilmar's writing warn us all as a voice from the true confessing, struggling Lutheran Church of the past, to our preservation of the church and its confessions, not because we are confessional particularists, but because we know what the gospel is and what we confess, if we speak with our hearts and mouths, with our fathers and with the church of all time: *Credo uman, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam.*³³¹

Vilmar widened the ecclesiology of the Lutheran Confessions in order to define and defend the church from the dangers he saw it facing in the 19th century. If the Augsburg Confession could define the church as all believers in Christ to preserve the church against an episcopal hierarchy seated in Rome, then Vilmar would defend the church from subjective yet arbitrary belief by individuals in his distinction between the objective and the subjective church. Certainty of salvation and Christ's presence were emphasized by describing the church as visible, not because of a hierarchy but because of the means of grace.

Likewise, the defense of the church from absorption into the state apparatus made it necessary to emphasize the source of this grace found in the means of grace and he, therefore, emphasized the office of the ministry, those who administered the means of grace to establish and nourish faith in the church.

To oppose all theologies that would justify such attacks, he identified theology as a churchly discipline, removing research from atheistic presuppositions otherwise identified as objective. Realizing that all theology began from presuppositions, he identified the

³³¹ Ibid., 8. "Möge sie unserer jungen Theologengeneration, auf die heute nicht das Pfarramtsidyll vergangener Zeiten, sondern ein schweres Amstleben voll harter Arbeit und ernsten Kampes wartet, zum Verständnis dessen helfen, was echte Theologie ist: eine Theologie nicht der Spekulation und des Literatentums, nicht der frommen Gefühl und der schönen Worte, sonder eine Wirklichkeitsnahe Theologie, die sich gründet auf das ewige und allmächtige Wort des lebendigen Gottes und die, weil sie ganz auf dieser Wirklichkeit ruht, auch der Wirklichkeit der Welt mit unerschrockenem Glaubensmut ins Zuge sehen kann. Möge Vilmars Schrift schliesslich als eine Stimme aus der bekennnistreuen kämpfenden Lutherischen Kirche der Vergangenheit uns alle mahnen, das Unsere zu tun zur Erhaltung dieser Kirche und ihres Bekenntnisses, nicht weil wir konfessionelle Partikularisten sind, sondern weil wir wissen, was Evangelium ist und was wir bekennen, wenn wir mit unseren Vätern und mit der Kirche aller Zeiten mit Herz und Mund sprechen: *Credo uman, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam.*"

presupposition of faith grounded in the reality of the church and its doctrine as the only valid method of determining theological truth.

Ulrich Asendorf agrees that Vilmar's somewhat one-sided organic approach bore "polemical accents." Karl Barth observes of Vilmar's debates,

" . . . with him we find ourselves in the atmosphere of an excited and perhaps rather disturbed pastors' conference. That need not mean that the theology he represents must be necessarily bad or even insignificant, but one must acclimatize oneself to it on coming from academic theological discussion, and one cannot say that Vilmar makes this acclimatization easy. . . . Nevertheless, despite everything, in being a complete outsider Vilmar gave sharp definition to a concern the emergence of which forms part of the picture of the academic theology of his day, precisely because in certain respects it points beyond his day. Perhaps it was essential that the opposition which Vilmar wanted to raise and the matter he wanted to present had to be brought about in this somewhat unattractive form."³³²

Also extending a post-World War II assessment as Barth had done, Ulrich Asendorf follows Barth's implication and asserts that this polemical debate over the church was fundamental to Vilmar's contribution, and to its value, to ecclesiology. Recognizing that his understanding of the church as "Institution" ("Anstalt") was not original to him but the term likely received from Stahl, Asendorf observes that it remains difficult to speak of a direct dependence on Stahl, but nevertheless, Vilmar's contribution lay in his analysis and remedy for the church problem of the time. "Vilmar's special position would therefore be marked by the analysis of the times gained by intensification and radicalizing of the stated images."³³³

Was the church question over-rated, or worse, were the confessional Lutherans of Vilmar's convictions left behind in the march of time with the issues that occupied Germany and the modern world for the rest of the century and into the twentieth? Though Sasse observed that the problem of ecclesiology did not rest for long on the minds of the German nation in the latter part

³³² Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Brian Cozens and John Bowden, (London: St. Albans Press, 1959), 625–6.

³³³ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 146–7. "Vilmars besondere Position wäre demnach durch eine von der

of the nineteenth century, Vilmar nevertheless, anticipated many of the problems of the twentieth century.

For a generation, from 1830 to 1860, German Lutheranism, concerning itself with the great problem of the church in similar fashion to the other confessions in Germany and in the entire Christian West and in practical work of church life, entered during the twilight of Vilmar's life a great exhaustion. The great attempt to build the evangelical church of Germany anew, was shattered for various reasons. It appears that the German people were so busy with the reconstruction of their political life after 1860 that neither time nor power for a reconstruction of the church remained.³³⁴

Consequently, research may conclude that the problems Vilmar emphasized in ecclesiology and related issues of his day, were somewhat beside the point. To such criticism, Asendorf stresses that the issues demonstrated to be of central importance by the events of the twentieth century.

The criticism one often hears about the church of the nineteenth century is that it was too little concerned for the great movements of the time, does not apply to Vilmar. He belongs to the great timelessness of the century, from which connections are already observed, that should be included within the complete dimensions of the twentieth century. If one sees Vilmar's theology from this perspective, he then sees it in a different way. What appeared as an uncritical reaction, shows itself under close examination to be an undertaking of exemplary boldness. Where else in the theology of the nineteenth century was shown the measure of certain, expected consequences of a European catastrophe? Only today do the connections become evident.³³⁵

Analyse der Zeit her gewonnene Verschärfung und Radikalisierung vorgegebener Begriffe bezeichnet."

³³⁴ Sasse, "Introduction," *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 5–6. "Nachdem ein Menschenalter lang, von 1830 bis 1860, das deutsche Luthertum ähnlich wie die anderen Konfessionen in Deutschland und im ganzen christlichen Abendland sich in der Theologie und in der praktischen Arbeit des kirchlichen Lebens um das grosse Problem der Kirche bemüht hatte, setzte in der Zeit von Vilmars Lebensabend eine grosse Ermattung ein. Der grosse Versuch, das evangelischen Kirchentum Deutschlands neu aufzubauen, war aus verschiedenen Gründen gescheitert. Es schien, als sei das deutsche Volk mit dem Neubau seines politischen Lebens seit 1866 so beschäftigt, dass für einen kirchlichen Neubau weder Zeit noch Kraft blieb."

³³⁵ Asendorf, *Die europäischen Krise*, 143. "Der oft zu hörende Vorwurf, die Kirche des 19. Jahrhunderts sei zu wenig aufgeschlossen gewesen für die grossen bewegungen der Zeit, gilt jedenfalls nicht für Vilmar. Er gehört darum zu den grossen Unzeitgemässen des Jahrhunderts, von denen bereits Zursammenhänge wahrgenommen werden, die sich in voller Grösse im 20. Jahrhundert zeigen sollten. Sieht man Vilmars Theologie aus dieser Perspektive, so erschliesst sie sich auf eine neue Weise. Was den Anschein einer unkritischen Reaktion zu haben scheint, zeigt sich bei genauerem Zusehen als ein Unternehmern von beispielhafter Kühnheit. Wo sind sonst in der Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts in einem solchen Masse Konsequenzen aus der mit Sicherheit erwarteten europäischen Katastrophe, gezogen worden? Erst heute werde die Zusammenhänge deutlicher."

Any timelessness of Vilmar's theological contributions need to be linked to other aspects of his metacritique. These include the office of the ministry, a centerpiece of his ecclesiology, and the manner in which he linked the world and church in his social criticism. Along with his theology of the church, his metacriticism would extend into his understanding of the ministry and social criticism as well, and this metacritique, dismissed by many would prove prophetic for the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 5

THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTRY

No account of Vilmar's theology of the church would be complete without a corresponding description of his understanding of the nature and role of the church's pastoral office. One may consider this feature an integral part of any theology of the church yet Vilmar's portrayal bears special consideration in light of the essential connection of theology and church. "Theology is intended for the church: it belongs to it, that is, directly serves the teaching office of the church."³³⁶ Karl Barth, commenting on Vilmar's view of the ministry, as well as the polemical context in which it was developed, observed, "In stressing the relationship between theology and the pastorate, Vilmar said something new to his time, and that meant an action whose influence was not reduced by the impetuosity with which it was accomplished."³³⁷ It remains the task of this chapter to identify how the Theologian of Reality said "something new to his time."

The topic of the pastoral ministry remains in the background of Vilmar's earlier writings. The subject comes to the forefront following the collapse of the Revolution of 1848, generally dated in 1848-1849. It was during a return of conservatives to power when he found himself appointed under the new Interior Minister Hasenpflug, as Inspector responsible directly to Diocesan Superintendent in Kassel, Ernst. His duties included, as we have seen, extensive interaction, supervision, and first hand observation of the role of the pastoral ministry in his region of responsibility. When appointed as Professor of Theology at Marburg in mid-decade,

³³⁶A.F.C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik: Akademische Vorlesungen*, vol. 1, (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 89. "... sie ist für die ganze Kirche bestimmt, der das Lehramt zugehört ..."

³³⁷Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology of the Nineteen Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden, (London: St. Albans Press, 1959), 633.

his focus on theology in connection with preparation of students for the pastoral ministry began in earnest. Now the task given him was to express what would be his theology of fact, not the abstract, scientific theology far removed from the church. Rather his students were prepared specifically for the pastoral office, and as such, Vilmar sought to transmit to them the doctrines that reflect the life of the church, lived and experienced.

The Office and Theology

If theology remains solely a church discipline, then Vilmar considers this theology a special task of the pastoral office. His book, *Theologie der Tatsache wider die Theologie der Rhetoric* (1856) presents an early examination of this theology and was written shortly after he assumed duties as a teacher of future pastors at the university. Reflecting on this responsibility he stressed, “Whoever has not directed his attention exclusively towards bringing up pastors is not a teacher of theology.”³³⁸ The reason for this assertion he describes as the search for need of salvation found only in the church and delivered by her pastors.

Whoever does not possess the deep need to teach and share in unlimited fullness—this certain knowledge—so that it equals the depth and common need of receiving is no theologian.

The need for the theologian and their need to teach pastors, exists in the hunger and thirst for the word of God. In theology the word of God should be given and received, the certainty, the unquestionable, the irreproachable assurance of eternal life, of salvation. Theology has the pastoral office to exercise in the way—to guide the new generation as a generation of faithful shepherds can be, which gathers the sheep, to follow them, to seek them, and ready to restore them to their place. . . .³³⁹

³³⁸ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen wider der Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 6. “Wer nicht ausschliesslich sein Augenmerk darauf gerichtet hat, Pastoren zu erziehen, der ist kein Lehrer der Theologie.”

³³⁹ *Ibid.* 5-6. “Wer nicht das tiefe Bedürfnis hat, zu lehren und mitzuteilen in unbeschränkter Fülle, und nicht das sichere Wissen, dass diesem seinem Bedürfnis ein so tiefes und ein völlig allgemeines Bedürfnis des Empfangenen entspricht, schon der ist kein Theolog.

“Das Bedürfnis des Empfangens aber besteht in dem Hunger und Durst nach dem Worte Gottes, nach der Gewisheit des ewigen Lebens, nach der Gewisheit der Seligkeit. Gegeben und empfangen werden soll in der Theologie das Wort Gottes, die Gewisheit, die unzweifelhafte, die unangreifbare Gewisheit des ewigen Lebens, der

The Church as *Tabula Rasa*

The exposition of Vilmar's teaching on the office of the ministry finds its roots not only in the Bible but in the political developments that followed reforms in government following the Revolution of 1848. The new National Assembly meeting in the wake of revolutionary successes at Frankfurt expressed the desires of revolutionaries and other of more "liberal" inclinations in its change of the religious establishment in the German nations. Though the constitution never came into effect, it served as a model for many reform constitutions in various German lands.

The new constitution sought to enact reforms that had been debated since the uprisings of 1830. Article 5, Section 14 stated, "No one is required to reveal his religious belief. Section 16 provided that, "Through religious confession the authority of the civil or national law is neither established nor reduced." Section 17 provided independent congregations but left them nevertheless subject to the laws of the state, "Every religious association orders and administers its affairs independently, but submits to the public laws of the state. No religious association enjoys legal priority before another through the state; henceforth there no longer exists a state church. New religious associations form themselves; it needs no recognition from the state." In Section 20 marriage restrictions were removed, "The legal validity of marriage is dependent only upon the completion of civil records; the church ceremony can only be conducted after the completion of the civil records. Religious difference is no civil hindrance to marriage." Section 21 provided: "The birth register will be controlled by the civil authorities."³⁴⁰

Seligkeit. Die Theologie hat da Hirtenamt zu üben in der Weise, das sie das heranwachsende Geschlecht anleite, wie daselbe zu einem Geschlecht treuer Hirten werden könne, welche die Schafe zusammenauhalten, ihnen nachzugeben, sie zu suchen und wiederzufinden im Stande und bereit sind. . . ."

³⁴⁰ Wilhelm Hopf, *August Vilmar: Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2 (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1912), 53–4. S 14: "Niemand ist verpflichtet, seine religiöse Überzeugung zu offenbaren." S 16: "Durch das religiöse Bekenntnis wird der Genuss der bürgerlichen und staatsbürgerlichen Rechte weder bedingt noch beschränkt." S 17: "Jede Religionsgesellschaft ordnet und verwaltet ihre Angelegenheiten selbständig, bleibt aber den allgemeinen Staatsgesetzen unterworfen. Keine Religionsgesellschaft genießt vor anderen Vorrechte durch den Staat; es besteht fernerhin keine Staatskirche. Neue Religionsgesellschaften dürfen sich bilden; einer Anerkennung ihres

Before this constitution could be decreed, other lands had already adopted laws placing such measure into effect. In Electoral Hesse similar measures were enacted with special harshness. Legislation on December 5, 1848 established religious freedom as well as civil marriage.

Through these arrangements, the established protection of the Protestant princes over their churches and their confessions was dissolved, an arrangement existing from the time of the Reformation. Not only the local state protection was lifted, but the protection granted in the 1548 Peace of Westphalia disappeared. The tectonic shift of history within the German lands broke the bonds closely connecting church and state since the time of Emperor Constantine, and in the West, since Charlemagne.

In the wake of these movements, throughout the summer of 1848, local conferences both friendly and unfriendly to the church gathered to bring pressure for a new arrangement in Electoral Hesse. The government received many petitions in this regard. Consequently on October 18, 1848, the government established a new Church Commission to consider the status of churches in the land and what their legal status should be in relationship to the government. As Wilhelm Hopf observes, this commission of professors, pastors, and government politicians revealed a complete lack of understanding of ecclesial affairs. It was as if the church was to be completely restructured, given a new doctrinal basis, and legal status. In other words as Hopf describes this process contemptuously, the church was treated not as a historical reality but as a *tabula rasa*.³⁴¹

Bekenntnisses durch den Staat bedarf es nicht." S 20: "The civil Gültigkeit der Ehe is nur von der Vollziehung des Zivilaktes abhängig; die kirchliche Trauung kann nur nach der Vollziehung des Zivilaktes stattfinden. Die Religionsverschiedenheit ist kein bürgerlichs Ehehindernis." S: 21: "Die Standesbücher werden von den bürgerlichen Behörden geführt."

³⁴¹ Ibid.

The Appeal to the Office

With this abandoning of legally established confessions, thereby leaving the prince's confession in doubt, Vilmar began looking about for another alternative to the "godless" state ruling the church with no confession to serve as its secure doctrinal basis. In February 1849 he wrote to his brother Wilhelm,

It calls for holding fast to the old things, i.e. those old things which have divine mandate. This is only, as far as I can see, the office of the ministry, and this has to stretch out its hands to take back its own if there should be a change in existing church authority. For that reason we still have in Hesse our own prudent ways—not the thrown-together, without-mandate, superficial, absolute synod.³⁴²

Fearing what might take place in the governing of the church in the uncertain situation in which the Hessian church found itself, Vilmar expressed his low expectations of any positive good resulting from actions taken by the government.

The current worldly power in the church (Ministry together with its commission including the consistory) I consider them in [i.e. as participants in] what has already happened—the proclamation of the state without worship or belief—entirely illegitimate. If an indirect church government by the prince is no longer possible . . . as is commonly acknowledged, then a direct government will not happen either, because presently the church is utterly unable and without call, otherwise to establish (ecclesial) mediating organs between it and the prince. That means a new mingling with the world, which has thrown us out, is also completely, politically impossible.³⁴³

This letter, sent only eight days before the Jesberg Conference discussed in the last chapter, reveals the problem of dependable and legitimate, faithful governance of the church of the

³⁴² Letter, A. F. C. Vilmar to Wilhelm Vilmar, February 8, 1849 quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2, 63. "Es heist, in deiser Wirrnis das Alte festgehalten, d.h. dasjenige Alte, welches göttliches Mandat hat. Dies is allein, so viel ich sehen kann, das gestiliche Amt, und dies muss, wenn zu einer Änderung des bisherigen Kirchenregimenst kommen sollte, die Hände austrecken, um sein Eigentum zurückzuempfangen. Dafür haben wir nun hier in Hessen noch unsere gewiesenen Wege—nicht die einer zusammengewürfelten, mandatlosen, auch schon äusserlich zerstörerischen Synode"

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 64. "Die jetztige weltliche Gewalt in der Kirche (Ministerium samt seiner Kommission oder auch den Konsistorien) halte ich nach dem, was bereits geschehen ist—die Proklamierung eines kultuslosen, geschweige denn glaubenslose 'Staates'—für gänzlich unbefugt eine Synode zusammenzuberufen . . . wenn ein mittelbares Kirchenregiment des Landesherrn nicht mehr möglich ist (d.h. durch seine Behörden) wie, allgemeinden zustandes wird so kann ein unmittelbares Regiment schon darum nicht stattfinden, weil die Kirche gegenwärtig völlig ausserstande und ausser Beruf ist, andere (kirchlich) vermittelnde Organe zwischen sich und den Landesherrn zu setzen. Das heisst sich aufs neue mit der Welt vermengen, die uns doch von sich gestossen hat, ist aber auch

Augsburg Confession. The problem arising had not been one primarily of material support of the church so much as the doctrinal basis and faithful adherence to its confessions. Up to this point, since the time of the Reformation, the government not only had supported the church, enacted legislation to preserve confessional faithfulness, but the ruling prince was himself a “bishop” to insure the proper confessional basis of evangelical churches in his land. Those who adhered to a Lutheran confession now faced the hostility, direct or implied, by the new arrangements facing them from the new Commission and the forces that had caused it to be brought into being.

If the government was no longer suitable to govern the church, and the issue was not the material support so much as the doctrinal basis, then for Vilmar the solution remained the clerical office, who would “stretch out its hands to take back” what belonged to it already. To meet the double threat of revolution from above and below:

The old does not work any more; what is new one does not know [what will work] either. So one holds tightly onto the last plank of the familiar, as if the human and the divine should once again be mixed. I must appeal to you clergy: Have confidence in your own spiritual office. This is the single thing that still possesses a divine mandate in this time of peril and destruction.³⁴⁴

The irony should not be lost that the trouble or emergency (“Not”) of Reformation times that resulted in the ruling princes becoming the bishops of their lands, was now to be replaced by another “Not” to reassign the rule of the church back to ecclesial office. Continuing his appeal to those in leadership positions within the church, the diocesan Superintendents and their Inspectors, he wrote two days later:

You, and no one else, it is, who have to take the government of the church in hand—for the sake of temporal order, through you, rightfully, the existing over-shepherds,

politisch völlig unmöglich.”

