

The Historical-Critical Method of Bible Interpretation

By Siegbert W. Becker

Introduction

In the pages of our daily newspapers we can at the present time observe evidences of the decay and the destruction of what was once a great conservative Lutheran church body and with which our Wisconsin Synod was once in fellowship. If we ask what lies at the heart of this destruction and decay, it must be answered that at least one of the causes must be found in the so-called historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible. Having observed what this destructive method has done to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, we will need to remember that this Synod was at one time, and for a long time, one in faith with us. What happened to that Synod can also happen to us, and it behooves us to recognize the danger in this approach to the Bible, lest we also be led astray by this modern form of unbelief.

Those who adopted the historical-critical method are convinced that they have made spiritual progress. Like the persecutors of the apostles against whom the Savior warned His followers, they are convinced that by this adoption they have done God and their church a service. They believe that by shortening the battle lines they have made it easier for the church to defend its position against its enemies. James Baumann says that we have created "unnecessary stumbling blocks" by insisting on reading the Bible as it has been interpreted in former times.¹ It is also significant that Paul Bretscher's defense of the use of the historical-critical method in the Missouri Synod bears the title *After the Purifying*. They believe that the historical-critical method has made it possible for us to understand the Bible better. Prof. Jones of Seminex writes that the "books produced by historical-critical scholars are far superior to those produced by those who reject the method,"² and Edgar Krentz of the same school says that the research tools in common use today, the grammars, the lexica, the concordances, the Bible dictionaries, the commentaries, have been produced by the critical scholars.³

It is true that the historical-critical method has been adopted by the great majority of so-called Christian scholars. Krentz goes so far as to say that since the second World War historical criticism is taken for granted by biblical scholarship and that it is today so firmly established that it can no longer "be dislodged by any attack."⁴

Whether the men who employ this method have made it easier to understand the Bible better however, is very questionable. The Jewish scholar, Samuel Sandmel, for example, says, "The older Gospel scholarship was easy for Jews to read and understand; today's scholarship has so shifted to the theological as to be very hard to understand and even to read."⁵

When the great majority of scholars have adopted the method, we must expect that the great majority of books being published in the area of Biblical studies will be produced by such scholars. Moreover, it is not surprising that those who have adopted the method will believe that books produced by this method are the best on the market. These are the books that they will recommend to their students. In fact, an examination of the lists of books suggested for study by both New and Old Testament professors today in most Lutheran seminaries would almost seem to indicate that no books at all are being produced on the other side. Such books are being

¹ Lutheran Education Association Monograph Series, Vol. 3 No. 1 (Fall, 1975), River Forest, Ill., p. 2.

² *Faithful to Our Calling* by the Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., no date given.

³ Edgar Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1975, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32f.

⁵ Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 103f.

produced, but they are simply ignored as being out of date. The attitude of many modern scholars is illustrated by Harvey K. McArthur, who in his book *In Search of the Historical Jesus* has brought together excerpts from the pens of many different authors who have written on the subject, including even Jewish scholars. McArthur says that he deliberately omitted all items from the extreme right "which continues to reject the methods of historiography which have emerged in the last two centuries"⁶ That sort of approach to the problem is no isolated instance of this type of scholarship. When Hans Werner Bartsch over twenty years ago selected essays which discussed Rudolf Bultmann's view of the New Testament he claimed that he was taking no sides in the debate except to the extent that he excluded from his book all essays that took the position that it was not necessary to demythologize the New Testament.⁷ Evidently in his opinion those who take such a stance are not worth listening to.

On the other hand, other Christian scholars are just as firmly convinced that the historical-critical method does not benefit the church. George von Groningen says of the critical scholars,

The great majority of these do not lead us in that way in which Jesus Christ is increasingly and more clearly revealed to us as God's Son, who came to redeem fallen man and to lead the redeemed sinners into paths of sanctified service to God and fallen men. The Restorer and King of the Kingdom of God is not more clearly revealed nor meaningfully set forth as a result of their efforts.⁸

That the historical critical method is a damnable heresy against which all Christians ought to be on their guard is what we should like to demonstrate in what we are about to say. May God help us to see the dangers into which it plunges the church.

I. The Nature of the Historical-Critical Method

Even those who use and defend the historical-critical method are not completely sure what is meant, by the term. Edgar Krentz in his book, *The Historical-critical Method*, says that it is anything but clear just what we mean when we use the phrase "*historical method*" or "*historical criticism*."⁹ Scholars are not even agreed on what the method should be called. Some, like Krentz, prefer to call it the "historical method." Others simply call it the "critical method."

The Historical-Grammatical Method

It may, however, help us to achieve a little more clarity if we will briefly review other methods of interpreting the Scriptures. Luther and Melancthon, as well as countless Bible students before and after their time, were convinced that the only method which yields sure and certain truth drawn from the Bible is what has usually been called the "historical-grammatical" method. It is sometimes also called the "literal" method, and, confusingly enough, the "historical" method.

⁶ Harvey K. McArthur, *In Search of the Historical Jesus*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969, p. 185.

⁷ Hans Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, by Rudolf Bultmann et al., tr. by Reginald H. Fuller, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1961, p. IX.

⁸ George von Groningen, "Genesis: Its Formation and Interpretation" in Simon Kistemaker, *Interpreting God's Word Today*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1970, p. 12.

⁹ Krentz, op. cit., p. 33.

Basic to the historical-grammatical method is the acceptance of the Holy Scripture as the verbally inspired and inerrant word of God. Up until the rise of the critical school, all Christian scholars, (even if they were not always agreed on what the words meant) accepted the words of the Bible as being the source of truth because they were the very words of God.

To understand what God was saying to us, according to the grammatical method, we need to study the meaning of the words in their ordinary and Biblical usage. When we have discovered what the words mean, we know what God wants to say to us. What the words say is then accepted as God's truth. It is particularly this last point that we have in mind when we call it the *historical-grammatical* method. Above all else that term means that in the Bible we have true history, a true account of what was said and done. The historical-grammatical method assumes that the men who claim to have written the Bible really wrote it at the time they claim to have written it. It assumes that the people who are spoken of in Scripture really lived and really did the things described, unless there is something in the context itself that compels the reader to think otherwise.

Luther in his commentary on Genesis gives us a concrete example of what we mean by a historical-grammatical interpretation. At the beginning of the commentary he emphasizes repeatedly that Moses is writing history when he speaks of creation and the fall. In his comments on Gen. 3:14 he writes,

I adhere simply to the historical and literal meaning, which is in harmony with the text. In accordance with this meaning, the serpent remains a serpent, but one dominated by Satan; the woman remains a woman: Adam remains Adam, just as the following events prove.¹⁰

The Bible claims to be that kind of book which needs to be understood and interpreted in this way. St. John emphasizes that the things he was writing about were things which he and the other apostles had heard, which they had seen with their eyes, and handled with their hands (1 Jo 1:1). This is the kind of testimony the Lord Jesus had in mind when He said to His disciples, "Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning" (Jo 15:27), and when He promised that the Holy Spirit would cause them to remember what He had said (Jo 14:26). St. Peter stressed the same point when he wrote, "We have not followed cunningly devised fables (myths) when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pt 1:16).

Luther says that everywhere in Scripture we should cling to the "simple, natural meaning of the words" as that meaning is determined by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech, which he says God has created. If we do not do that, he says, there will be no doctrine about which anything could be settled and proved for certain.¹¹

The Allegorical Method

Already in the early church there were men who turned away from this simple, natural meaning of the text and adopted what is known as the allegorical method of interpretation. This method was learned from the heathen philosophers, who said that one ought not to believe anything unworthy of God and used allegory to explain away what they found offensive in the poems of Homer and the heathen myths. This method was adopted by the Jewish scholar Philo

¹⁰ WA, 42, 138.

¹¹ WA, 18, 701.

who used it to explain away everything in the Old Testament that he considered to be unworthy of God or uncomplimentary to the great heroes of Faith.

The Christian church fathers in Alexandria, in Egypt, adopted this allegorizing method of the Platonic philosophers and Philo. This method makes the Bible an unclear book. According to Origen, the trees in the garden of Eden were really angels, and according to the Epistle of Barnabas, the 318 armed servants of Abraham really symbolized the crucified Christ. Those who adopt this method are limited in their understanding of Scripture only by the fertility of their imagination, and it is clear that if the Bible means angels when it speaks of trees, and if it is foretelling the crucifixion of Christ when it says that Abraham had 318 servants, then the ordinary reader can never know what the Bible is really saying.

The Historical-Critical Method

Luther and the other Protestant reformers saw the inadequacy and incorrectness of the allegorical method, but all the weaknesses of this way of interpreting the Bible have been reintroduced into Christian scholarship by the historical-critical method.

At the outset it should be noted that the word historical in the term "historical-critical" does not at all mean what it means when we use the same word in the term "historical-grammatical." When Luther said that he read the Bible historically he meant that he believed that what was recorded in the Bible was real, true, accurate history, that people like Adam and Eve, Jonah and Abraham had really lived on this earth and that what the Bible tells us about them really happened.