³⁴⁴ Letter from A.F.C. Vilmar to Pastor Hopf, February 10, 1849, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2, 66. “Das Alte geht nicht mehr, neues weiss man auch nicht, also klammert man sich an das letzte Brett des Gewohnten an, und wenn man auch abermals Menschliches mit Göttlichem vermischen sollte, Ich muss Euch Gesitlichen zurrufen: Habt nur Vertrauen zu Eurem eigenen gestilichen Amte! Das ist das Einzige, was in der jetzigen argen zeit der Not und Zerstörung noch göttliches, ewiges Mandat hat.”

the Superintendents, respectively Inspectors. We others have no mandate, neither to elect nor to organize a ‘synod’ (it is, as if every time I hear or write that word, the devil flies by me), from the present prince through his present authorities or arbitrarily decree an established synod—can only destroy. You in our offices, you leaders (but not the consistory), you alone can plant and build.³⁴⁵

Vilmar’s condemnation of a synod polity must be qualified—like much of his writing—by the situation he found himself in. His rejection of a governing synod was not absolute. He opposed a synod that exercised no legitimate authority to govern the church. A legitimate authority he observed at the time of the Jesberg Conference could convene a synod without introducing a novelty.

In this period of great trouble and confusion of the church let us release all powers [and] hold onto that one that truly and undoubtedly has divine mandate: onto the office of the ministry. This alone is called and empowered to receive the wavering or falling worldly rule in the church in its hands, and to be sure for the sake of order in the visible church. . . .³⁴⁶

The called office of the ministry was the solution already at hand to solve the problem of church polity whose alternative would be a religiously neutral, or in effect, atheistic, government. Vilmar hoped that those in the offices of Superintendent and Inspector would be able to exercise such authority. Subsequently, the Jesberg Conference agreed that these positions should be placed under the authority of the clergy of Electoral Hesse. In its official memorandum to the Elector, the Conference maintained that the Office of the Word, Sacrament and Church Discipline should rightfully now rule the church. Vilmar followed this memorandum with essays

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 66–7. “Ich muss Euch Geistlichen zuzurufen: Habt nur Vertrauen zu Eurem eigenen geistlichen Amte! Das ist das Einzige, was in der jetzigen argen Zeit der Not und Zerstörung noch göttliches, ewiges Mandate hat, Ihr, und niemand anders, seid es, die ihr das Kirchenregiment in die Hand nehmen müsst—um gutter zeitlicher Ordnung willen, durch Eure zu Recht bestehenden Oberhirten, die Superintendents resp. Inspektoren. Wir andern haben kein Mandat, weder zur ‘Synode’ (es ist, als wenn jades Mal der Teufel bei mir vorüberflöge, wenn ich das Wort höre oder schreibe) zu wählen noch da zu ordnen—eine Synode, vom jetzigen Landesherrn durch seine jetzigen Behörden oder durch sonst willkürlich gesetzte berufen, kann nur zerstören. Ihr in Eurem Amte, Eure Häupter (aber nich die Konsistorien), Ihr allein könnt pflanzen und bauen!”

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 70. “In dieser Zeit der grossen Not und Zerrüttung der Kirchen lassen Sie uns aus allen Kräften festhalten an dem Einzigen, was wahrhaftig und unzweifelhaft göttliches Mandat hat: am geistlichen Amte. Dieses allein ist berufen und ermächtigt, das wankende oder fallende weltliche Regiment in der Kirche in seine Hände zu empfangen. . . .”

titled, “What Should the Evangelical Church Not Do in Our Day?” and “What Should the Evangelical Church Do in Our Day?” These essays appeared in his *Hessischen Volksfreund*, from 10-24 March 1849, numbers 20-24. Here he described the nature and tasks of the pastoral offices to justify the governing of the church by those in the pastoral ministry. Presenting the contemporary state of affairs as that of confusion, disquiet, and destruction, he asks concerning the source of relief for self and posterity, “Do we have to climb to heaven to fetch Christ?”³⁴⁷

Noting that Christ would not come if we were able to apply force, he concluded that there really was no need to use such measures since he was already here among us.

. . . he is still there, there for all who want to see and hear him, to recognize and experience him, to possess and embrace him. He is yet present with his unbroken, community building power of word and sacrament and discipline. He is still present in his office of the word and sacrament and discipline, to re-gather his community and to unite it stronger than ever. . . .³⁴⁸

Appearing in this periodical with the political and social situation emphasized, Vilmar writes with a polemical accent, well within the circumstances of his time and place. This consideration may explain why Vilmar chooses to emphasize the ministry along with the salutary effects of the means of grace. He was not writing for a simple understanding of the means of communicating God’s grace, but was also seeking to justify the alternative rule of the church: the alternative to an unbelieving synod or an unbelieving government. Hence the means of grace and the means to govern are identified together: “To the pastoral ministry to whom all the gifts of the church are transferred to preserve and to administer, and only to it does it belong by right, also to

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 73. “Müssen wir aber darum gen Himmel steigen, Christum abzuholen?”

³⁴⁸ A. F. C. Vilmar, “Was soll die evangelischen Kirche in unseren Tagen nicht tun?” and “Was soll die evangelischen Kirche in unseren Tage tun?” *hessische Volksfreund* 20–24 (1849); quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2, 73. “. . . er ist noch da, da für alle, die Ihn sehen und hören, erkennen und erfahren, haben und fassen wollen. Er ist noch gegenwärtig mit seiner ungebrochenen, gemeindegewaltigen Kraft des Wortes, des Sakramentes und der Zucht. Er ist noch selbst gegenwärtig in seinem Amte des Wortes, des Sakramentes und der Zucht, um seine Gemeinde von neuem zu sammeln und sie fester zusammenzuschliessen. . . .”

look after the external treasures of the church, and also to be afforded the authority over the church, and from these to establish the congregation anew.”³⁴⁹

To administer the church—this solution to pressing problems suggested not a novel solution, but one that was ready at hand.

The pastoral office also receives the governing of the evangelical church; it receives this especially and chiefly in the Hessian lands; where it remains unspoiled for three centuries, for more than a thousand years to be sure. It receives it as I have otherwise discussed through the hands of the Superintendent (and, for the later controlling district, his Inspector), who then have to be concerned as their business for further advise and counsel, for the representation of the congregations in substantial affairs of the congregation and other matters. Maybe nowhere else than in Hesse-Kassel is this reorganization of church affairs so simple, based so much on unchanged rules and law; nowhere is the old order of the church so pure and faithful protected as with us.³⁵⁰

Here begins Vilmar’s controversial theology of the ministry as it would be further explicated in his further writings and in his preparation of his students for the ministry. Already in 1849 we read of the responsibilities resting on those serving in that office. “In similar fashion, the responsibility also rests with him.”³⁵¹

From Inspector to Superintendent Elect

The suppression of German rebellions in Baden and in the Rhinepalz in 1849 as well as the opposition presented by pastors and sympathetic laymen at such meetings as those at Jesberg, brought the restructuring of the church by the Church Commission to a standstill. The church

³⁴⁹ Ibid., Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2, 74. “Dem geistlichen Amte, dem alle inneren Güter der Kirche zur Hut und Verwaltung übertragen sind, und nur ihm gebührt es, auch der äusseren Güter der Kirche sich anzunehmen, das Kirchenregiment zu empfangen, und von sich aus die Gemeinde neu zu gestalten.”

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 75. “Das geistliche Amt also empfangen das Kirchenregiment der evangelischen Kirche; es empfangen dasselbe zumal und vorzugsweise im hessischen Lande, wo es noch unverkümmert dasteht wie vor dreihundert, ja wie vor tausend Jahren. Es empfangen es jedoch, wie ich schon anderwärts geraten habe, durch die Hände seiner Superintendenten (und, für die später hinzugekommenen Landesteile, seiner Inspektoren), welche dann für weiteren Rat und Beirat ihrer Geschäfte, für die Vertretung der Gemeinden bei wirklichen Gemeinde-Angelegenheiten und anderes der Art zu sorgen haben werden. Vielleicht nirgends anderswo als in Hessen-Kassel ist diese Umgestaltung der kirchlichen Dinge so einfach, so auf unverändertes Recht und Gesetz gegründet; nirgends ist die alte Ordnung der Kirche so rein und true bewahrt worden als bei uns.”

³⁵¹ Ibid., “Gebührt es ihm, so hat es auch die Pflicht dazu.”

question would not be resolved in Electoral Hesse until its annexation by Prussia in 1866. The Prince Elector, Friedrich Wilhelm, felt much like a prisoner with the legislature largely dominated by liberals elected in the wake of revolutionary successes. He sought a measure of independence in the counterweight of a conservative cabinet of ministers. He also sought more specifically to hinder the free church movement by including Vilmar in a high ministerial post. It would be difficult to press against a state church while serving to support and preserve a state church within the Interior Ministry.³⁵²

The Elector knew of Vilmar's reputation for organization and public service dating back to the early 1830s. He did not necessarily understand the theological issues, and did not support a free church since he thought it was an abrogation of his responsibility given to the Elector from the time of the Reformation, and he saw his governing the church as one of the strongest roots of his civil authority. He must have considered the issue with some reservation, therefore, when considering Vilmar for high office, but he also knew his enthusiastic opposition to the Revolution. So October 12, 1849, the position of Interior Minister was offered to Vilmar by the Elector in a personal interview. Assuming such responsibility weighed greatly on him; he declined to accept the position. By October 14, he reported that "all fails on the question of the church."³⁵³ He sought to avoid an action that might go against his conviction in the matter of the church, a question not yet settled, as well as a betrayal of those who had sided with him.

On February 22 the following year, the position would be assumed by an old associate and former conservative Minister of the Interior, Hassenpflug. On March 1, 1850, the Director of the Marburg gymnasium for fifteen years was selected to be Rat and Titular-Konsistorialrat at the Interior Ministry where he began a period of active service in the practical theology of the

³⁵² Ibid., 86–8.

³⁵³ Ibid., 95. ". . . alles an der Kirchenfrage scheitert. . . ."

church. This period would precede this election as Superintendent, though as we have seen, his career as professor, not church superintendent would begin in mid-decade.

The appointment of Vilmar was a triumph for his party. Their leader had vigorously opposed the revolution. Vilmar assumed the office as he confessed, “. . . not without a touch of vanity [that] the party which I represented in Hesse—chiefly in certain respects—because it had achieved victory.”³⁵⁴ By December 1850 the constitutional crisis over church polity and confession was at an end with the pre-revolutionary status quo maintained. This achievement was nothing less than victory for the church or Restoration church party.

In 1851, Vilmar published in the *Hessischen Volksfreund* an understanding of the proper relation of church and state in an article entitled, “Religion and Politics.” As Ulrich Asendorf noted, this understanding was characteristically Lutheran and places Vilmar among the few who promoted Luther’s understanding of the two realms (Regiment). He maintained that religion and politics should remain two different domains (Bereiche), “. . . but that the servant of the church uses his influence on the politicians to conduct their calling in the name of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁵⁵

His outlook on the relationship between church and state in Lower Hesse was expressed in an 1851 article for the *Hessischen Volksfreund*:

In these politics the church should and has to take with its serving party, the party it advises which by its divine establishment. . . . So may the church never cease to generate and loudly proclaim the honor of its earthly, native king, according to the words of Scripture, so that where honor and obedience is removed from its basis, there can be no salvation for the people until repentance and reconciliation are entered into. So the church may never stop to witness against arrogance whose alien office usurps and will assume these rights but not their responsibilities. For example, [it] reared up itself with the name ‘people’s sovereignty’ in the year 1848 and devoted

³⁵⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, biographical fragment, undated, quoted in Renate Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer: Von der fürstentreuen kirchlichen Restaurationspartei zur hessischen Renitenz*, *Quellen und Forschungen zur hessischen Geschichte* 59 (Darmstadt and Marburg: Selbstverlag der Hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der Historischen Kommission für Hessen, 1985), 73–4.

142. “. . . nicht ohne einen Anflug von Eitelkeit, dass ‘die Partei, die ich in Hessen—in gewissem Betrachte vorzugsweise—vertreten hatte, zum Siege gekommen sei.’”

³⁵⁵ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Zur neuesten Culturegeschichte Deutschlands: Zerstreute Blätter* (Frankfurt a.M. and Erlangen: Verlag von Heyder & Zimmer, 1858), 211. “. . . diesen Beruf als in Gottes und des Herrn Christi Namen führen.”

itself in similar fashion to certain, tangible, and dangerous so-called constitutionally faithful in Electoral Hesse. So it must against the lawless state, against property destruction, and witness to capital punishment which belongs to authority as Scripture shows, against the oath-relinquishing and honor-relinquishing state, etc. raise its voice most emphatically.³⁵⁶

Vilmar's office was not paid and in order to support himself, he sought an active role in parish ministry. Accordingly, he applied to become a pastor to the largest church in Kassel, St. Martin's, but a strident protest among some members of the congregation over having a "political agitator and party chief" made him reconsider. He withdrew his application and applied instead for the position of Inspector, subordinate to the General Superintendent of the Diocese of Kassel. Both the Interior Minister, Hasenpflug, and the Elector supported his application. The ruler did insist on receiving a declaration that Vilmar would not oppose the Elector's position as Summepiskopus or seek to diminish his role in that capacity.³⁵⁷ Vilmar, according to Hopf, was not anxious to lead an effort against the ecclesial authority of the Elector at this point. The revolution had been defeated, if not permanently—and indeed Vilmar had doubts that the victory was permanent—then at least there was a victory of political power.

Vilmar considered his task to promote a restoration of a Christian society in Hesse, a goal achievable only with the work of the church and its preaching office. He remained skeptical that the Elector ruled in God's name in any fashion but formally, yet he hoped that a restored Christian society would restore the old Hessian ideal. Lacking confidence in the restored

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 212. "In dieser Politik soll und muss die Kirche mit ihren Dienern Partei nehmen, die Partei, welche ihr durch ihre göttliche Einsetzung angewiesen ist . . . so darf die Kirche niemals aufhören, für die Ehre, die dem irdischen König gebürt, nach den Worten der Schrift, zu zeugen und es laut zu verkündigen, dass wo die Ehre und der Gehorsam, der dem König gebürt, einmal von Grund aus gebrochen ist, kein Heil für das Volk sein wird, bis Busse und Sühne eingetreten ist. So darf die Kirche es nie unterlassen, wider den Hochmut zu zeugen, welcher dass fremde Amt an sich reissen und dessen Rechte, aber nicht dessen Pflichten übernehmen will, wie derselbe z.B. unter dem Namen 'Volksouveränität' im Jahre 1848 sich aufbäumte, und wie derselbe in viel bestimmter, greifbarer und gefährlicherer Gestalt als sogenannte 'Verfassungstreue' in Kurhessen sich an den Tag legte. So muss sie wider den von Gesetz abfallenden Staat, wider den das Eigentum vernichtenden, die Todesstrafe, die Attribute der Obrigkeit, wie sie in der Schrift bezeichnet sind, den Eid und die Ehe abschaffenden Staat u.s.w. ihre Stimme auf das Nachdrücklichste erheben."

³⁵⁷ Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 145–6.

conservative government, he relied more and more on the church to overcome the powers and authorities that threatened in his time.³⁵⁸

So he wrote in the last edition of the *Hessischen Volksfreund* on June 29, 1853. He charged the politicians in the face of revolution with a “wretched self-deception” whereby the spiritual authorities were removed, and they then received the same consequences; in this charge he included the government administration, the police, and the nobility.

Those forgetting are the groundbreakers for the revolution of the future. . . . Especially it should and must be firmly grasped that the prevention of the utmost disgrace of the Electoral Hessian fatherland in the summer and fall of 1850 was made possible only through this spirit of humiliation and of prayer. Whether and how long this reality will be firmly grasped—therein hangs the future of our fatherland.³⁵⁹

On the other hand he promoted the legitimacy of the Elector, reflecting the changing politics of the church party who did not presently wish to challenge the Summepiskopus authority of the Hessian ruler.

Therein belongs the experience, that the revolution, which was directed against the Elector and kings, was essentially not against them, but their capacity as bearers of the divine office of authority, also of authority itself, and again this ultimately, effected against the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father, so long as it endures, effects and, as often as it reappears, will effect. This experience belongs chiefly to the evangelical church, and in more complete clarity and exhaustive depth it has been done in our small fatherland; because nowhere has anyone mixed the law, loyalty, conscience in so diabolical method mixed as in Electoral Hesse, nowhere has the deception in and of itself been so powerfully managed against the divine justice, which exists in our land. . . .³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 146-147.

³⁵⁹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Hessischen Volksfreund*, June 29, 1853, quoted in Hopf, *Ein Lebensbild*, vol. 2, 186. “Diese Vergessenden sind die Voerbereiter der Revolution der zukunft. . . . Insbesondere soll und muss daran festgehalten werden, dass die Abwendung der äussersten Schamch von unserem kurhessischen Vaterland im Somer und Herbst 1850 allein durch diesen Geist der Demütigung und des Gebetes möglich geworden und gelungen ist. Ob und wie lange diese Tatsache wird festgehalten werden—daran hängt die Zukunft unseres Vaterlandes.”

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 187. “Dahin gehört die Erfahrung, dass die Revolutino, welche gegen die Fürsten und Köngie gerichtet war, wesentlich nicht ihnene, sondern ihrer, Eigneschaft als Träger des göttlichen Amtes der Obrigkeit, also der Obrigkeit selbst, und diese wiederum nicht in letzter Instanz, sondern dem Herrn Jesus Christus und Gott dem Vater selbs galt, so lange sie besteht, gilt und, so oft sie widerkehrt, geltne wird. Diese Erfahrunggehört vorzugweise der evangelischen Kirche an, un din volltester Klarheit und erschöpfender Tiefe ist sie in unserem engeren Vaterlande gesmatch worden; denn nirgends hat man Recht, Eid, Geswissen, in so diabolischer Weise gemissbraucht als in Kurhessen, nirgends ist auch die Lüge an und für sich so kräftig gehandhabt wordern als gegen das göttliche Recht,

Here another development in Vilmar's theology of ministry develops with the political situation in Lower Hesse. He had already asserted the right and necessity of the clerical office to govern the church as the preferred alternative to either synod or absolutist government domination; he had already claimed that the ministry had this right, given to the prince in emergency but now to be reclaimed. Applying the Lutheran theology of the two realms, church and civil government, he recognized that both exercise authority divinely bestowed. Since the rightful authority of both church and state were under attack, he relied then on the office of the ministry to strengthen both the legitimacy of the ministerial office as well as the legitimacy of the Elector. The political stability of church and prince became in the post-revolutionary era, a complementary interest of both authorities.

Observing this complementary relationship between Vilmar's model of the ministry and the civil rule of Lower Hesse, Renate Sälter comments:

In his discourse as the representative of the Superintendent, Vilmar places the importance of the ministerial office in the center. He emphasizes the dignity and authority of his office. The exclusivity of the office holder is thereby emphasized so that to them alone the office of word and sacrament belong. The pastor is the responsible shepherd of his dependent congregation. . . . The Pastor exclusively exercises church discipline. The ministerial office has the task of catechesis to restore the Christian faith as the foundation of God's [political and church] order.³⁶¹

The spiritual and political implications of this position have led to a number of conclusions of what he was attempting to accomplish. Sälter agrees with Rainer Strunk that Vilmar could assumed this theological position because of his concept of history; in his view, maintains Strunk, the basis of Vilmar's writings on the office depend on his conviction that the age of

welches in unserm Lande besteht. . . .”