The historical-critical method, while it does not always deny the existence of these people or the facticity of all the events recorded, uses the word "historical" not so much in regard to the content of the Bible as in regard to the way the Bible was produced. This view holds that the writers of the Bible because they were human beings who lived at a certain time in history reflect the views and the opinions of their own historical period. A. C. Piepkorn, who before his death was a professor at Seminex, says, for example, "The documents of the sacred scriptures reflect the scientific and historical information of their times."¹²

The more conservative theologians who employ the historical-critical method believe that the Scriptures are "more than the writings of mortal men,"¹³ but they are nevertheless the product of mortal, fallible men to a certain extent, and John Tietjen, the deposed president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, writes, "Since the Scriptures were written by men in particular historical situations, the Scriptures can be studied and researched like other human writings."¹⁴

The Historical - Critical Method

It is just at this point that the word "critical" in the term "historical-critical" becomes important. To a greater or lesser degree, all those who employ this method believe that since the Bible was written by men in a specific historical situation (something which no one of us would deny), therefore we must study these writings very carefully and in great detail in order to determine whether what they say is really factual. Edgar Krentz, also of Seminex, writes, "The historian challenges all sources in a more or less friendly way, even those he most highly respects."¹⁵ "Therefore," he continues, "the historian must not only determine what his witnesses

¹² Faithful to Our Calling, II, p. 111.

¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 45.

say, but also evaluate their truthfulness." Krentz has summarized the effect of this approach to the Bible in the words,

It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible. The Scriptures were, so to speak, secularized. The biblical books became historical documents to be studied and questioned like any other ancient sources. The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history had become the criterion for understanding the Bible The history it reported was no longer assumed to be everywhere correct. The Bible stood before criticism as defendant before judge.¹⁶

It is hardly necessary to say that when these men speak of criticism, they do not mean by that word what is usually meant by it in popular speech today. They do not mean finding fault with the Bible. "That they mean rather is that the scholar must study the Bible and all other subjects that have a bearing on what the Bible says and then on the basis of this evidence decide whether what the Bible says is true or untrue, whether it is right or wrong. Paul Tillich describes the method well when he writes,

In itself, the term "historical criticism" means nothing more than historical research. Every historical research criticizes its sources, separating what has more probability from that which has less or is altogether improbable¹⁷. . . . Its ideal is to reach a high degree of probability, but in many cases this is impossible.¹⁸

Edgar Krentz describes the critical method as "a disciplined interrogation" of the sources "to secure a maximal amount of verified information."¹⁹ Birger Gerhardsson says that "the task of critical scholarship is only to estimate probability on the basis of the evidence of the source materials."²⁰ Martin Woudstra says that "the historical method by its own admission cannot accept at face value the Biblical contentions concerning past events as being true and subject to no contradiction or doubt."²¹

Even if the moderates in the Missouri Synod do not want to be accused of "finding fault with the Bible," yet it is obvious that anyone who uses the historical-critical method claims the right to sit in judgment on the Scriptures. Even if they accept as true everything that is written in Scripture, but accept it only because they have demonstrated to their own satisfaction that it is true, the method would still be unworthy of the Christian who says with Samuel, "Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth." The critical attitude which accepts as true only what it has judged to be correct on the basis of historical research is diametrically opposed to that of Martin Luther who said, "If you do not want to believe Christ and His apostles and the Scriptures, may the devil thank you for believing it." In other words, if men do not believe it because it is written in Scripture, we ought not even want them to believe it for any other reason (WA 36,526).

It is, however, true that no one who accepts the historical-critical method can accept as true everything that is written in the Scriptures. An attempt is made by the more moderate

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 101.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁹ Op. cit., p. 6.

²⁰ Birger Gerhardsson, "Memory and Manuscript," in Harvey K. McArthur, op. cit., p. 34.

²¹ Marten H. Woudstra, "Event and Interpretation in the Old Testament," in Simon Kistemaker, op. cit., p. 70.

practitioners of the method to distinguish between the theological and the historical side of the Bible. According to them the theological message of the Bible is authoritative and only the historical side of Scripture is subject to criticism. Paul Bretscher, for example, distinguishes between what he calls the "theological reality" of the Bible, which he says is from God, and the "historical reality" of Scripture, which he says is from men. To the "historical reality" belong such things as the authorship of the Biblical books, the historicity and facticity of persons and events, the question of whether Jesus really said what the Bible says He said, and so on. "All such questions," he says, "have to do with the historical reality of Scripture It is not appropriate, therefore, to approach such questions by appealing to the Bible's inspiration and authority. We must rather summon the soundest reasoning of which we are capable, based on a careful gathering and examination of the literary evidence."²²

The more radical critical scholars do not hesitate to pronounce judgment on anything and everything in the Bible. It is taken for granted that we today know more than the apostles knew about some of the things concerning which they wrote. Bultmann, for example, says, "Man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world - in fact, there is no one who does."²³ What he means by the New Testament view of the world becomes clear to a certain extent when he says, "Now that the forces and laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil."²⁴

Not only are the apostles viewed as being children of their time with all the misconceptions that are common to their time, but even Jesus is not immune to criticism, C. H. Dodd writes,

Jesus, as He is represented, shared the views of His contemporaries regarding the authorship of books of the Old Testament, or the phenomena of "demon-possession" - views which we could not accept without violence to our sense of truth.²⁵

Such views are by no means expressed only by such radical critics as Dodd. More than ten years ago I personally was told by a professor at Concordia Seminary that Jesus said things that were not in accord with the facts. He insisted that since Jesus was a human being, He could make mistakes. We shall have more to say on this when we consider the affect of this method on the church.

The Historical-Critical Method - A Method of Doubt

Earlier we noted that Luther and Melanchthon held that certainty about the teachings of Scripture could be found only by way of the historical-grammatical method. Only if the Bible means what it says and says what it means can we be sure of what it is saying at all. The meaning of the Bible must be found in the words of the Bible, not *behind* the words of the Bible. Only by that approach can we reach certainty about God's revelation.

The proponents of the historical-critical method admit that theirs is a method of doubt. We have heard one of the critics say that the goal of historical criticism is to decide what is more or less probable. A slogan that is commonly heard among theologians who follow this type of

²² Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, River Forest, Lutheran Education Association, 1975, p. 87.

²³ Bartsch, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible*, New York Harper, 1958, p. 237.

Biblical interpretation is "Probability is the guide of life." Commenting on the subject of historical research Paul Tillich says that "the historian can never reach certainty in this way, but he can reach a high degree of probability."²⁶ The ideal of historical research, he says, is "to reach a high degree of probability," but, he admits, "in many cases this is impossible."²⁷

The result of the employment of this method has been hopeless confusion among the scholars. What one scholar holds to be very probable another considers to be very unlikely. The very great diversity of their conclusions drawn from the same evidence demonstrates how unreliable the method must be. The better we understand the method the clearer it will become that Luther was right when he said that only by the historical-grammatical method can we ever reach certainty in regard to the doctrines of the Bible.

A few examples of the diversity of the critical conclusions may be enlightening. Some scholars on the basis of the historical information outside of the Bible have tried to show that the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin was illegal from beginning to end, and have tried to show from this that the trial could not have taken place as it is reported in the Gospels for no Jewish court could have violated its own legal code in this way. This has been a favorite argument of Jewish enemies of the Gospel. A more modern critic of a more conservative stripe, Ethelbert Stauffer, writes,

I have made a point of evaluating the Jewish legal provisions concerning heretics and the rules of trialsAs soon as we attack this problem, we recognize the iron clad logic that dominated the criminal proceedings against Jesus from the first secret tribunal to the great heresy trial. it becomes clear that everything followed clearly and consistently from the laws.²⁸

Presumably Stauffer would like to have us conclude that the record of the trial can be depended on because it fits with what we know of Jewish Law.

On the other hand, N. A. Dahl says of the trial before the Sanhedrin, "Our historical knowledge is extremely limited. The debate over the Sanhedrin's authority to levy the death sentence, a debate which still has not been finally settled, provides one example."²⁹ Still a fourth point of view concerning the account of the trial is found in Spivey and Smith's *Anatomy of the New Testament* which says,

No record exists of any Jewish court ever condemning anyone as a messianic pretender. Perhaps the Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin was invented by the early church as anti - Semitic polemic.³⁰

At least Spivey and Smith are careful to prefix their opinion with a "perhaps," but it is obvious that every opinion expressed by the critics cited must be so introduced. They all in a general way admit that their views are characterized by probability, but when they express those views in a specific matter, their opinions often seem to have the force of papal pronouncements. On one point, however, all the critics are agreed, and that is that the correctness of the trial account will

²⁶ Paul Tillich, op. cit., p. 104.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

²⁸ Ethelbert Stauffer., *Jesus and His Story*, tr. by Richard and Clara Winston, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1960, pp. VIII f.

²⁹ N. A. Dahl, "Kerygma and History," in McArthur, op. cit., p. 138.

³⁰ Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, Jr., *Anatomy of the New Testament*, New York, Macmillan, 1974, p. 231.

have to be determined by "historical research." Even Stauffer, whose view is more conservative than that of Spivey and Smith, does not accept the account as factual because it is written in the Bible, but because he is convinced by his own careful research that it, is in accord with what we could logically expect such an account, to be like.

Another case in point, to demonstrate the tentative nature of all critical conclusions, is the matter of the authorship and date of the fourth Gospel. It was not so many years ago that it was agreed by all critical scholars without exception that John's Gospel could not possibly have been written by John in the first century. A half century ago or so the solid ranks of the scholars began to break on this question. The discovery of part of a copy of John's Gospel in 1920 dated by the experts early in the second century convinced everyone that the Gospel was earlier than had been previously supposed.