³⁶¹ Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 148–9. “In seinen Reden als ertreter des Superintendenten stellte Vilmar die Bedeutung des geistlichen Amtes in den Mittelpunkt, er betonte Würde und Macht dieses Amtes. Die Exklusivität der Amtsträger wird dadurch unterstrichen, dass Ihnen ausschliesslich das Amt des Wortes und das Sakramentes zukomme. Der Pfarrer ist der verantwortliche Hirte seiner unmündigen Gemeinde. . . . Im Strafamt schliesslich hat der Pfarrer strenge Kirchenzucht to üben. Das geistliche Amt hat die heilspädagogische Aufgabe, den christlichen Glauben als Grundlage der Gottesordnung wiederherzustellen.”

revolution was the breaking in of the end times preceded by events of an apocalyptic nature. The role of pastor is to separate the believers from the unbelievers by this teaching, and thus is the full spiritual implication of Vilmar's theology of ministry explained. While it is true that Vilmar linked his theology with eschatology, it is nevertheless also true, as noted, that contemporary concerns for church and state were the primary driving factors in the continuing explication and development of the Theology of Fact as it pertained to the office of the ministry. Thus one must read with some misgivings the conclusion of these two critics when they decide:

The deeper reason for Vilmar's political theology should therefore 'be not sought primarily in his theological justification of order in the received social and political situation.' That the revolution as the in-breaking of apocalyptic age is meant, Strunk thereby separates from practical-political concerns pursued by Vilmar. Strunk maintains that the eschatological meaning of the world would be the ultimate motive of Vilmar and asks the question in so doing whether Vilmar was primarily a theologian or a politician. . . . ³⁶²

An examination of Vilmar's lectures published posthumously as *Lehrbuch der Pastoraltheologie*, fails to lend much support to this view, which likely would have been highlighted if Strunk and Sälter's evaluation truly identified the a single presupposition to explain the office of the ministry. Clearly Vilmar would have seen considered the church and the office of the ministry as eschatological since the church, as the eschatological community, has long considered Christ the last revelation before his return in glory. To consider Vilmar's allusion to eschatology as exclusively determining his theology of ministry ignores the importance of other theological aspects of ministry expounded by Vilmar such as the theology of the church, a theology that serves as both presupposition and the larger part of which ministry is

³⁶² Ibid., 149. "Die tiefere Grund für Vilmars politische Theologie sei deshalb 'nicht primär in seiner ordnungstheologischen Rechtfertigung der überkommenen gesellschaftlichen und politischen Zustände (zu) suchen.' Dass die Revolution als hereinbrechen des apokalyptischen Zeitalters gedeutet wird, trennt Strunk somit von dem praktisch-politischen Anliegen, das Vilmar in der Kirche verfolgt, ab. Strunk behauptet, die eschatologische Deutung der Welt sei der letzte Beweggrund Vilmars und stellt damit die Frage, ob Vilmar primär Theologe oder Politiker war. . . ." See also Reiner Strunk, *Politische Ekklesiologie im Zeitalter der Revolution* (München, Mainz, 1971), 282.

only a part. Also it fails to lend due weight to Luther's theological evaluation of the two realms. It may be noted that Luther too felt he lived in the last days of the world, but few would consider such an opinion as crucial for his theology of the ministry or any other area.

The next chapter discusses the role of the pastor with regard to the world as Vilmar assesses the spiritual currents of his age and the role of the ministry in that context. However, his theology of the ministry, expounded and developed over time, did not grow from a preconceived eschatology and expectation of immediate apocalyptic phenomenon in the world. The elements of cultural, social, and political criticism for which Vilmar is well known were also expounded and developed over a period of time.

Further, the legitimacy of the office and its right to govern the church received its development from the crisis facing the church in Lower Hesse following the Revolution of 1848. Nowhere does he invoke eschatological expectations in this issue. The role of the pastorate with regard to duties within the church does not receive eschatological emphasis. Hence, in describing necessary presuppositions for pastoral theology, Vilmar touches on a number of areas that might have revealed a basis of eschatology or apocalyptic expectations. For example, the separation of church and state he explains in terms of the ruling authority. The phrase, "separation of church and state," means "nothing other, than a 'religionless state,' i.e. the removal of the call of the church, to accept and to sanctify worldly relations; it means the abandonment of the *usus legis politicus*, e.g. the establishment of non-Christian authorities."³⁶³ Further, he must accept complete responsibility for doctrine, sacraments, and the salvation of the congregation.³⁶⁴ Other examples could be given where eschatology could have been mentioned either in connection or

³⁶³ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Lehrbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872), 8. "... nichts anderes, als einen 'religionslosen' Staat d.h. die Beseitigung des Berufes der Kirche, die weltlichen Verhältnisse zu durchdringen und zu heiligen; sie bedeutet das Aufgeben des *usus legis politicus* z.B. die Einsetzung nicht-christlicher Obrigkeiten."

justification, but such examples are lacking. It is more noteworthy that Vilmar considers worldly involvement a responsibility of Christians and the connection of state and church to be beneficial to both for carrying out the mandate of Christ from whom their respective authorities originate.

Nevertheless, in context of the events of his time, events that acted as a catalyst for his developing teaching of the church, eschatology not surprisingly played an important role. Ulrich Asendorf observes:

The connection, indeed, the inner basis of ecclesiology through the office should not lead to [a viewpoint] that the eschatological character of the office be overlooked. The exaggeration of Vilmar's doctrine of the pastoral office is his tribute to eschatology. As soon as the eschatological character of the office is no longer seen, the decisive history of salvation basis in understanding of the office with Vilmar fails. Cultural criticism and eschatology stand in immediate connection.³⁶⁵

The relationship of the church to the world and the pastor in his role as preacher does contain eschatological considerations as we study Vilmar as social critic in the next chapter.

On April 21, 1855, the General Superintendent Ernst died. The subsequent election of Vilmar to replace him prompted the Elector to seek opinions outside the consistory and diocese on the confessional issue never resolved from the late 1830s as well as the soundness of Vilmar's theology expounded publicly since that time. Opinions were sought from the theological faculty at the university in Marburg and from famous Jurist, Doctor Ludwig Richter in Berlin. Heinrich Heppe of the Marburg faculty criticized Vilmar and wrote polemically "against the catholicizing, hierarchical efforts of Dr. Vilmar." Ludwig Richter agreed with the opinion furnished by Heppe and his theological faculty in its essential points: that the historic confession of Lower Hesse was

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

³⁶⁵ Ulrich Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise und das Amt der Kirche: Voraussetzungen der Theologie von A.F.C. Vilmar, Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums*, vol. 18, ed. Max Keller-Hüschemenger, Wilhelm Mauer, Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, Ernst Sommerlath, and Walter Zimmerman (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967), 19. "Der Zusammenhang, ja, die innere Begründung der Ekklesiologie durch das Amt darf nicht dazu führen, dass der eschatologische Charakter des Amtes übersehen wird. Die Übersteigerung der Amtslehre Vilmars ist sein Tribut an die Eschatologie. Sobald der eschatologische Charakter des Amtes nicht mehr gesehen wird, fehlt die entscheidende heilsgeschichtliche Begründung im Verständnis des Amtes bei Vilmar.

Reformed, the Heidelberg Catechism best represented the theology of the state and questioned Vilmar's views of church and ministry.

Richter would excuse Vilmar's anti-revolutionary tendencies in his theology of the pastoral office under the pressure of difficult times. He wrote:

The writer goes even much further, because he identifies the call to establish and gather the church, with the authority of the service of the word, to the administration of the means of grace and to the treatment of discipline, which 'office,' i.e. the clergy, so exclusively with that he himself does not to belong to the communion of saints. Therefore we meet him on a path, on which he does not wish himself to follow, that otherwise the right of the 'office' he does not care to emphasize. It may be Catholic doctrine that divine authority be placed in a certain class [of people], from which all ecclesial life flows and harmonic movement is preserved. In the first place, evangelical concepts correspond really in no way that the word and the powers themselves as a deposit [of faith] should be transferred only to a certain office because according to the [church] order only those should publicly teach who are rightfully called by the church, indeed should we all proclaim God's word and work as Luther expressed in another sermon in January [?] 1544, for all time and in all manner of places. We all may be certain that the promise of the truth is not bestowed on one special class, and we all in comparison to the preaching office not simply those receiving, but we have the right, to judge the preaching of the Scriptures and of the Confessions.³⁶⁶

Identifying Vilmar's "catholicizing tendencies" he asserted that the Jesberg decision was illegal and in conflict with the constitution of 1852 where the Elector retained his authority to

Kulturkritik und Eschatologie stehen in unmittelbarem Zusammenhang."

³⁶⁶ Ludwig Richter, *Gutachten, die neuesten Vorgänge in der evangelischen Kirche des Kurfürstentums Hessen betreffend* (Leipzig, 1855), 32ff., quoted in Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 157–8. "Der Verfasser geht aber viel weiter, denn er legt den Beruf, die Kirche zu sammeln und zu gestalten, mit der Vollmacht zum Dienst zum Wort, zur Spendung der Gnadenmittel und zur Handhabung der Zucht, dem 'Amte,' d.i. den Geistlichen, so ausschliesslich bei, dass er selbst der Gemeinde der Heiligen daran keinen Theil zugestehen will. Damit treffen wir ihn auf einem Wege, auf welchen ihm selbst diejenigen nicht folgen werden, die sonst das Recht des 'Amtes' möglichst zu betonen pflegen. Die katolische Lehre mag es sein, dass die göttliche Vollmacht in einen bestimmten Stand gelegt sei, von welchem alles kirchliche Leben ausströmt und in harmonischer Bewegung erhalten wird. Evangelischen Begriffen entspricht es jedoch zuvörderst in keiner Weise, dass das Wort und die Kräfte desselben allein dem 'Amt' als ein Depositum erwiesen sein soll. Denn obschon nach der Ordnung nur diejenigen öffentlich lehren sollen, welche von der Kirche rechtmässig herufen sind, sollen doch wir alle, wie Luther es noch in einer Predigt im J. 1544 ausdrückt, zu aller Zeit und an allerlei Orten Gottes Wort und Werk verkündigen; wir alle dürfen gewiss sein, dass die Verheissung der Wahrheit nicht an einen besondern Stand ergangen ist, und wir alle sind gegenüber dem Predigtamte nicht bloß die empfangenden, sondern wir haben das Recht, die Predigt an der Schrift und dem Bekenntnisse zu messen."

govern the church as bishop. He accused the Inspector of promoting works righteousness through “external ordinance” and “legalism” with his understanding of sacrament and liturgy.

The old church orders, where they are not cancelled, in any case still appear as part of the legal code. But in between them and the present intervening time a change took precedence over moral conditions, over life relationships and over concepts, which with the renewal in its contained arrangements may not be disregarded, if not simply demanding an external legalism, but a true progress in rebuilding the church should take place.³⁶⁷

Further Richter assured the Elector that he rightfully had the authority to approve or veto Vilmar’s election. The Elector used these opinions as reason not to confirm the election of Vilmar to the office of Superintendent and appointed him as theology professor instead.

Professor of Theology at Marburg

The attacks leveled by such men as Heppe and Richter prompted the response found in *Theologie der Tatsache wider die Theologie der Rhetorik* in 1856. Here Vilmar defended his theological view of the ministry along with other topics that had been questioned in his election controversy. This programmatic writing furnishes the first comprehensive exposition of his theology, including that of the ministry, that had provoked such sharp attacks.

In this book, Vilmar notes that the doctrine of the church promoted in recent times from the Lutheran Confessions had provoked intense criticism. But none was sharper than the condemnations over the doctrine of the office, a doctrine that he saw rooted in the Confessions. The purpose of the doctrine he saw, like the means of grace that gave certainty of God’s grace and salvation, also came from the office entrusted to administer the sacraments, preach the word, and administer the Office of the Keys.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 64, Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer*, 159. “Die alten Kirchenordnungen sind, wo sie nicht aufgehoben, allerdings noch als Theile des gesetzlichen Materials anzusehen. Aber in der zwischen ihnen und der Gegenwart inneliegenden Zeit ist eine Wandelung der sittlichen Zustände, der Lebensverhältnisse und der Vorstellungen vorgegangen, welche bei der Erneuerung der in Ihnen enthaltenen Bestimmungen nicht ausser Acht gelassen werden darf, wenn nicht blos äussere Gesetzlichkeit gefördert werden, sondern ein wahrhafter Fortschritt im wiederaufbau

Rather than offer a thoroughly systematic justification for his viewpoint, he typically explained it in terms that were at once descriptive and also pastoral. He describes the manner in which the pastor comes to serve his congregation:

Does the congregation provide itself with this office? –the congregation of the true believing mixed with the evil and sinners? –is the number of the godless and openly sinners in the church from the sanctified, truly believing and obedient to provide themselves with this office? –or will at least the communion of saints and true believers provide themselves finally with the same? –does it give birth to it out of itself, thus will it exercise it itself as “part of its commission?”³⁶⁸

Could such an office originate with the congregation itself? No, the church congregation, like those claiming Christian faith everywhere, was itself is a mixture of believers and hypocrites. If the office and the means of grace it was charged with administering were grounded in the congregation, then there would be no certainty. So the pastoral office had its source outside the congregation; this point would be made again and again, in manner recognizing it as fact, and not a practice imposed on the church. By contrast, Vilmar made this point not just for rhetorical effect but to challenge opponents’ demands since the 1839 Hessian Confessional Dispute that congregations determine what pastors will teach and what they will not teach on pain of removal from office, in effect, treating the church as a tabula rasa on which those in charge could manifest their opinions, or “rhetoric,” on the fabric of the church.

Then pastorally, the arguments proceeds with the issue of certainty, and within a matrix of community and the whole rather than the atomized mass. In Vilmar’s own words:

Overall how in the church and in its doctrine and in its portrayal of doctrine should it otherwise rightfully happen, it has to be started from not from the tedious gathering together of details, but from the whole, not from empty sentences, but from the

der Kirche geschehen soll.”

³⁶⁸ Vilmar, *Tatsachen*, 91. “Versiehet sich die Gemeinde selbst mit diesem Amt? die Gemeinde, in qua vere credentibus admixti sunt mali et impii? Wird die Zahl der Gottlosen und offenbaren Sünder in der Kirche von den sanctis, vere credentibus und obedientibus mit diesem Amt versehen? Oder versieht sich endlich wenigstens die communio sanctorum et vere credentium mit demselben? Gebiert sie es aus sich selbst, damit es ‘in ihrem Auftrag’ and ihr selbst ausgeübt werde?”

fullness of the contents, not from the uncertain and doubtful, but from the certain and immovable, not from the searching but from the found—so is it necessary before all other things in the doctrine of the pastoral ministry.

The pastoral ministry is not once otherwise understood as means of experience.³⁶⁹

He ties together his ecclesiology of a visible church to this teaching of the pastoral ministry. Those who deny the teaching of the pastoral office do so with a conviction that the church is invisible, that is, they deny the visible means of grace which the office administers. He appeals to the Augsburg Confession and finds there the teaching task of the church in various articles where he apprehends a thread running through various articles:

If one wants to take the trouble to look over, over which, at first glance in any case, to be sure, a certain connection in Article VII of the AC, through which the pedagogical task of the church were not removed, indeed improperly shoved into the background, and beside it also to consider Art. VIII, XII, XIII, XV with the appropriate discussion belonging to them of the Apology, so it will itself yield, that this abstract doctrine of the invisible church, which one cares to present as doctrine of the evangelical church, in the AC has no basis.³⁷⁰

This appeal to the Augsburg Confession would receive further exposition in his lectures in theology at the university. Again we see the metacriticism of Vilmar; in his theology of church and the Jesberg solution to confessional polity, he appealed to what was already present: the clergy in the church in Hesse who were already positioned to assume the role called for as a correction to what had and was going wrong. Now Vilmar, based on his study of the Lutheran

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 89-90. "Wie überall in der Kirche und in deren Lehre und Lehrdarstellung, soll es anders recht zugehen, nicht von dem mühsam zusammengelesenen Einzelnen, sondern von dem Ganzen, nicht von dem leeren Gesätz, sondern von der Fülle des Inhalts, nicht von dem Unsichern und Zweifelhaften, sondern von dem Gewissen und Unwandelbaren, nicht von dem Suchen sondern von dem Gefundenhaben ausgegangen werden muss, so ist es vor allen andern Dingen in der Lehre vom geistlichen Amt notwendig. Das geistliche Amt wird nicht einmal annähernd anders verstanden, als mittels der Erfahrung."

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 94. "Will man sich die Mühe nehmen, über den, auf den ersten Blick allerdings einen gewissen Anstoss gebenden Artikel VII der A.C., durch welchen die pädagogische Aufgabe der Kirche wo nicht beseitigt, doch ungebührlich in den Hintergrund geschoben scheint, hinauszugehen, und neben demselben auch Art. VIII, XII, XIII, XV mit den dazu gehörigen Erörterungen der Apologie gebührend zu berücksichtigen, so wird sich ergeben, dass diejenige abstracte Lehre von der unsichtbaren Kirche, welche man als Lehre der evangelischen Kirche aufzustellen pflegt, I der A.C. keinen Grund hat."

Confessions, found a correction to the practical and pastoral issues with an exposition of the Augsburg Confession. His assessment was reflected in his lectures.

In this article it is taught that for the attainment of faith:

a special office . . . belongs, that

the same is established by God

its functions should be proclamation and the administration of the sacraments, and that

through these functions the Holy Spirit is given, which

works faith where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel.³⁷¹

Expanding on these observations, he affirmed that the office of the ministry was distinguished from the priesthood of all Christians; he concluded that it was not established by human conferment which led him to deny that its source was by any chance from the congregation. In this assertion he refuted the heretical Socinians who denied any special office and refuted Schliermacher who denied that there was any special office and that the mandate of Matthew 28:16-20 was transferred to the congregation. Vilmar concludes that the promise of Christ to the end of days also contains the mandate of a special office directed to make disciples by baptizing and teaching.³⁷² Here Vilmar sees the solution to the practical and pastoral problem. “If we but hold to these parts [of doctrine], so it is to be expected, that we, those holding fast, will out of the same experience new shares of church doctrine and life.”³⁷³

³⁷¹ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Die Augsburg Confession Erklärt*, ed. Dr. K. W. Piderit (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1870), 73–4. “Im diesem Artikel wird gelehrt, dass zur Erlangung des Glaubens 1, ein besonderes Amt (ministerium ecclesiamsticum Predigtamt) gehöre, dass 2, dasselbe von Gott eingesetzt sei, dass 3, die Functionen desselben die Verkündigung und die Ausspendung der Sacramente seinen, und dass 4, durch diese Functionen der h. Geist gegeben werde, welcher 5, Glauben wirke wo und wann er wolle, in denen welche das Evangelium hören.”

³⁷² Ibid., 74.

³⁷³ Ibid.