When Rudolf Bultmann published the German edition of his book *Jesus and the Word* in 1926, he could confidently write, "The Gospel of John cannot be taken into account at all as a source for the teachings of Jesus, and it is not referred to in this book."³¹ In 1958, C. H. Dodd could still write that it was not impossible that the fourth Gospel contains "personal reminiscences" but he still says that the evidence for this is subject to "heavy discount."³² The radical change in regard to the critical dating of John's Gospel is reflected in the words of Reginald Fuller, who wrote in 1962,

It is not surprising that quite responsible scholars, and not only those with conservative predilections who would naturally be inclined to "cash in" on the new evidence, are beginning seriously to entertain the possibility that the fourth Gospel was written much earlier than has been commonly supposed.³³

But even Fuller's words do not exhaust the extent of the change in critical opinion on this subject. In the second edition of his well-known book *From Stone Age to Christianity*, published in 1957, William Albright could still write, "There can be no doubt that John is the latest of the Gospels,"³⁴ but after the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls Albright became convinced that John's Gospel is the earliest Gospel and that it is very likely that Jesus really spoke the words that are attributed to Him by John.³⁵ McArthur summarizes the present scholarly opinion on this question of John's Gospel in the words,

Perhaps the current trend is to insist that there is more history in John than was believed a generation ago, but scholars continue to be cautious about determining precisely which elements are historical.³⁶

In the light of this radical shift in "scholarly" opinion, it is very interesting to note that in 1941 Emil Brunner could say that "the most important result of the whole work of Biblical criticism" was the discovery that between the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, on

³¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, tr. by Louise Smith and Erminie Lantero, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p. 12.

³² C. H. Dodd, op. cit., p. 88.

³³ Reginald Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962, p. 131.

³⁴ William Foxwell Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957, p. 388.

³⁵ Samuel Sandmel, op. cit., p. 105.

³⁶ McArthur, op. cit., p. 10.

the one hand, and in John, on the other, there was a great and radical difference, and that therefore the Gospel of John must be eliminated as a source in the sense of a literal record of His words and acts.³⁷ If the "most important result" of the method has now been called into question, it seems rather strange that we find men still insisting that this method helps us to understand the Bible. One thing is obvious. A discipline that reaches such tentative conclusions cannot expect to create confidence in its competence to answer important questions. Edgar Krentz quotes Peter Stuhlmacher as saying that there are "mutually exclusive opinions" on every topic or question treated by historical-critical interpretation, and this, Stuhlmacher says, is "a scandal in a scientific discipline."³⁸

This vacillation in scholarly opinion is accepted as normal. It is a common view among theologians today that the only thing we can be certain about is that nothing is certain. But if they are so sure that nothing is certain one is inclined to wonder how they can be so sure of this that nothing is certain.

Edgar Krentz even sees a virtue in these divergent opinions. He says that historical criticism is self-correcting and that what he calls "wild theories" are gradually rejected by close attention to and careful study of the text.³⁹ Krentz does not seem to realize that theories that are called "wild" from one point of view may very well be very mild from another. Moreover, the process of correction never seems to end in a certain answer. The "highest degree of probability" is the best that historical criticism can hope to attain, and the whole process is turned into a search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The correction of earlier views by later scholars who in turn are corrected by still later scholars reminds us of the old ditty,

Greater bugs have lesser bugs upon their backs to bite 'em;
And these in turn have smaller bugs and so *ad infinitum*.

Other scholars comfort themselves with the thought that historical criticism can never destroy the kernel of Christian faith. Emil Brunner says that while it is true that "the credibility of the Gospel narrative in its main features is the necessary foundation of real Christian faith," yet the Christian need not be disturbed when criticism calls much of the Gospel narrative into question, for "even the most intensive historical criticism leaves 'more than enough' of the Gospel story and its picture of the central Person to enkindle and to support faith."⁴⁰ That this is not true we shall see when we consider how the historical-critical methodology affects the message of the church.

Types of Criticism

To understand the effect of the historical-critical methodology on the church and its message it is necessary to examine in some detail the various types of criticism that have been popular in scholarly circles in the last two hundred years and more. The early criticism was directed mainly to pointing out all the things in the Bible that modern man could no longer believe. This was the rationalism against which orthodox Lutherans protested so loudly. This scholarly unbelief parading in the sheep's clothing of Christian learning did much to undermine

³⁷ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, tr. by Olive Wyon, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1946, p. 288. (The original German text was written in 1941.)

³⁸ Krentz, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴⁰ Brunner, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

faith in the divine character of the Bible, and men began to read the Bible as they studied any other book.

No longer believing that the Bible came into existence through a unique operation of the Holy Ghost by which He prompted the authors to write what He wanted written in words which He Himself taught them, the critics began to ask, "How did this book then, come to be written? How did it come to have its present form? And how are we to understand the things that are written here?"

Out of those questions come many types of Biblical criticism with which we must contend today, particularly source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. These various forms of historical criticism we will review briefly.