Faith and salvation are bound to the ministerium ecclesiamsticum and the congregation is built by this ministry through the means of grace. Indeed the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit is tied to this ministerial office. He references Luther who maintained in a sermon on John 14: “. . . the Holy Spirit hovers not over the clouds but is below on earth where Christ points him—one should therefore not rise up to him, but draw to him and unite with him in the office and authority of Christendom. . . .”³⁷⁴

In considering AC VII on the church, Vilmar recognizes two attributes or two characteristics of the church: the pure teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. These two aspects of the church he identifies with the objective nature of the church, which, as we have, seen he identifies with the commission and function of the ministry.³⁷⁵

AC XIV he identifies as a continuation of AC V on which the latter article is based. Vilmar observes that Melanchthon in his Apology does not define ordination as such but “only refers to the sentence that where there are right word and right sacrament, there is also the right church.”³⁷⁶ He observes that one cannot appoint himself to the office, but then from whom does one receive such appointment? It can come only “From those who already are in the ministry.”³⁷⁷ “A recognizable mandate of God, which indeed

should be in the ministerium ecclesiamsticum, is only possible for the same to be found and given in those where it is already present . . . who has nothing, can give nothing. . . .”³⁷⁸

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 75. “. . . der h. Geist schwebt nicht oben über den Wolken, sondern ist hienieden, wo ihn Christus hinweist,—man soll also nicht hinaufgassen, sondern ihn ziehen and vereinigen in das Amt und Regiment der Christenheit, des Worts und Sacraments. . . .”

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 84-93.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 130. “. . . beruft sich nur auf den Satz, dass da, wo rechtes Wort und rechtes Sacrament sei, auch die rechte Kriche sei.”

³⁷⁷ Ibid. “. . . von denen welche bereits in dem ordo sind. . . .”

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 131. “Ein erkennbares Mandate Gottes, welches doch im ministerium ecclesiamsticum sein soll, ist nur möglich für dasselbe zu finden and zu geben in dem schon vorhandenen . . . wer keins hat, kann auch keins geben. . . .”

Further Vilmar observes that AC XIV opposes both extremes that he had opposed during the time of revolution in the previous decade.

In this Article the *ordo ecclesiasticus* is protected against both opposite extremes: Caesaropapism and (secular and spiritual) democracy. The spiritual office receives its mandate and also its external form neither from secular authority nor from the congregation. . . . Both lead to dissolution of the church . . . one through the dissolution of the office, then the preaching of the word, the Office of the Keys, and in the world in which the office is chiefly administered, as the world dictates it, according to chance political considerations and viewpoints until Christ is at last entirely forgotten. The other [is] through subjectivity, where in the same fashion the view, personal trends of belief in the congregation, should the same also still so anti-Christian, relinquish [the] norm for the vocation in ordinem and for the administration of the *ministerii ecclesiastici*.³⁷⁹

Here Vilmar repeats his concerns from the preceding years that neither illegitimate government authority nor a democratic apparatus define the church—to its destruction—and thus the only possible solution was to be found in the pastoral office. This line of reasoning would find its basis in the Augsburg Confession and Apology where he found a meaning not asserted by others when the confessional basis of Lutheran state churches had been under attack. With the new political and church situation across Germany, his re-examination of the confessional documents led him to the solution discussed here.

Luther in occasional writing provided him further encouragement:

. . . with St. Paul, all apostles and prophets faithfully have to say ‘thus says the Lord,’ that God himself has said. And again I have been an apostle and prophet of Jesus Christ in this sermon. Who cannot extol such from his sermon, who allows this

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 132–3. “In diesem Artikel wird der *ordo ecclesiasticus* gegen die beiden einander gegenüber liegenden Extreme: den Cäsareopapismus und den (weltlichen und geistlichen) Demokratisumus geschützt. Der geistliche Stand empfängt sein Mandat auch nach dessen äusserlicher Seite weder von dem weltlichen Regiment noch von der Gemeinde. . . . Beide führen zur Auflösung der Kirche; da seine durch allmähliches Aufgehen des Amtes, dann der Verkündigung des Wortes, des Amtes der Schlüssel u. in der Welt, indem dann gepredigt und überhaupt das Amt verwaltet wird, wie es die Welt anordnet, nach zufälligen, politischen Rücksichten und Gesichtspunkten, bis zuletzt Christus gänzlich vergessen wird,—das andere durch Subjectivismus, indem alsdann consequenter Weise die Ansicht, Glaubensrichtung u. der Gemeinde, sei dieselbe auch noch so widerchristlich, Norm für die vocation in ordinem und für die Verwaltung des *ministerii ecclesiastici* abgibt.”

preaching to be rejected, then he, without a doubt, denies and blasphemes God (Wider Hans Wurst).³⁸⁰

It is often brought up in criticizing Vilmar that he completely dismisses the laity and their active participation in the work of the church. Certainly this criticism was leveled in his day as we have seen by Heinrich Heppe as well as Ludwig Richter. All who considered the ministry proceeding from the congregation were his opponents in his assertions concerning the office as mandated and commissioned by God himself.

And what is more, if entirely superficial and childish complaints want to be maintained, as for example, that indeed all Christians are called at all times and in all places to proclaim God's word and work, that is entirely itself understood (where prophecy according to the proof of the New Testament happens along with the pastoral office and is distinguished from it), with which here the question at issue has nothing to do in the least—that the pastoral office is no office of power and act, but only an office of preaching (through which the church itself would in modern fashion be turned into a crowd in a theological auditorium, the apostolic gifts and directions, the confessions of the evangelical church and the gathered historical witnesses denied to its face)—or indeed, that the pastoral office is really nothing more than a voluntary service in the inner mission, through which the congregation would certainly be scattered—from which certainly according to the theory the office should proceed—and more of this type thing, so rich is this childishness that it measures not up to rhetoric, but belongs in elementary school and should no longer be considered here.³⁸¹

Clearly Vilmar considered the “exhibitive” nature of the means of grace to be tied to the man in the office and never considered whether such means could even conceivably be

³⁸⁰ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 89–90. “. . . mit St. Paulo, allen Aposteln und Prpheten trötzlich sagen muss Haec dixit Dominus, das hat Gott selbs gesagt. Et iterum Ich bin ein apostel und Prophet Jesu Christi gewest in dieser Predigt. Were solches nicht rhümen kann von seinger Predigt, der lasse das predigen anstehen, denn er leugt gewislich und lästert Gott.” (*Luther wider Hans Wurst*)”

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 95. “Wenn aber sogar ganz oberflächliche und kindische Vorstellungen geltend gemacht werden wollen, wie z. B. dass ja doch alle Christen berufen seien, zu aller Zeit und an allerlei Orten Gottes Wort und Werk zu verkündigen, was sich ganz von selbst versteht (indem die Prophetie nach Ausweis des N.T. neben dem geistlichen Amte hergeht und von demselben verschieden ist), mit der hier verliegenden Frage aber nicht das Mindeste zu thun hat -: dass das geistliche Amt gar kein Amt der Kraft und der That sei, sondern nur ein Amt des Predigens (wodurch die Kirche sich in ein theologisches Auditorium moderner Art, die Gemeinde in ein Publicum verwandeln würde, den apostolischen Gaben und Vorschriften, den Bekenntnissen der evangelischen Kirche und den sämtlichen geschlichen Zeugnissen ins Angesicht widersprechend)—oder gar, dass das geistliche Amt eigentlich nichts anderes sei als ein freiwilliger Dienst in der innern Mission, wodurch sogar die Gemeinde aufgelöst werden würde, aus welcher doch nach der Theorie das Amt hervorgehen soll—und Mehreres der Art, so reichen diese Kindereien nicht einmal an die Rhetorik heran, sondern gehören in die Klasse der Abecedarier, sollen auch hier weier in Aufschlag kommen.”

administered by those outside the office in the absence of a pastor. This concern was not Vilmar's because this abstract question had little to do with the issues he confronted during the last twenty years of his life.

The responsibilities of the office, as well as its existence, were clearly part of the essence of the church (*esse*) and not simply something for its benefit (*bene esse*). The church could not survive without the office instituted by Christ, and who exercised the apostolic authority to make disciples with the means mandated by Christ in Matthew 28:16-20.

Assessment

Vilmar joined the public debate over the issue of church and ministry and sought with his theology of the ministry to correct, renew, and lend clarity to theology of the ministry. These first two goals he undertook in his characteristic fashion of metacriticism, seeking to correct Schleiermacher's assertion that the office came from the congregation, and to restore a Lutheran understanding of the pastoral office. Further, as he had done with the broader topic of the church, he sought a new clarity of the Lutheran Confessions as it identified the origin, purpose, and mandate of the pastoral ministry. In this task he would be criticized for advocating a theology that either conflicted with the Lutheranism or for adopting a theology not based there at all.

Though there were and remain many who do not share Lutheran practice and doctrine of the ministry, the focus of this assessment must remain with those who assess the Lutheran character of Vilmar's theology of ministry; a number would charge that he elevated the pastorate at the expense of the congregation, and this move is alien to Lutheranism. Part of our assessment must examine this charge.

As one might infer from the polemical debate over the church, the 19th century debate over the role and authority of the clergy was equally controversial. The role of priesthood (of all

believers) and the ministry was commonly confused and the resulting discussion over the perceived role of authority could often be described as fiery. In Vilmar's day, the theological debate really did not exhaust the topic nor has the issue been resolved in our own day. The difficulty frequently lies in the discussion over the unique nature of the pastoral office, "The pastoral office should be observed by its founding by Christ as without comparison."³⁸²

His critics include Friedrich Kantzenbach who attributes Vilmar's understanding of the pastoral office to Möhler's introduction of an institutional church. He believes all of Vilmar's theology is based on this adopted ecclesiology of Möhler, reflecting a conformity also in the role and status of the clergy. He sees a common thinking in ontological categories in their understanding of church and office.³⁸³ In this position he attempts to refute Bernhard Lohse's understanding that the basis of Vilmar's theology was his understanding of revelation, where Christians, in a sense repeat, as they live and experience the truth of revelation, the truth as it was from the beginning, so that the history of the church is a dogmatic history of moving from clarity to clarity. On this basis according to Lohse, Vilmar's theology develops. Lohse criticizes Vilmar's trying to achieve certainty in this fashion because, in his view, it renders the word of God as something static rather than a living word.³⁸⁴ Regardless of attempts to identify the one basis of Vilmar's theology, a single basis approach does little justice to the developing theology, informed by many currents of theology as well as events in this period of revolution. Indeed its explication resulted in large part from Vilmar's change in professions from gymnasium director to government and diocese official, and professor.

³⁸² Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 149. "Das geistliche Amt sei von der Einsetzung Christi her als eine Grösse sui generis."

³⁸³ Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, "Vilmar's 'Theologie der Tatsachen' und die 'Symbolik Johann Adam Möhlers,'" *Zeitschriften für Kirchengeschichte* 70, no's. 3-4 (1959): 269-70.

³⁸⁴ Bernhard Lohse, "Kirche und Offenbarung bei A.F.C. Vilmar," *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1957): 465-466.

Ernst Wolf protested that any attempt to describe the church in sociological terms as one normally understands “society” or “association” must be rejected as a “romanticizing” of the church. He attributes to Schliermacher the attempt to manifest the Spirit within the church; he then attributes to Möhler the equally questionable attempt to describe the church as the continuing incarnation of Christ in the world. This move by Möhler results in hierarchy that must go with such a move but for which there is no justification. He criticizes Kliefoth and Löhe—not mentioning Vilmar by name—and rejects any attempt to develop a sociology of the church, a move typical in the early 19th century of both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians. He considered the attempt by men such as Vilmar to elevate the estimation of the pastoral office making the church a *causa secunda* of salvation.³⁸⁵ Further he denies that the ministry was ordained in Luther’s view along with word and sacrament as “means” to attain what they attain. Rather, the office remains established by God but with no dependence on the ministry specifically for the faith. Rather the word preached by the pastor is the actual means of salvation.³⁸⁶

Ulrich Asendorf recognizes that Vilmar once again emphasized the conviction that Christ was truly present in the pastor’s witness. He might be criticized for emphasizing the pastor rather than the word of God the pastor preached. Yet Vilmar was undoubtedly one of the few who recovered key aspects of Lutheran understanding of the pastoral office from oblivion. For this alone he assumes a stature that critics cannot deny.³⁸⁷

Asendorf stresses that the alternatives between office and congregation is a false one. Neither are entrusted with sole authority to govern the church. Vilmar responded to a common

³⁸⁵ Ernst Wolf, *Peregrinatio: Studien zur reformatischen Theologie und zum Kirchen- Problem*, 2d ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1962), 279–91.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁸⁷ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 150.

trend to understand the office as an extension of the congregation and totally under its authority in teaching. This theme was a source of conflict in the early Hessian Confession Conflict as well as providing a basis in various pieces of post-revolutionary legislation. Vilmar rightly saw that such a move, whether rule of the office by the congregation, or the threat of government sovereignty in church teaching, would result in the church being absorbed into the world. Again here is a major achievement of Vilmar that should receive due regard in assessing his worth and contributions.³⁸⁸

Rudolph Keller rejects much of the criticism mounted of Vilmar in the 20th century. Comparing the development of theological thought of Wilhelm Löhe and A.F.C. Vilmar, he recognized that their individual circumstances differed considerably, and therefore, one must be careful when assessing their contributions. Löhe's championing of the Lutheran Confessions was accomplished in an environment of conflict with the established church authority in heavily Roman Catholic Bavaria. Vilmar's struggles took place in the conflicts of revolution and reaction discussed above. His experience with democratic experiments certainly lent to distrust of congregational, popular sovereignty. Three centuries after the confession had been composed, Lutheran leaders had little to assist them in the struggles of their century to identify the proper relationship of the congregation to the pastor, the congregation to the state, the congregation to other congregations. The contextual, occasional nature of Vilmar's theology can only be understood in consideration of these circumstances. These issues cannot be transferred immediately into our time and place. Yet many critics fail to see the viewpoint and what was at stake for men such as the Theologian of Reality. Their thought and criticism frequently reflect the thought of their own day and not the state of 19th century Germany.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 150–1.

³⁸⁹ Rudolph Keller, "August Vilmar und Wilhelm Löhe: Historische Distanz und Nähe der Zeitgenossen im

Eberhard Amerlung emphasizes the political environment and Vilmar's understanding of the pastoral office developing from the time of the Revolution of 1848. "As for Hengstenberg thereby also for Vilmar the pastoral office became the basis of judgment of contemporary issues."³⁹⁰ We must postpone until the next chapter Vilmar's belief in the role of the pastoral office to judge the world situation of their time. Yet this central position of Vilmar's theology developed as he found need to address it and spell out his position. The conversion of Vilmar to the conservative politician for which he would be reviled into the present day, took place only during the period 1848-1850. If he could establish and promote a new political position in the face of social revolution, how can it not be obvious that this revolution that sought to assert its authority over the church would not mold his views of the pastoral office and its authority as well? Amelung's estimation supports the occasional and gradual maturing of Vilmar's critique as events ran their course over time. As stated before, it illuminates the method by which Vilmar found opportunity to speak on important issues, i.e. as the issues assumed importance and received analysis of an occasional nature.

Vilmar's method of developing this theology was quite similar to Luther's with whom he felt a kinship in having shared religious experience of justification, or as Vilmar might have said, along with the church, personally to have experienced revelation as it pertained to this doctrine.³⁹¹ Vilmar himself found Luther's straightforward method appealing and assessed him as "a completely unscientific man."³⁹² We also find here a method of theology that Vilmar might have imitated, intentionally or not. He wrote of Luther's style, "Luther's literary presentations

Blick auf ihr Amtsverständnis," *Kerygma und Dogma* 39 (J– Sep 1993): 214–22.

³⁹⁰ Eberhard Amelung, "A.F.C. Vilmar's Entwicklung zum konservativen Politiker," *Zeitschrift zur evangelische Ethik* (Gütersloh: Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1965), 109. "Wie für Hengstenberg ist damit auch für Vilmar das Amt der Obrigkeit der Ausgangspunkt zur Beurteilung der Zeitereignisse geworden."

³⁹¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, "August Vilmar's Lutherverständnis," *Luther-Jahrbuch* 21 (1939), (reprinted Amsterdam: Jon Benjamins N.V., 1967), 92.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 77. "... einen gänzlich unwissenschaftlichen Menschen. . . ."

throughout have the mark of critical immediacy.” This the Theologian of Reality enjoyed. “He carves from the whole log. All is truly discovered and seen, lived and experienced, and then presented in striking expressions and in rapid development.”³⁹³

According to Asendorf, the absence of an exhaustive, systematic approach, often resulting in tensions between opposite poles, was an aspect of pastoral theology that Luther shared with Vilmar. For Luther, for example, ordination was only performed by other clergy, but Luther was describing how it normally was done for the sake of pointing to the individual’s qualifications, and not dictating it as a condition of ordination; likewise, Luther would not have excluded the congregation as Vilmar specifically did.

Also, it is apparent that Vilmar’s “*Amtslehre*” emerges only with the background of a vision of European ruin. Besides, the nineteenth century was unable to differentiate the distinctive aspects of Reformation theology. Hence the concerns of the last century remain inadequate to completely assess Vilmar’s thought. We receive from him, a Reformation-informed emphasis that the pastoral office cannot emerge from the congregation:

In agreement with the Reformation Vilmar state in all urgency, that the pastoral office cannot be an exponent of the congregation, because the congregation cannot rule itself. Accordingly, it is under the lordship of Christ who leads it through word and sacrament. Every type of delegation theory has no room within a Reformation-ordained theology. Here Vilmar brought into recognition one of the essential assertions of the Reformation.³⁹⁴

In his advice to the Bohemians in need of a bishop when the Roman bishops would not undertake the preaching of the gospel as understood by the reformers, Luther considered it

³⁹³ Ibid., 76. “Luthers literarische Darstellung hat durchweg das Gepräge der kritischen Unmittelbarkeit. Er schneidet durchweg aus dem ganzen Holz. Alles ist wahrhaft empfunden und angeschaut, erlebt und erfahren, und dann in den treffendsten Ausdrücken und in raschem Fortgang dargestellt.”

³⁹⁴ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 151–2. “In übereinstimmung mit den Reformatoren hat Vilmar in aller Dringlichkeit gesagt, dass das Amt nicht Exponent der Gemeinde sein kann, denn die Gemeinde kann sich selbst nicht regieren. Sie ist unter der Herrschaft Christi, der sie durch Wort und sacrament leitet. Jede Art von Delegationstheorie hat innerhalb einer reformatorisch bestimmten Theologie keinen Raum. Hier hat Vilmar eine der wesentlichen Aussagen der Reformation wieder zur Geltung gebarcht.”

necessary and proper for the clergy to elect their own bishop for this purpose. Asendorf believes that there are indeed parallels with Vilmar's theology of office and that of Luther, a parallel theology for which Vilmar is often not credited. The selection of a new bishop does not imply a delegating of the office from the congregation. Rather God mandated that men would preach the Gospel. One might agree with Asendorf that Vilmar's theology of the pastoral office is one of exception. Such an assessment may not justify it completely, but it cannot be rightfully assessed by disregarding the circumstances by which it was formulated.³⁹⁵

In the chapter of the church's life and thought that we associate with the Theologian of Reality, August Vilmar, it must be admitted that he recovered essential aspects of Lutheran understanding of the ministry, a recovery that offered defense against the total absorption of the church into social and political institutions. What was at stake for Vilmar was the recovered the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the pastor, a proclamation by which the hearers would be assured and reassured of God's grace and by it, receive the salvation that Christ came to bring. For this alone he assumes a stature that critics ought not to deny.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 156-7.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 150.

CHAPTER 6

CULTURAL CRITICISM

The social unrest that entered into Vilmar's life he often referred to as revolutions from above and from below. The former he identified with two incidents: Napoleon's invasion and occupation of Lower Hesse and other German lands, and the annexation of the nation to Brandenburg-Prussia in the aftermath of Austria's defeat in 1866. The latter are known as the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848. All these resulted from social forces that Vilmar would consider inimical to German culture, and if left unchecked, they would result in a disaster for all of Germany. His apprehension found expression in his book *Theologie der Tatsachen wider Theologie der Rhetorik*. In his chapter, "Pastoral Theology," he notes a task of the pastoral office that lies within the church but focusing outside the church.

It is a matter of the spiritual currents of time in their connection to the preaching office—to the church, to the future of the Lord, but also to characterize to the point the external, nearer, worldly future—and the tasks which the servant [of the word] has to speak to answer these currents face to face. He notes with relentless sharpness: pleasure, and the world of luxury, industry (the so-called 'intelligence'), materialism, pauperism and communism, revolution and 'omnipotence of the state,' literature, the cult of genius, art and science. . . .³⁹⁷

The breadth and depth of Vilmar's social criticism merits study of its own. He clearly ranks as one of the great cultural critics of the 19th century. He has been compared with such cultural

³⁹⁷ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen wider Theologie der Rhetorik: Bekenntnis und Abwehr* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 110–11. "Es handelt sich also darum, die geistlichen Zeitströmungen in ihrem Verhältnisse zum Predigtamte, zur Kirche, zu der Zukunft des Herrn, aber auch zu der äusseren, näheren, weltlichen Zukunft auf das Bestimmteste zu charakterisieren und die Aufgaben welche der Diener am Worte diesen Strömungen gegenüber zu lösen hat, mit unerbitterlicher Schärfe verzeichnen: Genuss- und Luxuswelt, Industrie (die s.g. 'Intelligenz'), Materialismus, Pauperismus und Communismus, Revolution und 'Omnipotenz des Staates,' Literatur, Geniecultus, Kunst und Wissenschaft. . . ."

critics of the 19th century as Jakob Burckhardt, Cortes, and de Toqueville.³⁹⁸ Yet to not examine it in conjunction with the theology of church and ministry limits a world view that saw the criticism of culture a necessary task of the ministry, the ministry that stood in the center of his ecclesiology. Hence, much of what he had to say, and much that was said about him, must be seen within the perspective of his view of his German 19th century context, his evaluation of the preceding centuries—centuries where he detected a steady decline in Western civilization, and the future which many saw he foretold with a prophetic accuracy. Opponents of Vilmar’s theology considered him and continue to assess him and others of his confessional conviction as irrelevant, confining themselves into a “spiritual ghetto” and away from the currents of the day, are themselves in danger of self-exclusion if they were to welcome the ideas of communism and other ideas proposed by the “left-wing Hegelians,” ideas now largely exhausted after a century of revolution and international tension. His warnings of an increased Prussian militarism manifested themselves in the Willhelmina Empire only three years after his death; the twentieth century gives ample demonstration of the accuracy or inaccuracy of his alarm. Who cannot sharply note his warnings, after the passage of so much time, as he saw the German nation tottering on the brink of an abyss of destruction as it abandoned the Christian heritage that had given it being and identity?

Curiously Vilmar and others of the confessional movement were criticized and even today suffer the judgment of lying outside the current of the times, where the concerns of culture and society were ignored for the concerns of a “repristinated” theology. Just as Vilmar’s concern for the church was forward-looking and anticipated questions that would increasingly become plain,

³⁹⁸ Ulrich Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise und das Amt der Kirche: Voraussetzungen der Theologie von A.F.C. Vilmar*, ed. Max Keller-Hüschemenger, Wilhelm Maurer, Karl Heinrich Regstorf, Ernst Sommerlath, and Walter Zimmermann, vol.18, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967), 62.

he also provided a cultural critique and discovered in the currents of his time the looming destruction of German civilization. A theology of church and ministry would not often concern itself with such cultural criticism. Yet since the Theologian of Reality saw it as a task of the church to criticize and to correct contemporary errors of a nation abandoning its basis of faith, this metacritical task comprises a part of his view of the church and office.

Writing at the end of the 1960s, Ulrich Asendorf assesses Vilmar's insights as that tumultuous decade drew to a close: "They want to look among the theologians of the [19th] century, among whom otherwise such an illusionless picture of the situation is to be found. There is no other!"³⁹⁹

Part of the exploration of Vilmar's assessment must be its applicability not only in regard to the modern era he experienced but its accuracy in assessing and offering a theology for the period following his death and to the end of the twentieth century and even beyond. Further, now that in the estimation of many, the Western world has entered a post-modern or post-critical era, one must assess the value of Vilmar's evaluation of the world after the modernism he criticized may have exhausted itself.

The Emergence of German Culture: Presuppositions

As early as 1844, Vilmar noted that German culture had emerged from Christianity.

In our day those individuals who want to take a position of the greatest indifference against Christianity, even the most cold hearted, who always take the position of greatest indifference against faith and church, they have to admit that the Christian faith has been for a thousand years one with the national life of the people of the West, chiefly the German people as the inner growing life element, not one of mere knowledge, but the shared, fulfilling essence of the German nation, and that it would in its depth have been the fullness of life's content.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁹ Ulrich Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 142. "Man mag unter den Theologen des Jahrhunderts Umschau halten, bei wem sonst noch ein so illusionloses Bild der Lage zu finden ist. Es gibt keinen zweiten!"

⁴⁰⁰ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Geschichte der deutschen Nationalliteratur*, 14th ed. (Marburg and Leipzig: N.C. Elwrtische Univrsitäts Buchhandlung, 1871), 420. "Es mögen in unseren Tagen die Individuen eine Stellung gegen das

Vilmar's metacritique may be identified as a polemic against the "theoretical man." He enters into a new area of cultural criticism, a criticism belonging to a sphere emerging from profoundly coherent and consistent thought.⁴⁰¹ He found in the early Middle Ages a unity between the educated and all others in society. There was found a unified manner of thinking, a common world view, a common faith. Speaking of the ancient sagas that reflected this early unity, he observed:

The sagas . . . were not something conceived, from individual contrivance, especially not invented or devised, but shared real experience of the entire people. . . . Received in an age and accepted in an age, in which there were yet no educated and uneducated, no cultured and uncultured, no over-refined *haut volee* and no one submerged in dirt and common, raw masses, in an age where the king not only spoke the same dialect with the lowest man of his people, but also through them was united completely with them in all things essential to a view of life and morality with them to the last.⁴⁰²

This cultural harmony, between educated and uneducated became tenuous with the arrival of scholasticism. At the same time emerged a city culture where all manner of people found themselves lumped together in a public mass with no common interest or uniting culture. Dating this change, already known in German in the 13th century, he traced its establishment at pre-eminent German universities: the early 14th century as was established in Prague, then Heidelberg, then at the beginning of the 15th century in Leipzig. This process began the

Christentum einnehmen, welche sie immer wollen, so viel wird auch der Kälteste, der gegen Glauben und Kirche Gleichgültigste, ja der entschiedene Gegner zugestehen müssen, dass der christliche Glaube seit eintausend Jahren ein mit dem nationalen Leben der Völker des Occidents vor allem des deutschen Volkes auf das innigste verwachsenes Lebenselement, ein nicht etwa bloss das Wissen, sondern das gesamte Sein der deutschen nation erfüllenden Lebensinhalt gewesen sei."

⁴⁰¹ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 37.

⁴⁰² Vilmar, *Geschichte Nationalliteratur*, 20. "Die sagen . . . waren nicht etwas Ersonnenes, von Einzelnen Erfundenes, überhaupt nichts Ersinnbares und Ersindbares, sondern teils wirkliche Erlebnisse des ganzen Volkes . . . angenommen hatten zu einer Zeit und festhielten in einer Zeit, in der es noch keine Gelehrte und Ungelehrte, keine Gebildete und Ungebildete, keine überfeinerte *haut volee* und keine in Schmutz und Gemeinheit versinkende rohe Masse gab, in einer Zeit, in welcher der König mit dem geringsten Manne seines Volkes nicht allein eben denselben Dialect sprach, sondern auch durch die in allen wesentlichen Dingen vollkommen gleiche lebensaufschauung und Sitte mit ihm auf das Junigste verbinden war."

separation of the educated and uneducated, the dissolution of the original organic unity of the German people.

Learning began to become dominant over life, as it [learning] should never preserve life in a healthy body of people (Volkskörper); a division began to develop within the people, a division which encroached far deeper and far more detrimentally in the inner life of the people, than the division of worldly classes, than the division between clergy and laity: the separation between the learned and unlearned, of whom the former held in contempt because of the local saying: 'the learned are puffed up,' and held them as unworthy and incapable of the high standpoint which they themselves assumed, abandoned itself without concern to the deepest barbarity—nothing, and especially recognized no poetry, at least not all, and even the poetry with its stamp of wisdom; what only partially belongs here that they only knew and wanted to know what happened on paper; however, they allowed and realm and church to go where they willed.⁴⁰³

Vilmar asserted that the Reformation led by Luther had a regenerative power to at least partially restore the unity of what had been lost; the unity was found in the new proclamation of justification, a proclamation that tore down the manmade wall between clergy and laity, and a proclamation that was experienced by individuals regardless of class:

[In the Reformation] . . . the entire accent of divine revelation and the church rested on a person's own experience of sin and of grace, and where the dividing wall between clergy and laity was torn down, where it recognized all varieties of spiritual gifts and the same means of grace for the most gifted and the most lacking in gifts, but rather both were gathered in the same sin and in the same redemption, in the same sorrow and in the same joy in the better life. There is therefore a true, and in the noblest sense a popular manifestation, a popular form of the church—how the true church lay, generally speaking, in the true folk life where the necessary seed for development lay prepared.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 243. "Das Wissen fieng an ein Uebergewicht über das Leben zu bekommen, wie es dasselbe in einem gesunden Volkskörper niemals erhalten darf; es begann sich eine Scheidung im Volke zu bilden, welche weit tiefer und weit nachteiliger in das innerste Leben desselben eingreift, als die Scheidung der weltlichen Stände, als die Scheidung zwischen Geistlichen und Laien: die Trennung zwischen Wissenden und Unwissenden, von denen die ersten nach dem auch hier geltenden Spruche: 'das Wissen bläst auf' die andern verachteten, und als unwürdig und unfähig des hohen Standpunktes, den sie selbst einnahmen, der tiefsten Barbarei gleichgültig überliessen—nichts, und namentlich keine Poesie anerkannten, in so fern nicht alles, und eben auch die Poesie mit ihrem Weisheitsstempel bezeichnet war; abgesehen davon, was hierher nur zum Teil gehört, dass sie bloss von Thaten wussten und wissen wollten, welche auf dem Papier geschehen, dagegen Reich und Kirche dahin fahren liessen, wohin sie wollten."

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 296–7. ". . . welche den ganzen Accent der göttlichen Offenbarung und der Kirche auf die eigene Erfahrung von der Sünde und von der Gnade legte, und welche die Scheidewand zwischen Klerus und Laien niederriss, indem sie bei aller Verschiedenheit der geistlichen Gaben auch für den Begabtesten keine anderen

Vilmar maintained that there existed an analogy between the time of scholasticism and the Enlightenment and its residue of rationalism in the Germany of his day. Just as the Reformation had restored to the German lands a unity of contentment and spiritual peace lost in the “pagan” thought of scholasticism, he believed the Reformation possessed a regenerative power to restore Germany yet again from the “new paganism:”

[The Christian faith] accounts for the entire Middle Ages in all its manifestations a loud witness, and it cannot be denied even by people blinded by a passionate unbelief; from this deep inner contentment our poetry witness from the old times; as we observed earlier in the most decisive manner: the quiet peace, the unclouded gaiety, that dwelt in these poems, the soft shimmer of peace and well-being, which spread over them, demonstrates that the nation was one with itself, that it in its deepest essential need, knew itself completely at peace. Therefore and in no lesser fashion the Reformation witnesses when it in its religious source, with serene, historically true view . . . in it lies the endeavor that for the life of the nation essential personal faith again in its complete fullness to empower and to regain the nearly lost contentment.⁴⁰⁵

Today we might conclude that Vilmar anticipated a post-Christian Germany and predicted disaster for the nation as it abandoned the “shared life element” and became enemies of the faith. This bleak assessment began with the conclusion that Germany was a Christian culture, and if no longer Christian, it would descend into an abyss, led by leaders who identified with their masses of followers: the leaders of the masses who would be completely identical with them.⁴⁰⁶ The

Gnadenmittel anerkennt, als für den Unbegabtesten, vielmehr beide in gleicher Sünde und in gleicher Erlösung, in gleichem Leid und in gleicher Freude des höheren Lebens zusammengefasst, ist eben darum eine wahrhaft, und im edelsten Sinne volksmässige Erscheinung, eine volksmässige Gestaltung der Kirche, wie denn überhaupt in dem warhaften Volksleben die warhafte Kirche, dem Keime nach und der Entwicklung bedürftig, vorgebildet liegt.”

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 420. “Davon legte das ganze Mittelalter in allen seinen Erscheinungen ein zu lautes Zeugnis ab, als dass es selbst von dem durch einen leidenschaftlichen Unglauben Verblendeten geleugnet werden könnte; von dieser tiefen, innigen Befriedigung zeugen eben unsere Poesieen der alten Zeit, die wir früher betrachteten, auf die allerentschiedenste Weise: die stille Ruhe, die ungetrübte Heiterkeit, die diesen Dichtungen inwohnt, der milde Schimmer des Friedens und der Behaglichkeit, der über sie ausgebreitet ist, beweist, dass die Nation sich mit sich selbst einig, dass sie sich in ihren tiefsten Daseinsbedürfnissen völlig befriedigte. Nicht weniger zeugt dafür die Reformation, wenn sie in ihrem religiösen Quell, mit ruhigem geschichtlichem Blicke, mit einem von Leidenschaft und Ueberdruß gleich wenig gestübten Auge betrachtet wird: es liegt in ihr Streben, sich des für das Leben der Nationen unentbehrlichen persönlichen Glaubens wieder in seiner ganzen Fülle zu bemächtigen und zu der fast schon verlorenen Befriedigung zurück zu gelangen.”

⁴⁰⁶ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Collegium Biblicum: Practische Erklärung der heiligen Schrift Alten und Neuen Testaments*, ed. Christian Müller (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1883), 329.

government, especially that of the Prussians who sought hegemony and intruded in Vilmar's estimation into every facet of national life, would not simply be an alternative to the ancient faith, but would present a demonic specter before the nation and world. Likewise the Christian church would be under assault and would have to be equipped with a doctrine of itself to stop this onslaught.

Previous chapters have discussed the manner in which Vilmar sought to equip the church and its ministers. The task of the pastoral office was tied to the eschatological concept of separating the faithful from the unfaithful, a task he saw for them in the German society emerging in his age of revolution. This task accompanied the unfolding of history or as he considered it, Heilsgeschichte.⁴⁰⁷

The Emergence of a Cultural Criticism

Early in his career, in a period coinciding with this religious development, a cultural criticism emerges. In letters from 1831 and 1832, at the time of the gathering of the Hessian legislature (Ständeversammlung) in the wake of the Revolution of 1830, themes begin to emerge that will feature prominently in Vilmar's future writings as he considers the spirit of his time critically. He anticipates, for example, a future destruction in the context of a state indifferent to Christianity, portraying itself as neutral to Christianity before it inevitably becomes anti-Christian. Soon what was only suggested by him, began to receive more meaning. Two elements began to emerge in this period that would be linked together in future criticism: the modern world in the embrace of a popularized sham-science and a uniformity in society that entailed the destruction of all personality. His concepts had not yet received the focus that years of public life and further political turmoil would lend them. But as Asendorf comments, "Everything is already

⁴⁰⁷ Asendorf, *Die Europäische Krise*, 85–8.

in the year 1832 so clear, that the external framework is complete, it only needed the dates of external political events needed to be inserted.”⁴⁰⁸

Moved by Julius Stahl’s ironic question, “Is Christ the idea or is the idea Christ?” Vilmar questioned the Hegelian world view at an early date, especially that of the left-wing Hegelians. In February 1837 he commented on the controversy over David Strauss’ *Life of Jesus*:

The anti-Straussians are nearly completely, thoroughly weak, and it makes me sick, to read any one of these things; often it is only theory against theory; how little they are able to witness against. Where it fails to approach the terrified heart, Straussism, Reimarianism, Lessingism and whatever other -ism finally must emerge in the end, all the same, whether it be written or not written, and as long as I cannot terrify someone’s heart,—and that I cannot do if I do not have such a terrified conscience myself—then I cannot show him that he is wrong.⁴⁰⁹

As always, Vilmar was an educator, and in a speech to his school in 1846 he presented his first major social polemic, which was published in his *Schulreden*. It was titled, “The General Spiritual Slumber of Our Time.” He introduces a number of themes that he will pursue especially following the 1848 uprisings. Here we find an early criticism of a superficial and abstract scientific method (“Wissenschaft”) then entering all academic disciplines. Ever the literary scholar, he particularly remonstrated with those who substituted this science for real life experience.

Who has today can imagine a book, a scientific work, could be an experience, created out of the depths not only of knowledge, but even more of the soul, conceived not so much out of the cold calculation of understanding, as through the warm beat of the heart, proceeding not only from the still quiet of a scholar’s study, but from the

⁴⁰⁸ Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 91–3. “Allerdings ist schon soviel im Jahre 1832 klar, dass der äussere Rahmen fertig ist, in den dann nur noch die Daten der Konkreten politische Ereignisse eingesetzt zu werden brauchen.”

⁴⁰⁹ A.F.C. Vilmar, Letter, February 1837, no addressee listed, quoted in Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 94. “Die Anti-Straussie sind fast durchaus schwach, und es ekelte mich, nur eins dieser Dinge zu lesen; oft ist’s nur Theorie gegen Theorie; wie wenige haben dagegen zu zeugen vermocht. Wie es an dem erschrockenen Herzen fehlt, müssen ja am Ende consequent Straussiaden, Reimariaden, Lessingiaden und was nicht noch sonst für iaden entstehen, gleichviel, ob sie geschrieben oder nicht geschrieben werden; und solange ich einem das Herz nicht erschrecken kann,—und das kann ich nicht, wenn ich nicht selbst ein solches erschrockenes Gemüt habe—kann ich ihm auch nicht beweisen, dass er unrecht hat.”

moved, stormy life of the world, not from the indifference of abstract research, but from the joy and pain of a series of life blows?⁴¹⁰

This critique of science, of a certain rationalistic approach to all disciplines, did not consist simply in a Romantic move against all rationalism. Vilmar, ever an opponent of the revolutions of his era, attributed them at least in part to Romanticism. On the other hand he traced the time of rationalism back two hundred years from his own day and attributed to it the separation of the educated or intellectual (“Gebildeten”) from those not enjoying the same background (“Ungebildeten”). He wrote further on this subject in 1849, no longer addressing only the political strife of 1848, but continuing a comprehensive critique.

Tracing the account of the growing regard in which science was held, and the corresponding preference for learning in the abstract, and as Frederick the Great of Prussia and Napoleon became the darlings of the intellectuals who overestimated the value of their rational methods. For the thirty years following the Napoleonic Wars, as knowledge replaced act in this regard, science was raised to the queen of life.