Textual Criticism

It is very common for so-called "moderate" Lutherans to justify their adoption of the types of criticism just mentioned by saying that they are only following in the footsteps of the fathers of the old Synodical conference, who never objected to the use of *textual* criticism.

This, too, is a part of the sheep's clothing worn by these modern false prophets. Textual criticism never sits in judgment on the truthfulness and facticity of Scripture. It judges not the work of the men who wrote the Bible but only the carefulness and accuracy of those who made copies of the Scriptures. It is, therefore, totally misleading when Alfred Fuerbringer says in *Faithful to Our Calling*, Part II, (p.56) that between "form criticism, redaction criticism and other aspects of historical-critical methodology," on the one hand, and textual criticism, on the other, "there is no sharp dividing line."

Until the invention of the printing press in Germany in the middle of the fifteenth century all copies of the Bible were made by hand. Even though the men who made copies exercised a great deal of care in their work, yet many, many variations have crept into the text, and it is safe to say that no two handwritten copies of the hundreds that are still in existence are exactly alike. By comparing these hundreds of manuscripts we are able to determine how the original copies of the Biblical books were really worded.

The great majority of these variations have little or no effect on the message and meaning of the Bible. A full discussion of this matter would take us too far from our subject, but it can be said that these variations in wording have absolutely no effect on the teaching of the church, and it is downright wicked to use textual criticism as an excuse for historical criticism, for, as we said earlier, the textual critic sits in judgment on the work of the copyists, while historical criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism sit in judgment on the holy men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

Dr. Theodore Engelder in 1939 wrote of this sharp cleavage between textual criticism and what he called "the so-called 'higher' criticism," by which he meant everything we understand under the heading of the historical critical method. He said at that time,

There is a vast difference between textual criticism and the so-called "higher criticism," which applies arbitrary and subjective standards to various portions of the Bible and denies the *fact* of inspiration as far as those portions are concerned.⁴¹

We therefore exclude textual criticism from consideration in our discussion of the historical-critical method, and insist that those Lutherans who use the pretext of the valid

⁴¹ Theodore Engelder, in *Concordia Theological Monthly* X, 1 (Jan 1939), p. 65

discipline of textual criticism to justify and defend this critical methodology of interpretation are using it only as sheep's clothing to hide their heresy.

Source Criticism

Before the First World War practically all historical criticism could be characterized as source criticism. This type of criticism studied the Biblical record in order to determine what sources had been used by the men who gave the books of the Bible their present form.

In this area, too, the views proposed are divergent and mutually contradictory and it is impossible in the time available to give a complete picture of the matter. Source criticism began in the field of Old Testament and its beginning is usually associated with the name of Jean Astruc, a French Catholic doctor of medicine, who in 1753 published a book in which he set forth what he called his conjectures or guesses about the original documents that Moses had used to compose the book of Genesis.

Astruc noticed that in Genesis chapter one the Hebrew word *Elohim* was invariably used for God, whereas throughout chapter two Moses used the name *LORD* or *Jehovah* or *Jahveh* (*Yahweh*). He therefore assumed that these two chapters were originally written by two different men and that Moses simply copied the two accounts so that they became the first two chapters of Genesis. Since the names of these original authors were not known, the author of chapter one was later simply called the Elohist or E and the author of chapter two was called the Jehovist or J.

Astruc also noticed that there were what appeared to him unnecessary repetitions in Genesis. For example, God tells Noah to make the ark 450 cubits long and then we are told that Noah made the ark 450 cubits long. Astruc assumed that the two documents were involved and Moses copied both of them. By applying such guesswork to Genesis, Astruc finally came to the conclusion that Moses had copied from thirteen different sources.

Astruc's ideas were adopted and developed by more scholarly men, who denied that Moses had written the Pentateuch. This was probably the one thing on which they all agreed so that to this day a denial of the Mosaic authorship is a mark of anyone who is a scholar. Some years ago, when a professor at Concordia Seminary told me that no one believes in the Mosaic authorship and I told him that I believed in it, his reply was, "No one who is a scholar believes in it."

In a general way it may be said that in our time it is a commonly accepted view that for the most part the first five books of the Bible are a compilation of four different documents, J E D P. D's work is found mainly in the book of Deuteronomy, and since the name of the author is unknown he is simply called the Deuteronomist or D. This is a scholarly way of saying that the man who wrote the book of Deuteronomy is the man who wrote the book of Deuteronomy. P is the priestly writer to whom are ascribed most of those parts of the Pentateuch that have to do with the Levitical worship of Israel.

These various documents were then combined by a number of editors or redactors, who are named R₁ or R₂ etc., or R_{JE}, R_{JED}, etc., and the whole Pentateuch as we know it today was put together after the Babylonian Captivity.

Source criticism studies the books of the Bible in great detail in an effort to determine just what sources are involved in the production of the books. Not one of these sources has ever been discovered. Even though the critics speak of J E D and P as though they were historical personages, yet they exist nowhere except in the imagination of the scholars. In other words, no

one in the whole world has ever seen the document called J, or E, or D, or P, although one would hardly suspect that when one reads the modern books on Pentateuchal studies.

While source criticism began in the Old Testament field, the New Testament has not been spared. Even though efforts have been made to find several separate documents in a few of the letters of Paul, yet in the main, New Testament source criticism has limited itself to the study of the Gospel, especially the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Since these three follow the same general outline, contain much of the same material, and often in telling the same story use many of the same words and phrases, it is assumed that they must have copied from each other or from a common source.

In a general way it may be said that, according to the most widely accepted form of New Testament source criticism, Mark, or a book very similar to Mark, copied and revised by the author of our present Mark, was written first. Since both Matthew and Luke have much material also found in Mark, they must have copied Mark or Mark's predecessor. Since they have much material in common which is not found in Mark, they must both have used a common source, called Q. Q is the first letter of the German word, *Quelle*, which means source, and when the scholars say that the source of the common material in Matthew and Luke is Q, this is simply a scholarly way of saying that the source of the material that is found in both Matthew and Luke is the source. Finally since Matthew has some material that is found in neither Mark nor Luke there must have been a third source and since no one knows what that source was it is simply called M. And since Luke has material that is found in neither Mark nor Matthew, there must be a fourth source, which is called L.

In order to find some kind of evidence to support such theories concerning the origin of the Gospel and of the Pentateuch, the books of the Bible are studied in meticulous detail, and we must admit that at times the amount of work that these men expend in a task whose aim, whether conscious or unconscious; is to discredit the Bible, often puts to shame the zeal of those who confess that in the Bible we have the very words of God.

That source criticism discredits the Bible as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God cannot be doubted. The various theories take for granted that the books were not written by eyewitnesses of the events which they record, that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses and that the Gospels were not written by apostles or close associates of the apostles. There would be no harm in saying that Moses used previously written documents as a source of information about events that took place before his time. But when sources are invented which contradict the plain statements of Scripture, they can only have the effect of undermining faith in the Word of God. For example, if Deuteronomy was written by D in 622 BC, as is asserted by the critics, then Deuteronomy, which claims Moses as its author (Dt 1:1 ; 4:44, 5 :1; 27:1, 9, 11; 29:1; 31-1, 9, 22, 24, 30; 33:1) is not a truthful book.

Source criticism has also generally denied the possibility of miracles. In this it followed the rationalism from which it developed. In fact, any miraculous elements in an account was usually enough to convince a source critic that he was dealing with an account which could not have been produced by an eyewitness, for those who were there would know that no miracle had taken place.

This methodology was used also to discredit all specific prophecy. If any part of the Old Testament spoke in clear terms about some event as still in the future, it was immediately assumed that it must have been written after the event took place. When, for example, the second half of the book of Isaiah clearly speaks about the Babylonian Captivity, which did not begin until a hundred years after Isaiah's time, it is immediately assumed that Isaiah could not have

written this part of his book. In fact, this is considered to be one of the benefits of the historical critical method. C. Blackman, who rejects many of the radical conclusions of historical criticism says that it is an advantage that "we no longer have to try to interpret t Isaiah 31 with reference to the eighth century BC"⁴²

The proponents of source criticism were also deeply influenced by an evolutionary view of religion and they rearranged and dated the various parts of the Old Testament in such a way that what they considered primitive was written earlier and what they considered to reflect a more advanced view of God was written later. When they had then rearranged the material they used this new order of the documents to demonstrate that their theories concerning the evolutionary development of Israel's faith was correct. C. H. Dodd says, "When once they have got the documents in their true chronological order, the broad rhythms of the history stand out firm and clear."⁴³

Because after two centuries of meticulous research in the area of source criticism, no firm results were apparent on which scholars could agree, more and more scholars came to see that there was little to be gained from this approach. It was recognized that after all this effort, J, E, D, P, H, S, Q, M, L, and countless other "documents" remained what one writer has called "shadowy anonymities."⁴⁴ No one knew exactly what those documents had contained and no one knew by whom or when they were written. No one had ever seen them, and two hundred years after Astruc they still remained "conjectures" or "guesses." Ten years ago a leading scholar could write, "Recent students of the Gospels have paid less and less attention to source criticism as such"⁴⁵

Form Criticism or *Formgeschichte*

The type of criticism that seems most popular today is called form criticism, or, as it was first called in Germany, the land of its birth, "Formgeschichte."

Unlike source criticism, *Formgeschichte* had its beginnings in the field of New Testament studies. When it became clear to many that the search for written sources was unfruitful, it was conjectured that the stories told in the Gospels were spread from mouth to mouth in the early church and that instead of searching for written documents behind the Gospels, it was the task of scholarship to study the oral tradition that finally resulted in the written Gospel.