With very sharp accents, with an almost passionate emphasis we have in this last generation, asserted it in almost all areas of life so we could recognizing no act, justify no act, not to mention then earlier [acts]—in reality we could consider any act possible, which had not emerge from a scientific formula, a previously discovered and previously recognized formula in the book world. No spiritual possession would be respected, not even noticed, which was bore the status, as they said, ‘to justify scientifically.’⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Die allgemeinen geistige Erschlafung unserer Zeit,” in *Schulreden über Fragen der Zeit*, 3d ed. (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1886), 191. “Wer hat denn heutzutage nur einen Begriff davon, dass ein Buch, ein wissenschaftliches Werk, ein Erlebnis sein könne, geschöpft aus den Tiefen nicht allein des Wissens, sonder mehr noch des Gemüters, erzeugt nicht so sehr durch den kalten Calcül des Verstandes, als durch den warmen Blutschlag des Herzens, hervorgegangen nicht allein aus der stillen Ruhe des Studierzimmers, sonder aus dem bewegten, stürmischen Leben der Welt, nicht aus der Gleichgültigkeit der abstrakten Forschung, sondern aus den Freuden und Schmerzen einer Reihe von Lebenschicksalen.”

⁴¹¹ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Von der Ueberschätzung der Wissenschaft,” *Schulreden*, 247. “Mit sehr scharfen Accente, mit einer fast leidenschaftlichen Betonung hat man es während dieses letzten Menschenalters fast in allen Gebieten des Lebens geltend gemacht, dass man keine That anerkennen, keine That für berechtigt, geschweige denn für fruchtbar—ja dass man eigentlich überhaupt keine That nur für möglich halten könne, die nicht aus einer wissenschaften Formel, einer zuvor gefundenen und zuvor im Kreisse der Bücherwelt anerkannten Formel, hervorgegangen sei. Kein gesitiger Besitz wurde respectiert, ja nur beachtet, welcher sich nicht, wie man sagte,

Vilmar was attacking Hegel though perhaps indirectly in this instance.⁴¹² In one of his Reden the previous year, he had specifically criticized the “young Hegelians” and identified their influence as contributing to the dissolution of society in an ill-directed and ignorant efforts resulting in the rift of Germans from all social connections that had united them, from the church out of ignorance of the facts of the faith, and a predominant individualism that rested not on informed positions, but on willfulness, ignorance, and empty phrases that he would begin to term “rhetoric.” As one example he cited the popular evaluation of the Reformation current at the time.

Do we have continually to hear the trite and absurd phrases ‘in the Reformation the unending justification of individualism was realized,’ its spirit should be ‘the freedom of the future people to themselves’ and more of the same expressions, which directly or indirectly, but always understandably enough, results in itself in the separation of people from all faith in the transcendent, personal God. . . . separation from the now eleven hundred year old world shaking, deep inner struggle, of the question of the relation of human vocation to the fact of redemption. . . .⁴¹³

This polemic against the method he labeled “science” he expanded to address theology more explicitly in the programmatic work, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, in 1855.

His criticism extended beyond a mere interest in epistemology or hermeneutics and detected a spiritual problem with science, a form of idolatry. He wrote in 1845, “Love is extinguished by science, under the rule of concepts, under the rule of phrases. Exclusive science

wissenschaftlich u rechtfertigen’ im Stande war. . . .”

⁴¹² Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 43.

⁴¹³ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Von einigen vermeintlichen Vorügen und wirklichen Mängeln unserer Zeit,” *Schulreden*, 164-6. “Müssen wir nicht immer wieder die bis zur völligen Sinnlosigkeit abgedroschene Phrase vernehmen ‘es sei in der Reformation die unendliche Berechtigung des Individuums verwirklicht,’ es sei ihr Geist ‘die Freiheit des zu sich kommenden Menschen’ und dergleichen Redensarten mehr, welche alle direct und indirect, aber immer verständlich genug, die Loslösung des Menschen von allem Glauben an einen überweltlichen persönlichen Gott in sich schleissen. . . . Entscheidung eines schon seit elfhundert Jahren die Welt bewegenden tief innerlichen Kampfes, der Frage um das Verhältnis der Thätigkeit des Menschen zu dem Factum der Erlösung. . . .”

not only lacks sense, not only lacks courage, it is also heartless.”⁴¹⁴ He condemned this heartless rationalism and identified the prevailing incapacity of his own day as a refusal

to comprehend, to understand, to grasp, to take into account great personalities—thereby the inability, to notice decisive characters and to join with them. . . . Every distinguished personality, every decisive characters conceal within an inexhaustible source of new thought, new views, new reality, which this person, this character, uniquely possesses and does not share; it conceals deep within itself, immeasurable, imponderable, unfathomable mysteries. [By contrast he lamented] Modern science takes the position that there is nothing imponderable, nothing unfathomable, nothing exclusively ones own, that there are no mysteries. The rule of modern science maintains that only the most universal, the most accessible, the most comprehensible and most inferior definitions should have value and rule.⁴¹⁵

As Vilmar assessed the intellectual currents of his day, he also identified the spiritual sources and attitudes. In an essay from 1844 appearing in the *Hessian Volksfreund*, he identified this condition in the title, “Von der Adedie,” referring to a world weariness or a general spiritual discontent. Here it should be noted that his analysis predated by four years the approaching revolution and so cannot be labeled a reactionary political statement occasioned by that liberal disturbance. This world weariness elicits other effects: “. . . from these depicted class of people here, who therefore in great measure spread abroad and are themselves immersed in unity with the untold masses who live exclusively from the empty works and idle talk of the newspapers, a generation of people are preserved, whose essential character becomes cowardly.”⁴¹⁶ Guilt for

⁴¹⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, “Überschätzung,” *Schulreden*, 254. “Die Liebe erlosch unter der Wissenschaft, unter der Begriffsherrschaft, unter der Phrasenherrschaft. Die exklusive Wissenschaft macht nicht allein sinnlos, nicht allein mutlos, sie macht auch herzlos.”

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.* “. . . grosse Persönlichkeiten zu begreifen, zu verstehen, zu fassen, ja nur gelten zu lassen—daher die Unfähigkeit, entschiedene Charaktere zu achten und sich ihnen anzuschliessen. . . . Jede bedeutender Persönlichkeit, jeder entschiedene Charakter birgt in sich einen unversiegbaren Quell von neuen Gedanken, neuen Anschauungen, neuen Thaten, die diese Person, dieser Charakter eigens für sich hat und mit Niemandem teilt; er birgt in sich tief, unausmessbare, unberechenbare, unergründliche Geheimnisse. Die moderne Wissenschaft aber steht gerade darauf, dass es nichts Unberechenbares, nichts Unergründliches, nichts ausschliesslich Eigenes, dass es kein Geheimnis gebe. Die moderne Begriffsherrschaftsteht eben darauf, dass nur die allgemeinsten, zugänglichsten, abgegriffensten und untergeordnetsten Definitionen Geltung und Herrschaft haben sollen . . . ”

⁴¹⁶ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Zur neusten Culturgeschichte Deutschlands: Zersteute Blätter*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main and Erlangen: Verlag von Heyder & Zimmer, 1858), 276, quoted in Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 31. “. . . aus der hier bezeichneten Menschenschicht, die sich alsdann in grösstem Masstabe ausbreiten und vertiefen wird, im Bunde mit den ungezählten Massen, welche lediglich vom leeren Wort und Geschwätz, von der Zeitungsliteratur leben, ein

this state of affairs could be attributed in the least measure to a “sentimental Christianity,” that provides only an “aesthetic stimulant” without any knowledge of the horror of the law and of sin.⁴¹⁷

This spiritual deficiency reached into political parties, where everyone’s value and the legitimacy of their thoughts were evaluated according to the acceptable party line (Parteizeichnen). The emptiness of universal concepts “could only disintegrate and destroy, never build. . . .”⁴¹⁸ This pursuit of science and its method of abstract thought, actually corrupted the gradual accumulation of knowledge and took away all joy in learning, especially when “it saw its spiritual activity thrown in with the restless, erratic, heaven storming and earth shaking, baseless and pointless movements in the word, “science.”⁴¹⁹

Since the seventeenth century this concept had ruled political thought as well and one could detect in it we could

. . . catch a view of something truly demonic. Therein belongs the concept ‘state’ with the greatest part of the uncountable armies of those inferior concepts which belong to it, from the ratio status in the 17th century to the esprit des loix of Montesquieu, and from there on to the contrat social of Rousseau, on to the police state and down to our own day—‘freedom,’ long the political as well as the freedom of conscience, ‘culture,’ ‘humanity,’ ‘free human nature’ and uncountable others.⁴²⁰

Menschengeschlecht erhalten werden, dessen wesentlicher Charakter Feigheit sein wird.”

⁴¹⁷ Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 31.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 251. “. . . allgemeine Begriffe können nur auflösen und zerstören, niemals bauen. . . .”

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., “. . . er seine geistige Thätlichkeit mit den unruhigen, sprunghaften, himmelstürmenden und erdaufwühlenden, grund- und resultatlosen Bewegungen in dem Worte, ‘Wissenschaft.’”

⁴²⁰ Ibid., “. . . etwas wahrhaft Dämonisches erblicken. Dahin gehören die Begriffe ‘Staat’ mit dem grössten Teile des unzählbaren Herres von Unterbegriffen, welche zu ihm gestellt werden, von der ratio status im 17. Jahrhundert an zum esprit des loix Montesquieus und von da weiter bis zum contrat social Rousseaus, bis zum Politzeistaat u. unser Tage herab;—‘Freiheit, ‘sowol die politische als die Gewissensfreiheit, ‘Cultur,’ ‘Humanität,’ ‘freie Menschlichkeit’ und unzählige andere.”

Such an approach he warned against in 1849, “Who now attacks and destroys the meaning of character and personality, destroys not only the state, not only the people (Volk)—he destroys humanity.”⁴²¹

In the 1830s Vilmar also proposed a multifaceted view of history comprising a key segment of his metacritique. In “Concerning the Connection of Gymnasium Studies to the Christian Faith and to the Christian Church (Über das Verhältnis der Gymnasiumstudien zum christlichen Glauben und zur christlichen Kirche),” he sought to present a unified understanding of world history against that of the threatened disunity of his own time. The unity lay in Christ.

Only insofar as there is a redemption, there is a divine world rule and Providence, and only insofar there is such a thing, there is one world and folk and human history. Only he who in his life experienced that Christ is the focus (Mittelpunkt) of his life, and that here there are only two phases: before Christ without him, and after Christ with him, and who also thereby also knows that Christ is the focus of life of the world and of the peoples, only he is able to share history in Christian schools as real world history, as real genuine educating and forming element.⁴²²

Here emerges a facet of his cultural criticism, finding not only a Biblical application, parallel, analogy, or lesson but also Biblical typology. His spiritual assessment of the Old Testament located a typology connecting the Old Testament Israel with their antitypes in contemporary events. The unity he locates in Scripture in Christ he also locates in human history. This unity results in a typology between that of faithless Israel and faithless Germany. The prophets had preached against the sins of the people to correct their ways; now Vilmar would take up a metahistorical critique as part of his writing. In his later writings he would also develop

⁴²¹ Vilmar, “Ueberschätzung,” *Schulreden*, 254–55. “Wer nun die Bedeutung des Charakters und der Persönlichkeit angreift und zerstört, der zerstört nicht allein den Staat, nicht allein das Volk—er zerstört die Menschheit.”

⁴²² Vilmar, “Über das Verhatnis der Gymnasiumstudien zum christlichen Glauben und zur christlichen Kirche,” *Schulreden*, 7. “Nur insofern es eine Erlösung gibt, gibt es eine göttliche Weltregierung und Vorsehung, und nur insofern es eine solche gibt, gibt es eine Welt- und Völker-und Menschengeschichte. Nur der, welcher in seinem Leben Erfahren hat, dass Christus der Mittelpunkt seiner eigenen Lebenszeit ist, und dass es hier nur zwei Abschnitte gibt: vor Christus ohne ihn—nach Christus mit ihm, und welcher darum auch weiss, dass Christus der Mittelpunkt der Lebenszeit der Welt und der Völker ist, nur der vermag Geschichte in christilichen Schulen als

an understanding of revelation as it originally existed among sinless mankind and was now being restored by the proclamation of the Gospel. Indeed the proclamation would itself be a correction to history.⁴²³

A Programmatic Cultural Critique: The Theology of Fact

Following the public debate over Vilmar's election to high ecclesial office and subsequent appointment to the faculty at Marburg, Vilmar penned a mature summary of preceding themes dealing with the church, and he bound together with his metacritical assessment of Western and German culture. In the *Theology of Fact*, he would indicate the priorities emphasized in his writings and his university instruction to the end of his life.

One of the arresting terms emerging from this polemic is that of "rhetorician (Rhetoriker)." Such a person serves science (Wissenschaft) as its champion. Vilmar considers this method not objectionable so much in philology as in a rationalism that results in a world view that is at once rigidly formal and lifeless. In theology he labels it Alexandrianism after the ancient heresy of an idealized religion. He considers "real science" something that relates observed details and parts to the whole, but cannot presume judgments over the whole without negating itself in a self-defeating effort. As he had done in the Schulreden, he linked the contemporary pursuit of science with revolution. He mocks their claims of objective, scientific system:

This lack of bias and presupposition is then taken over with great applause by the atheologians into their system, because through this take over is their goal reached, the destruction of theology, the annihilation of faith, the raising of strife against Christ and the renunciation of God in proportion to their own need for salvation and the ability to save their own souls, with unquestionable certainty: then will God's life

wirkliche Weltgeschichte, als wirklich erziehendes und bledenedes Element, mitzuteliien."

⁴²³ A.F.C. Vilmar, "*Dogmatik*, vol. 1, ed. K.W. Piderit (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 23. ". . . so can revelation mean nothing other than a corection of World history." (" . . . so kann Offenbarung nichts anderes bedeuten, als eben eine Correcture der Weltgeschichte.")

be measured according to the world's life, the knowledge of God according to the world's knowledge, and thereby annihilate the particularity of theology.⁴²⁴

The red thread running throughout the work and writings of the rhetoricians is that they know nothing of the church.⁴²⁵

He now introduces a recurring theme linking this social criticism with the pastoral ministry. He considers the preaching office to be the means to reverse the injurious trends of his time and to restore the lost unity within a common understanding of faith and the church, and an alternative to the destructive forces from the rhetoricians. Pastors were called to this task:

Further it is necessary in pastoral theology to communicate a sharp signature of the times both in the general and in the particular. If our theological disciples are to bear the torches which must light the way before the coming Lord Jesus, here they must illuminate the face of the Antichrist. So we must light these torches for them. It is also a matter of the spiritual currents of our time in their relationship to the preaching office, to the church, to the day of the Lord, but also to characterize in the most decided manner, the external, closer, worldly future, and the tasks, which the servant of the Word has to solve, to reveal these opposing currents with unrelenting clarity: pleasure and worldly luxury, industry (the so-called 'Intelligence'), materialism, pauperism, and communism, revolution, and the 'omnipotence of the state,' literature, the cult of genius, art and science . . . [we] have in our days to be exemplary objects of pastoral theology. It is now important to demonstrate and to teach with forceful scrupulous sharpness that the word of God should up until now have been preached concerning all worldly endeavors, with worldly wisdom and in trust in worldly supports; that the hands that should have worked day and night in order to pull souls out of the depths . . . that hearts which in devoted love and sincere mercy that should have burned, and are felled from the fire of earthly sorrows and from the smoke of earthly thoughts, or that they were cold as stone and the flock of worldly trials and lusts that because to let it endure without a word much less with an act of opposition.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁴ Vilmar, *Tatsachen*, 20–1. "Diese Unbefangenheit und Voraussetzungslosigkeit ist denn auch mit grossem Applaus von den Atheologen in ihr System herübergenommen worden, und mit Recht, denn durch diese herübernahme wird ihr Zweck, die Zerstörung der Theologie, die Vernichtung des Glaubens, die Aufrichtung der Feindschaft gegen Christus und die Lossagung von Gott so wie von der eigenen erlösungsbedürftigen und erlösungs-fähigen Seele, mit unzweifelhafter Sicherheit erreicht: dann wird das Gottesleben nach dem Weltleben, die Gotteserkenntnis nach der Welterkenntnis gemessen, und damit die Eigentümlichkeit der Theologie vernichtet."

⁴²⁵ Ibid., Asendorf, *Die europäische Krise*, 46.

⁴²⁶ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 110–11. "Ferner ist es in der Pastoraltheologie nötig, eine scharfe Signatur der Zeit sowol im Allgemeinen als im Besondern mitzuteilen. Wenn unsere theologischen Jünger die Fackeln zu tragen haben, welche dort dem widerkommenden Herrn Christus voran, hier dem Antichrist ins Angesicht leuchten sollen, so müssen wir Ihnen diese Fackeln auch anzünden. Es handelt sich also darum, die

The Theologian of Reality is clearly concerned with pastoral care for souls in his critique. Thus his criticism, his observations serve not as general information, but are also aimed at those who may set an alternative course to the history of nations, the pastoral ministry as they seek to teach, correct, admonish, and restore a Christian Weltanschauung.

The Metacritique in the Mature Thought of Vilmar

During Vilmar's years as professor of theology at Marburg, his view received amplification in his lectures made available by student notes edited and published after his death as well as other essays written over the years in *Pastoral Blätter* and collected into *Kirche und Welt*. Earlier themes emerge, themes addressed earlier but now with time and experience adding to their development. Typologically, he considered ancient Israel to be a forerunner of modern spiritual slumber or outright hostility to the Christian faith. In his description of the rebellion of the people of Israel at Sinai he saw a shadow of his own time.

Aaron appears as the archetype of the first of those people who allow themselves to be overcome by the will of the masses. From the world viewpoint, the will of the masses is dazzling—as the voice of the people (*vox populi*) would be the voice of God (*vox Dei*) but not looked upon that way from God's side. Aaron forgot vis-à-vis the will of the people, that he was supposed to be the mouth of Moses. . . . Whoever [i.e. pastors] does not stand fast in God and in God's calling, he does as Aaron and excuses it as does Aaron (v. 22-24). But to the world the will of the masses is never to be long resisted. . . . Without all doubt today's present revolutionary conviction and revolutionary desire attain their goals as long as those opposing [them] . . . only are

geistigen Zeitstömungen in ihrem Verhältnisse zum Predigtamte, zur Kirche, zu der Zukunft des Herrn, aber auch zu der äusseren, näheren, weltlichen Zukunft auf das Bestimmteste zu charakterisieren und die Aufgaben, welche der Diener am Worte diesen Strömungen gegenüber zu lösen hat, mit unverbitterlicher Schärfe verzeichnen: Genuss- und Luxuswelt, Industrie (die s.g. 'Intelligenz'), Materialismus, Pauperismus und Communismus, Revolution und 'Omniptenz des Staates,' Literatur, Geniecultus, Kunst und Wissenschaft . . . müssen wir in unsern Tagen Gegenstände der accuratesten Darstellung der Pastoraltheologie sein. Hier gilt es nun, nachzuweisen und mit nachdrücklicher Gewissenschärfung zu lehren, dass das Wort Gott bisher mit Eingehen in alle jene weltlichen Bestrebungen, mit weltlicher Weisheit und im Vertrauen auf weltlichen Stützen sei verkündigt worden; dass die Hände, welche Tag und Nacht hätten arbeiten sollen, um die Seelen aus der Teufe zu ziehen, sich dem zietlichen Erwerb, dem Spiel und Zeitvertreib zugewendet und jene Mächte der Welt hereingezogen haben in die Kirche; dass die Herzen, welche in heisser Liebe und herzlichem Erbarmen hätten breen sollen, von dem Feuer irdischer Leidenschaft und dem Rauch irdischer Gedanken sind erfüllt, oder dass sie kalt gewesen sind wie Steine, und haben die Scharen der weltlichen Versuchungen und Lüste, welche in die Gemeinde einbrachen, gleichgültig und empfindungslos über sich hingehen lassen ohne in Wort, geschweige denn eine That der Gegenwehr."

moved by worldly thoughts and worldly means; also the individual church bodies will relentlessly be destroyed if we only oppose with the worldly means of church congregational officials. . . .

To those who employ only worldly devices, be they pastors or consistorial church officials, Vilmar compares them to faithless Aaron.⁴²⁷

In this brief passage a number of issues come together: the spiritual significance of the present revolutionary struggle, the opposition of the revolutionary forces as opposed to God's will, the role of the pastor in remaining faithful in testimony of the Scriptures, and its opposite, the impotence of church pastors and officials at the highest levels to preserve the status quo unless resorting faithfully to the spiritual means given them in God's word, and the office of the ministry whose call it is to be the voice of God in their proclamation, and finally the preservation of the church and the preservation of German and (Western) civilization. Not only does Vilmar locate a Biblical analogy or parallel, but he also finds Biblical typology between the Old Testament and contemporary events.

Vilmar recognized a natural religion among all peoples, a knowledge that became increasingly faint with the passage of time. This exposition receives what is likely its most complete exposition in the introductory portion to his *Dogmatik*.

⁴²⁷ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Kirche und Welt: die Ausgaben des geistlichen Amtes in userere Zeit*, vol. 2 (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1873), 32–3. “Aharon stellt sich dar als Urbild derjenigen Personen, welche sich durch den Willen der Massen überwältigen lassen. Von der Weltseite angesehen, hat der ausgesprochene Massenwille allerdings etwas Imponierendes—wie wäre sonst das Wort *vox populi vox Dei* möglich geworden—aber nicht von der Gotteseite betrachtet. Aharon vergass diesem Massenwillen gegenüber, dass er der Mund Mosis sein sollte. . . . Wer jedoch in Gott und in seinem Gottesberufe nicht fest steht, der thut wie Aharon und entschuldigt sich dann auch wie Aharon v. 22-24. In bloss weltlicher Weise aber ist dem Massenwillen niemals auf die Dauer zu widerstehen, und deshalb haben die Umwähler und Umstürzter unserer Zeit ganz recht, zu behaupten es könne dem ‘Volkswillen’ nicht Widerstand geleistet werden. Ohne allen Zweifel wird die heute vorhandene Revolutionsgesinnung und Revolutionslust alle ihre Zwecke erreichen, so lange ihr gegenüber. . . . nur weltlichen Gedanken und weltlichen Mittel in Bewegung gesetzt werden; auch die einzelnen Kirchenkörper werden zuverlässig zerstört werden; wenn man die weltlichen Mittel der Gemeindegemeinderäte und was des Zeugs mehr ist, der drohenden Zerstörung entgegen stellt. Die Solches thun, sind nichts anderes, als Aharone unter dem Sinai, und wenn sie auch Oberkirchenräte sind so wie sie wolletn, oder Genealksuperintendenten, oder auch Minsiter der geistlichen Angelegenheiten.”

The history of all peoples without exception shows with regard to its religious culture invariably the result, that the religious consciousness in the earliest ages of peoples was the strongest, and in the course of generations, namely with the growth of external cultures (agriculture, wealth, luxury, literature) successive weakening. It suffers this weakening of religious consciousness unrecognizably the impression of the extinguishing of memory, a forgetting of history⁴²⁸

These forgotten “facts” of the abstract word “religion” “we call revelation.”⁴²⁹ Bernhard Lohse has written on Vilmar’s equating original revelation to “fact” or “reality” (Tatasache) which also has to be experienced, or “repeated” in the individual, the subjective moment of proclamation.⁴³⁰ This repetition or return to the original revelation only happens in the church, and provided a view of Christian history that in some ways Christianizes the romantic understanding of the church. Vilmar saw theology as the correction of history.⁴³¹ Commenting on this key aspect of Vilmar’s thought, Lohse continues:

There can be no doubt that Vilmar sought to make the thoughts of historicity of revelation fruitful for his theology. He strove toward a Christological meaning of church history and history chiefly. By this it would be erroneous if we concluded as perhaps U. Asendorf and H. Schmidt did speaking about an analogy between the natural growth process and history of the church. Vilmar can in the opposite way speak of a one-of-a-kind existence of the church for the world. . . . Church history does not assume the place of natural growth process, but just the opposite; the natural growth process is understood in analogy to church history.⁴³²

⁴²⁸ Vilmar, *Dogmatic*, vol. 1, 16. “Die Geschichte aller Völker ohne Ausnahme ergibt hinsichtlich ihrer religiöse Cultur ausnahmslos das Resultat, dass das religiöse Bewusstsein in den ältesten Lebenszeiten der Völker am stärksten sei, und im Laufe der Generationen, namentlich mit dem Wachstum der äusseren Culture (Ländererwerb, Reichtum, Luxus, Literatur) successive Abnahme. Es trägt diese Abnahme des religiösen Bewusstseins unverkennbar das Gepräge des Erlöschens der Erinnerung, eines Vergessens der Geschichte. . . .”

⁴²⁹ Ibid. “. . . nennen wir Offenbarung.”

⁴³⁰ Bernhard Lohse, “Kirche und Offenbarung bei A.F.C. Vilmar,” *Ev. Theologie* 10 (1957), 459.

⁴³¹ Vilmar, *Dogmatik*, vol. 1, 23. “Wer eine Offenbarung ohne Phrase annahmte, der betrachtet die Offenbarung als die Geschichte aller Geschichte, als den unbedingten Massstabe aller Weltgeschichte”

⁴³² Lohse, “Kirche und Offenbarung,” 459–60. “Es kann kein Zweifel bestehen, dass Vilmar den Gedanken der Geschichtlichkeit der Offenbarung, für seine Theologie fruchtbar zu machen versucht hat. Er hat sich sogar um eine christologische Deutung der Kirchengeschichte und der Geschichte überhaupt bemüht. Dabei wäre es unzutreffend, wenn man, wie etwa U. Asendorf und H. Schmidt es tun, von einer Analogie zwischen dem natürlichen Wachstumsprozess und der Geschichte der Kirche redete. Vilmar kann im Gegenteil geradezu von einer exemplarischen Existenz der Kirche für die Welt sprechen. . . . Nicht die Kirchengeschichte tritt in Analogie zum natürlichen Wachstumsprozess, sondern umgekehrt, der natürliche Wachstumsprozess wird in Analogie zur Kirchengeschichte verstanden.”

To achieve what Vilmar calls “repetition,” or stated another way, a recovery of the initial knowledge of God, he turns to the preaching of the Gospel. The corrective to history gone wrong can only be the clergy. The pastoral office is charged with this preaching; it is with the office that the corrective can be achieved. As observed above, Vilmar already alluded to this role in *Tatsachen*.⁴³³ Calling attention as he had in the earlier work to the responsibility of a pastor to remain aware and engaged with the events of the world Professor Vilmar tells them in his lectures on pastoral theology. They are not to confine their interest to strictly academic pursuits or a small circle of like-minded friends. He reminds them that each age of world history has its own signature and identified the historical perspective typical for the last two hundred years [i.e. the Enlightenment].⁴³⁴ The first he significantly identifies as the “Disintegration of Nationalities:”

... in a general world turned upside down, in which the national particularities become extinct. Already thirty years ago there was talk from general world literature of a common, pure idea of humanity. This is more or less intentional opposition to the living God. The forgetting of origins of a people leads to decline and to savagery, where the people actually tear themselves apart.⁴³⁵

He notes that law and necessary force may still prevail but that, “With such a contempt of national origins then must simple material, external, imagined order would then prevail.” So order of certain quality and legitimacy he imagines would be quite different when the Volk-context is forgotten and neglected. He sees warnings and a typology between the situation of his day and that described by Jeremiah and Ezekiel.⁴³⁶ He notes the results of this successive decline of nationalities would have a profound effect on the Christian faith. He noted that each people

⁴³³ Vilmar, *Theologie der Tatsachen*, 110–11. See fn 29 above.

⁴³⁴ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Lehrbuch der Pastoraltheologie: Nach dessen akademischen Vorlesungen herausgegeben*, ed. K. W. Piderit (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1872), 142.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, “Auflösung der Nationalitäten in ienen allgemeinen Weltverkehr, in dem die Nationaleigentümlichkeiten untergehen. Schon vor mehr als 30 Jahren hat man von allgemeiner Weltliteratur und einer allgemeinen reinen Menschheitsidee geredet. Diess ist mehr oder weniger bewusste Opposition gegen den lebendigen Gott. Das Vergessen der Origines eines Volkes führt zum Untergang und zur Wildheit, indem das Volk sich dadurch recht eigentlich zerreibt.”

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 142. “Bei einem solchen Wegwerfen des Nationalkerns sollen dann bloss fleischliche, äusserliche,

had received the gospel in a particular fashion and understood it in ways attendant to their conversion as a people, and something new had been introduced by this change to a common understanding of a universal humanity rather than nations of people (“Volk”). He cites as an example the German people, who in his judgment, had received the gospel in a special way so that they felt the burden of sin to a special degree, and this unique aspect had made the Reformation concerning justification first possible in their lands. Consequently, as a sense of German nationality diminished, the German church was in danger of losing what had been uniquely its own, a number of institutions and understandings that were immediately tied to the national church. It would be a task of the pastoral office to preserve this identity insofar as the church was in danger of disappearing along with the national identity.⁴³⁷

Vilmar is no provincial and realizes that Christ made no promise that the German nation would endure in the same fashion that Israel had received such a promise. He acknowledges that the Christian faith does not rest on the German or any other national churches, but their existence rests on historical contingency. He asserts that:

It has been the bearer of the gospel, and it is this unto the present day, but it is not said that the bearer of the gospel has to remain as such; it can extinguish the call itself which it has carried for hundreds of years, and can knock the Lord of light from his place here and erect something else in his place. Also remaining steadfast on nationality may not become so understood, spoken against as if the decline of nationality also the church in itself declines; this concept would a nationalism, which the gospel, that is something universal: nations can fade away, thrones crumble and rise again, peoples be used up—the gospel goes out over it all; it is eternal.⁴³⁸

erträumte Ordnungen bestehen bleiben.”

⁴³⁷ Ibid. 143.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 143–44. “Es ist allerdings Träger des Evangeliums beleiben muss; es kann seinen Beruf, den es Jahrhunderte getragen hat, selbst wegwerfen, und der Herr den Leuchter auch hier von seiner Stelle stossen und anderswo aufrichten. Also darf das Festhalten an der Nationalität nicht so aufgefasst werden, also ob mit dem Untergange der Nationalität auch die Kirche an sich zu Grunde gienge; diese Auffassung wäre ein Nationalismus, der dem Evangelium, das etwas Unverselles ist, schlechthin widerspräche: Nationen können vergehen, Throne stürzen und werden wieder aufgerichtet, Völker verzehren sich—das Evangelium geht über sie alle hin, es ist ewig.”

Further, he concludes that as the sense of folk identity diminishes, and with it the national churches, Vilmar trusts that as railroads and telegraphs contribute to this loss of a consciousness of particularity, so will it also sow the seeds of the gospel throughout the world and remind all of the higher home and that we are not to find our final home here. He again employs the typology of Israel: just as the faithlessness of Israel preceded the conversion of many pagan nations, so would the present worldly confusion and loss lead to ways which the Lord himself knew.⁴³⁹

While Vilmar could commend the future ultimately to the Lord with faithful confidence, he could not be so reticent with the more immediate future. With the insight that has been called, “metahistorical,” he predicted the developments that would characterize the end of the 19th century and the much of the 20th century.

Communism: His assessment of this developing movement make him one of the very first to predict this negative outcome of the industrial revolution.

Plutocracy and pauperism are understood in progressing development. The possession of money exercise a terrible pressure which continuously accelerates and evokes communism. . . . A right teaching of the church is no mass of accumulated individuals, but one of from the start organically constructed society: where individuals only [emphasis is the author's] has his significance for eternity. Everything now among temporal things, which is analogous to this form of the church, is temporally good, what is not, is positively reprehensible. So is all corporate life in the world relatively good; all atomizing reprehensible. Therein belongs the unqualified sharing of basic possessions, whereby many individuals have worked, the whole is disintegrated; further, in this belongs the unrestrained commerce (Disintegration of the Corporate), what is that, the essence of which struggles against the church . . . everyone has a natural right to work at a vocation according to his choice; we desire unrestrained justification of individualism.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 145–46.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., “Plutocracy und Pauperismus sind in fortschreitender Entwicklung begriffen. Der Besitz des Geldes übt einen furchtbaren Druck aus, der sich noch beständig steigert und als reaction den Communismus hervorruft. . . . Eine richtige Lehre von der Kirche weist ihm auch hier den Weg: die Kirche ist auch als Gemeinschaft keine Masse von zusammenaddierten Individuen, sondern eine von vornherein geliederte Gemeinschaft: der Einzelne hat nur in der Kirche seine Bedeutung für die Ewigkeit. Alles nun in weltlichen Dingen, welches dieser Gestalt der Kirche analog ist, ist weltlich good, was nicht unbedingt verwerflich. So ist alles corporative Leben in der Welt relative gut, alles Atomisieren verwerflich. Dahin gehört die unbedingte Teilung des Grundeigentums, wodurch lauter Individuen geschafften werden, das Ganze aufgelöst wird; dahin gehört ferner der unbeschränkte Gewerbebetrieb (Auflösung der

Never failing to equate the emergence of communism with the love of material wealth endemic of his time, he wrote to Sidonie Giesler in 1852, “Through the glitter that the world of wealth spreads around itself, or more correctly, through the splendor of pleasure, to which it resigns itself, it excites revolution, communism, with irresistible, overwhelming necessity against itself and all human and divine order in the world.”⁴⁴¹

He already saw in the events of 1848 the role of communism though he did not see the essential connection between this movement and the proletariat.⁴⁴²

Totalitarianism: Vilmar then specifically spelled out the consequences of this unrestrained individualism. “The lapse into subjectivity and individualism becomes complete anarchy as a consequence which then again calls forth by reciprocal action despotism, Caesarism (omnipotence of the state).”⁴⁴³ He anticipated in the decline of thought and faith a corresponding decay in the responsible actions of government.

That we in Europe and in Germany find ourselves in the beginnings of an entirely abnormal process of political dissolution, therefore can he, to whom only the smallest measure of political eyesight remains, be not in doubt, also not be in doubt concerning from whom and through which means this process is caused and supported. There is in view in the history of Germany, overall unheard of before, power and the daring to rule, perhaps the will to do so. According to political authority we see ourselves vainly—certainly those, who should be authorities or which authorities prove effective or such who should have been installed. They in part relinquish their own authority, in part are they tend to break other authorities,

Zünfte), was auf dem, dem Wesen der Kirche widerstrebenden . . . Jeder habe ein natürliches Recht, nach seinem Belieben jedes Gewerbe zu treiben; man will schrankenlose Berechtigung des Individuums.”

⁴⁴¹ A.F.C. Vilmar, to Sidonie Giesler, March 10, 1852, quoted in Wilhelm Hopf, *August Vilmar: Ein Lebensbild*, vol. II (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1913), 189. “Durch den Glanz, welchen die reiche Welt um sich verbreitet, oder richtiger durch den prunkenden Genuss, dem sie sich hingibt, reizt sie die Revolution, den Kommunismus, mit Notwendigkeit gegen sich und alle menschliche und göttliche Ordnung in der Welt unwiderstehlich auf.”

⁴⁴² Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 61.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 146. “Das Versinken in Subjectivismus und Individualism zieht vollkommene Anarchie als notwendige Consequenz nach sich, die dann wieder als Wechselwirkung Despotismus, Cäsarismus (Ominpotenz des Staates) hervorruft.”

lastly at times in the difficult to grasp political wrong ideas, in order to strengthen thereby their own imagined authority.⁴⁴⁴

There can be little doubt who Vilmar looked to with the most concern for the future. He specifically named the emerging Prussian hegemony as the greatest threat to German identity, liberty, and the Christian heritage of the German people. In 1847 he expressed his concern, “What I am afraid of is Prussia.”⁴⁴⁵ He wrote in that year a letter expressing his concern over the growing strength of that country as it competed with Austria, Russia, and France for dominance over the German states. Not only did he resent the thrust of Prussian foreign policy, but he displayed disdain for their bureaucracy that he thought penetrated into every aspect of life, thus allowing the demonic to penetrate the daily lives of the people. He displayed special disdain for those churchmen in Prussia who supported Bismarck and the Union of confessions.⁴⁴⁶

Militarism: With the destruction of the Volksorganismus, the growth of industry with its appeal to luxury, Vilmar considered it the beginnings of rule by money (plutocracy), greed (mammonism), and the rule of the sword, militarism (Säbelregiment). Again looking to ancient Israel as a type of a Christian culture such as Germany, he concluded commenting on the second chapter of Isaiah that there were many complex consequences of spiritual decay.⁴⁴⁷

Widespread political deception:

⁴⁴⁴ Vilmar, “Zustände der Kirche in der Gegenwart; unser Verhältniss zu den selben,” *Kirche und Welt*, vol. I, 33–4. “Dass wir in Europa und in Deutschland ganz besonders in den Anfängen eines politischen Auflösungsprozesses befinden, darüber kann der, welchem nur noch der geringste Grad von politischer Sehkraft übriggeblieben ist, nicht im Zweifel sein, auch nicht darüber, von wem und durch welche Mittel dieser Prozess bewirkt und gefördert werde. Fehlt es doch überall in einem bis daher in der Geschichte Deutschlands unerhörten Grade an der Einsicht, der Kraft und dem Mut zu regieren, vielleicht an dem Willen dazu. Nach politischen Autoritäten sehen wir uns vergeblich um—ja, diejenigen, welche Autoritäten sein oder Autoritäten bewahren oder solche aufstellen sollten, geben teils ihre eigenen Autoritäten auf, teils sind sie darauf aus, anderen Autoritäten zu brechen, letztes mitunter in dem schwärz begreiflichen politischen Irrtum, ihre eigene imaginäre Autorität dadurch zu stärken.”

⁴⁴⁵ Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 77. “Was mich graust, ist Pressen.”

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76–9.

⁴⁴⁷ A.F.C. Vilmar, *Collegium Biblicum, Des Alten Testament Vierter Teil* (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1883), 20; Asendorf, *Europäische Krise*, 36.

“The rule of empty words, of rhetoric, of lies. “Similarly, as in the time of Demosthenes rhetoric seeks to overcome facts. Concepts are deprived of their own content; there remains only the phrase, the simple form, which then still can be filled with lies. Steadfast maintaining of the right, we call fanaticism; right become wrong; truth called lies. Clothing should make the people; the petticoat, the makeup makes the ‘lady,’ the athletic or shooting costume makes the patriot, etc. (Worth through simple arbitrarily named appearance.)”⁴⁴⁸

Within his theology of pastoral ministry then, Vilmar concludes that the task of the preacher is the eschatological task of the end times. This time was also a time of separation, a separation of peoples effected by the preaching of the gospel.

Among a small minority results the taking up of the gospel; among the great masses rejection and thereby hardness of heart. This separating will and must be fulfilled among all humanity, and it will ultimately so far proceed that two parties will oppose each other with different languages, different logic, different discoveries, as before the great flood. The middle ground between the enemies of Christ and the faithful is untenable and has to be rejected entirely with the times. Before, when realization was not so great, unbelief and belief not so great, we tolerated in the twilight, but now the bright light is there. If the word of God is preached clearly and without doubt, so that it cannot be denied: here is the word of God, so that it always has the result of a division. This division the pastor has to understand and has to recognize, as he prepares for the advent of the antichrist.⁴⁴⁹

Conclusion

When surveying the events of the 20th century, the reader must be astonished over the ability of Vilmar to predict events before they happened. Communism, class warfare, and the

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 146–47. “Die Herrschaft des leeren Wortes, der Rhetorik, der Lüge. Aehnlich wie zur Zeit des Demosthenes sucht gegenwärtig die Rhetorik die Thatsachen zu übertreiben. Die Begriffe werden ihres eigentlichen Inhalts beraubt, es bleibt nur die Phrase, die blosser Form, die dann noch mit Lügen ausgefüllt werden soll. Strenges Halten auf das Recht nennt man Fanatismus, Recht wird Unrecht, Wahrheit Lüge genannt. Die Kleider sollen Leute machen; die Crinoline, der Putz macht die ‘Dame,’ das Turner—oder Schützen—Costüme macht den Patrioten u.s.w. (Geltung durch den blossen willkürlich angenommenen Schein.)”

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. 147. “Bei einer geringen Minderzahl erfolgt Annahme des Evangeliums, bei der grossen Masse Verwerfung und danach Verstockung. Diese Scheidung wird und muss sich an dem ganzen Menschengeschlecht vollziehen und es wird zuletzt so weit kommen, dass sich zwei Lager gegenüberstehen mit verschiedener Sprache, verschiedener Logik, verschiedenen Empfindungen, wie vor der grossen Flut. Die Mittelstellung zwischen Christusfeinden und Gläubigen ist unhaltbar und muss mit der Zeit ganz aufhören. Ehedem wo die Erkenntnis nicht so gross war, der Unglaube und der Glaube nicht so gross, vertrug man sich in der Dämmerung, jetzt aber ist das helle Licht da. Wenn das Wort Gottes klar und unzweifelhaft verkündigt wird, so dass nicht geaugnet werden kann: hier ist das Wort Gottes, so hat das immer eine Scheidung zur Folge.—Diese Scheidung muss der Pfarrer verstehen und muss erkennen, wie sich in ihr die Ankunft des Antichristen vorbereiten.”

collusion of the state in tyranny supported by the general population he predicted with uncanny accuracy as he assessed the spiritual troubles of his time. While it would be easy to dismiss his predictions as those of a man whose political sympathies met with little success, nevertheless, when surveying the currents of his time as they flowed into 20th century reality, one must conclude that his assessments bore the mark of accuracy.

We can criticize Vilmar for valuing the issues of his day so highly. After all, many tend to see contemporary events as all-important. His gauging the events of his day in light of eschatology would not be a fault unique to himself. Yet the course of events for Germany and the rest of the world in modern times must give pause and wonder if his evaluation did not indeed possess the sight that can only be described as metahistorical.

The question of Rainer Strunk, whether Vilmar was more a politician or a theologian,⁴⁵⁰ is rejected by Renate Sälter. She considers both to be of equal concern to Vilmar to preserve world order. While Strunk's question is skeptical of Vilmar's motives and convictions, it is nevertheless incorrect of Sälter to consider them both of equal status in Vilmar's estimation.⁴⁵¹ Certainly he saw both the church and state as essential to world order. He preferred, as we have seen above, the unity of church and state so that the church would remain in the mainstream of the world and its concerns. However, he did not consider the state, or a particular people, or a state church essential to the essence of the church. The church was eternal; the state was not eternal, and as he recognized it could, and likely would become hostile to the church.

Even more significant for this study is his connection of church and ministry to the larger significance of the troubles and concerns of his day. He closely connected the task of the church

⁴⁵⁰ Rainer Strunk, *Politische Ekklesiologie im Zeitalter der Revolution* (München und Mainz: Chr. Kaiser Verlag und Mathias-Grünwald Verlag: 1971), 233.

⁴⁵¹ Renate Sälter, *Die Vilmarianer: Von der fürstentreuen kircklichen Restaurationspartei zur hesischen Renitenz* (Darmstadt und Marburg: Selbstverlag der hessischen Historischen Kommission Darmstadt und der

and theology with opposing and even reversing the spiritual plight of the 19th century. Pastors in their office were to remain faithful, and not only oppose those developments inimical to it, but also to attempt to reverse them. Thus the pastoral office was to attempt to restore the organic unity of German culture but also to prepare the church for the tasks that lay in the future as believers were distinguished from those without faith.

Vilmar envisioned a time when society could be accurately described as “post-Christian” when the Christian faith would no longer provide the unifying element of culture, would face opposition of the most profound spiritual nature, and would need a theology to survive these attacks. The issue for him was not one of an intellectual challenge to provide an alternative system. Rather he was like a prophet in the wilderness, rejected by many, and calling God’s people to faithfulness.

Again his hermeneutic and his theology of the church dovetailed with his concerns for culture. He sought not only an assessment of his own day, and a warning for the future, he also sought to state a theology of the church and ministry that would equip Christ’s church for the challenges of the future. Only as it embraced the experiences and events of the church’s past in its doctrine, and as it sought to address the crisis of thought and faith could it faithfully endure the coming troubles. These he described so ably as the edge of the abyss on which the German nation stood.

Historischen Kommission für Hessen, 1985), 136.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

An Inheritance

A.F.C. Vilmar offered his world an overview of church and ministry, and indeed of the world itself. This service was seldom appreciated; his service could be compared to the Old Testament prophets who were persecuted by an Israel, a type of Germany he insisted, a nation that did not want to hear their witness. Vilmar offers us a view of reality that is not exhausted with the hailed end of modernism or the period of critical doubt we identify with that era. So insightful was the Theologian of Reality, that the description of the world as he saw it, called for certain theological description. Insofar as his picture of reality was a true one, he offers the present church a valuable point of departure for the theological task.

Unity

Today society that bears the appellations of “post-modern,” “post_Christian,” or academic life that describes itself as “post-critical,” indeed the entire Western world, seeks a basis for unity. There often seems little consensus on the basis of our culture as metanarratives are rejected as methods for exercising power. Vilmar knew the source of his culture; he anticipated the consequences of dissolution; he offered the solution in the Theology of Reality. The Western world seeks to find the unifying influence in the to bind itself together. Vilmar offers the answer.

In all of his writings a common theme emerges in among Vilmar’s concerns: disunity, or as he might have stated the problem, atomization. Atomization through abstract thought over reality

became problematic as the German nations abandoned the means of their historic unity, manifested in literature, history, political organization, and the established churches. He noted the modern phenomenon of the educated being increasingly distanced from the common man. In the church of the Augsburg Confession he found the truest expression of German unity resulting from the proclamation of the gospel.

Though Vilmar would identify the revolutions of his era as symptoms of the wider problem of social disintegration, indeed God's judgment against people who had abandoned the faith, it is likely few agreed with him. Instead they found progress inevitable, whether it emerged from a revolution to overthrow the established, repressive authorities of church and state, or whether it was a government that centralized much of modern life around itself, thrusting its authority into areas where it had not been sovereign before, especially into the Christian church. Vilmar considered these takeovers of the church a revolutionary act whose effect would accelerate the arrival of pending destruction. For Germany, there were only two alternatives to the troubled times: either a renewed Christianity or disaster.

It would be true, though not the whole truth, to describe his whole life as a search for unity and to promote the manifestations of unity in his work. This effort provided the impetus for his innovative educational initiatives to teach German literature and his defense of teaching the classics. He sought to immerse his students in the real world and away from the baseless presuppositions of modern life. The real world—something elusive to modern times he maintained. He saw an accelerating rejection of the real experience of the world in the relentless search for individual autonomy. In this seeking for a basis of reality, the only alternative were the abstractions of an empty rhetoric, based purely on abstract thought. The problem in his analysis was at root spiritual; he considered it paganism as theology and philosophy, especially in the

systems of Spinoza and Schleiermacher embraced pantheism. The solution came was to be found not only in a renewal of German culture but in a renewed Lutheran Christianity.

Today we know enough of history to judge if Vilmar's judgments were accurate in light of 19th and 20th century events. However, it would be premature to place a bookend on Vilmar's era as if the end of the Cold War provided a bookend to the historical era he represented. Discourse concerning the church takes places as societies, and indeed the Western world as a whole, in the midst of a "post Christianity" seek a basis for unity. As noted the question of the church continues to be at the center of religious discussion as Christians develop discourse and hermeneutical approaches to assist with the enduring questions with which the Theologian of Reality contended. As such questions continue to be asked in our day, we have an answer along with ample demonstration of the consequences of destroying the social fabric.

Conceptual Tension

A renewed Christianity was not found in a simple-minded return to the past, but involved critical retrievals such as the Lutheran Confessions, essential manifestations of the life and experience of the church. These doctrines of the church recognized the true, corporate reality of Christ's church and his dwelling in the midst of his church to lead and protect his people to the end of time. The challenge for Vilmar was to express how the historic facts of the faith could become part of the lives of his contemporaries. Vilmar explained it in terms of a conceptual tension: fact and experience. For him theology was descriptive; as he himself described it, theology could only describe what the church had "viewed, seen, heard, discovered."

The truth of revelation exists and always has existed since the beginning of time. As the gospel is preached and Christ leads his church through the contingent events of history, the church comes to a realization of this original revelation through the Spirit's guiding. The church

gains new insights into the Scriptures; new doctrine come into existence as the church describes the reality that is God, his creation, and his new creation, the church.

This conceptual tension of fact and experience was a hermeneutical shift, unusual if not wholly original in his day, avoiding the dialogical question altogether, with opinion divided between the two poles of reason or revelation. Vilmar never sought to prove the truth of revelation within rational categories, and in this endeavor he presents an original and Lutheran hermeneutic to the discussion of this issue. Rather his method was what today we call intratextual, where meaning is found within the context of the believing community and not methods contrived from atheistic presuppositions. He advocates theology as a church task.

In this method he rejects the a priori method of scientific systemization where knowledge of the whole is postulated on knowledge of some details. Rather he advocates the earlier method of a posteriori theology where certain knowledge of the whole is presumed and the details follow. In this fashion he presented the repetition description of how the original revelation was made to the church in a cumulative fashion within the context of history.

This intratextual method, however, was not intended to keep the church separate from the world. He saw the problem of modern times is an rejection of reality found in real life and experience. The church had to remain engaged with the world, and indeed, as he said, the church was its only hope to reverse the trends of the times and to avoid the pending disaster.

Vilmar's theological method offers Lutherans a manner of seeing the nature of theology as primarily descriptive theology as exclusively a church task, resting on the witnessed life and experience of the church.

Church as Institution

One of the common evaluations of Vilmar runs on the lines of a conservative politician using the church as an instrument of state power. He would advocate the prince as God's agent in the world; he advocated the established church even as he defended this divine institution from domination by the state in theological confession. When Lower Hesse became temporarily confessionally neutral following the early success of the revolutionaries in 1848, he gathered like-minded churchmen at the Jesuberg Conference to declare a free church and separate from the authority of the state in the church altogether. A confessionally neutral state clearly constituted an attack on the faith. Such a moment came when Prussia annexed Lower Hesse and the free, Renitenz Church was founded.

It was not simply for the sake of convenience that Vilmar sought to keep the church established. First, given the history of the German church, a disestablished church would not be useful to promote a faithful Christianity, actually quite the opposite was true. But when the Lutheran Confessions were finally rejected by the state, then it was desirable to distance the church from an institution that was no longer supportive.

In this aspect we see that Vilmar, though himself a monarchist as a conservative politician did not find the state essential to the essence of the church. It was no longer even beneficial without a confessional establishment.

The church was the institution of grace, even a means of grace, an institution which alone mediated the salvation of Christ through the means of grace. The word of God was alone found in the church and not outside of it. The gracious presence of Christ was to be found only in his church. The truth of revelation came to God's people only in the church. The church resembled an incarnational model where the presence of Christ became the focus of the institution.

And in this church the office of the ministry was commissioned to preach the word and deliver the salvation that Christ had won for his people and was to be found chiefly at the hands of his ministers. It was these men who were positioned to reverse the destructive trends in Germany; there were no others. The high assessment of the pastoral office led to criticism along with the designation of church as institution, an accusation of hierarchy and of a clergy dominated church. Given the context of revolution from both above and below, Vilmar sought not an institution with a dominant clergy, but a regard for what only the pastoral office could accomplish. It was more a matter of them having the first word of grace in their proclamation rather than who would have the last word in church affairs.

Given the occasional nature of doctrine, and given the cumulative nature of doctrine, Vilmar could embrace the Augsburg Confession's understanding of church. However, he felt that too many questions were left to be answered. There was room for much misunderstanding. Accordingly, he observed that the doctrine of church and ministry was yet to be completed. This observation was consistent with the logic of his understanding of doctrine and its development.

This understanding of the church offers an alternative to the concept of the church as invisible. Such a description serves to emphasize the need for individual faith and rejects a rigid, worldly hierarchy. However, an invisible church is essentially negative, leaving many in doubt about the church. Vilmar's description of the church as visible lends certainty as to the church's location, around the Word and sacraments, where Christ is present with his people, forgiving, leading, and fulfilling his promises.

Problematic Portrayal of the Preaching Office

In the Lutheran tradition, the priesthood of all believers and the office of the ministry exist in tension; the source of the ministry is depicted as both from above and below. Luther

introduced this tension when in denying an ontological difference between ordained and Christians not ordained, he maintains that all Christians are called to minister in word and sacrament; the community entrust the pastoral ministry to exercise this function on their behalf for the sake of good order. If this were all that the theology had to say, then there would be no need to deny the demands of the revolutionaries with whom Vilmar contended as they demanded synodical control of the church. Such an establishment would institutionalize the theology that claims that the pastor receives his authority from the congregation itself.

However, in a reading of the Scriptures, Luther noted the paradoxical nature of the pastoral office. It was clearly a gift of God to his church, having been established by Christ. The office derives directly from him without reference to the priesthood of all believers. However this distinction does not nullify the general priesthood of all believers.

This seeming paradox is resolved by the noting that the ordained ministry is drawn or called out of the universal ministry. Thus Luther restores the New Testament meaning of the ministry to the church where all are given a mandate by Christ. Second the ontological distinction between the laity and ordained is eliminated. Finally this theology of the ministry does not lessen the importance of the people of God called out from the nations.⁴⁵²

Clearly, Vilmar favors an emphasis on the institution of the pastoral ministry by Christ, the ministry from above approach. In his belief that ordination lends the recipient special gifts of the Holy Spirit, he errs in the Lutheran assessment of ministry. Just as all Christians are priests and are all anointed with the Spirit, there is no special gift awarded to those ordained with the laying on of hands beyond those gifts given to all Christians.⁴⁵³ While it remains true that a special

⁴⁵²Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, "The Calling of the Whole People of God into Ministry: The Spirit, Church and Laity." *Studia Theologica* 54 Issue 2 (2000): 144–46.

⁴⁵³A.F.C. Vilmar, *Dogmatik: Akademische Vorlesungen*, vol. 2, (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1874), 275.

aptitude is necessary for a call into the ministry, this ministry remains one of several gifts the Spirit bestows on his church. Therefore, the pastor, though his office does not extend from the congregation but from Christ, nevertheless acts on behalf of the congregation in the administration of the means of grace.⁴⁵⁴ However, in the connection he makes between theology and the pastorate “he said something new to his time.”⁴⁵⁵

Metacritical vs. Repristination

One of the unpredictable developments of his life examined here remains: the rediscovery of the Lutheran Confessions not only provided a body of material truth claims to counter that of liberal, modern theology. Rather he presented it as part of a larger movement of metacriticism that sought to explain the church in terms of its historical experience with Scripture. He provides a broad context to understand the significance of the Reformation itself. In contrast to the abstract theology of the day, here he saw a movement of the church—under the leadership of its pastors—that finds a new meaning in the Scriptures which had the effect of restoring a culture where the clergy were often alienated from the laity. Thus the Reformation was not simply an intellectual exercise of inner experience; the witness of Vilmar lends to the church of his day a way of explaining how one could accept the Reformation Confessions, remote historical documents, and find not only substantive truth, but a demonstration of how the church experienced truth throughout its history. Thus the Lutheran renewal of that period did not only repristinate dated doctrine, but in the understanding of Vilmar, it represented a hermenetical shift from scholastic unbelief to a church theology that had much to say to the people of his day, and

⁴⁵⁴Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 439–40, 450–457.

⁴⁵⁵Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, New Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 619.

this critique provided the church under attack with a theology of reality, of the reality of the church.

In Vilmar we have something original. His larger hermeneutical understanding comes to light only in recent years as we identify our own era as post-critical and question if not altogether dismiss the foundationalism on which so much theology, conservative or liberal, has long rested. His critical retrieval, that is the Lutheran Confessions, was not original to him, but it is known that he was part of a larger Christian movement. Nevertheless, his arguments for a truth known only to the church is original, and insofar as they remain a reflection of that reality, remain useful to Lutheran theology today.

His understanding of reality, the reality of the church and its witness, was the reality to useful so Lutheran theologians confronting the predicted outcome of the Third Reich as they sought to preserve themselves from the popular sentiment that supported that movement, however briefly. It offered a theological defense from the encroachment of the state into the church which had a different guise in the 19th century. Yet Vilmar saw it as the same revolutionary movement that had the same disastrous results that he had predicted long ago as German culture abandoned its unifying reality and adopted an alternative that as Vilmar evaluated it, would have no basis in reality.

His endeavor to find meaning as it came to us externally provided a different explanation for truth. No longer searching through rationalism for the relation to external reality, nor a search of Romantic subjectivity, he provided an explanation for the truth witnessed by the church within an understanding of the church. This move contra the atomizing of society into a mass of individuals was quickly dismissed by many theologians of his own day and subsequently; now, insofar as his witness of the church bears resemblance to reality, Lutheranism is left with an

ecclesiology it can use to explain the truth of the Scriptures without resorting to a rational method resting on the individual believer or any other kind of internal experience.

His exposition of Christ leading his church through history gives new explanation and meaning to Christ's promise to be with his church to the end of time. That reality will continue to challenge Christians as they consider Christ among them now, as well as the meaning for Christ in the midst of his church at all times and places, leading them to new meaning of the truth in the Scriptures.

Too long have confessional Lutheran bore the label of reprobation. Vilmar rejects that label and provides the church with a compelling reason for doing it. The developing nature of doctrine recognizes the life of the church in its experiences and the key events of its life. It recognizes Christ in its midst. Recognition of these dynamics offer a defense of the normative nature of the Confession even for believers today.

Hermeneutical Shift

As the church seeks to answer the question of itself that came so markedly onto the world stage in the events of the early 19th century, the reality of the church as a problem for its own self understanding remains a challenge. Vilmar sought to relate the Scriptures to the individual through the mediation of the church and its pastoral office, charged with the task of proclaiming the truth. Hence at the very least the church becomes the hermeneutical institution by which believers find meaning.

Not being satisfied with an objective external truth cast in objective form, Vilmar took on the question of how individual believers could experience this truth. Today we study anew the relationship of the biblical text to the believer. Can there be objectivity? Can there be meaning in the contingent that happened so long ago? In this search, Vilmar provided an explanation,

recognizing the essential task of the church, and indeed the task peculiar to the church, the preaching of sin and God's justification of sinners. So essential was this task that Vilmar could describe the church as a means of grace.

This intratextual approach as we call it today, finds meaning in terms of the community for which it is the underlying witness. This use of language was elemental to Vilmar's understanding of literature, its relation to culture, as well as the Christian witness itself. In this fashion, the Theologian of Reality demonstrates how God continues to be an agent, delivering on his promises, in the experience of his people.

In this post-critical effort, Lutherans and other Christians will likely find in Vilmar a valuable resource to explain the Scriptures, the Christian faith, as well as the reality that is the Christian church.

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