There is an element of truth in this picture. The earliest of our four Gospels was not written until at least fifteen years after the death of Jesus and perhaps two or three of them were not written until thirty years, or, as is the case with John's Gospel, sixty or more years after the first Easter.

During those early years the church had the Gospels on the lips of the apostles. As those stories were told again and again they acquired a certain stereotyped form. As a result they are often told in the same words. In this way the similarities between Matthew, Mark, and Luke are to be explained.

Formgeschichte however, assumes that these stories as we have them today were not preserved by the apostles, who were eyewitnesses and ear witnesses of the words and works of Jesus. Instead it is held that these stories were in large measure spread by people who made all

⁴² E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1957, p. 146.

⁴³ C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 261

⁴⁴ W. D. Davies, *Invitation to the New Testament*, Garden City N.Y., Doubleday and Company, 1966, p. 121

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122

sorts of changes in the stories as they were passed from one individual to another and from one community to another and from one culture to another. It was the conviction of the inventor of *Formgeschichte* that "even the earliest Gospel (Mark) was not a simple historical narrative but was impregnated with the theological interpretation of the Christian community."⁴⁶

In principle, *Formgeschichte* differs from source criticism only in this way that while source criticism looked for written sources that it could never examine because no copies of these written accounts were ever found, form criticism is concerned with examining "the oral tradition which lies behind our Gospels."⁴⁷ It is assumed at the outset of the search, that even if we cannot be completely sure of what the oral tradition was like we can be sure that this oral tradition "took shape in the believing community."⁴⁸

The purpose of *Formgeschichte* is the same as that of historical criticism in general. The Jewish scholar, Samuel Sandmel, has very correctly said that "form criticism was resorted to in an effort to recover the materials which went into the early sources and to sift this material in order to isolate the historical from the unhistorical."⁴⁹ Kaiser and Kümmel, in their book on *Exegetical Method*, say that the goal of this type of criticism is to separate the original tradition "from later accretions and thereby pave the way for a historical evaluation."⁵⁰

It is the general accepted view of form criticism that the four Gospels are not a primary source for the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The account of Jesus that we find there has been too radically altered for that. What we have in the Gospels is rather a primary source for the beliefs of the early church. It is true that some scholars hold that the tradition was not as radically modified as is usually assumed. The Scandinavian scholars, Harald Riesenfeld and Birger Gerhardsson, for example, have argued that the New Testament itself indicates that the original tradition was already in fixed form by the time Paul wrote his epistles and that the community exercised rather strict control over the tradition.⁵¹ More moderate critics hold that one can show by the historical critical method that the synoptic Gospels contain a considerable amount of eye-witness material.⁵²

All the proponents of *Formgeschichte* however, are agreed that the original tradition has been modified and changed to some extent. The only difference between them is to be found in the degree of change that they assume has taken place. It is still always the task of the form critic to decide what is factual and what is not. Guenther Bornkamm who is generally viewed as a rather moderate defender of the method, says,

The critical exegete and the historian is therefore obliged, in questions concerning the history of tradition, to speak often of "authentic" or "inauthentic" words of Jesus and thus to distinguish words of the historical Jesus from "creations of the church."⁵³

And Robert Schultz of the LCMS writes in *Dialog*, that it is

⁴⁶ McArthur, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴⁷ Davies, op. cit., p. 129.

⁴⁸ Otto Kaiser and Werner Camel, *Exegetical Method*, tr. By E.V.N. Goetchius, New York, Seabury Press, 1967, p. 43.

⁴⁹ Sandmel, op. cit., p. 107

⁵⁰ McArthur, op. cit., p. 16.

⁵¹ Davies, op. cit., p. 127f.

⁵² McArthur, op. cit., p. 7

⁵³ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1960, p. 20.

not possible for us to think - as Christians for many generations could assume - that the New Testament gives us the very words of Jesus and of the apostles. We cannot even assume that large sections of the New Testament were given their present formulation by the apostles.⁵⁴

Just as source criticism did not remain limited to the Old Testament field, where it was first employed, so form criticism, which originated in the area of New Testament studies, was adopted as a fruitful method of research by Old Testament scholars. It is assumed that while the stories we have in the Old Testament may have a kernel of historical truth in them, yet the accounts as we have them today "are the result of the community experience of generations of believers."⁵⁵

The "Forms" of Form Criticism

The scholars who invented *Formgeschichte* believed that the various stories of the Gospels could be classified into a number of different types of literature. Here again we find no real agreement as to how the accounts are to be classified, but Dibelius, the German scholar who is credited with the invention of this type of research, found six forms, or types, of literature in the Gospel. They are 1) the passion story; 2) the paradigms, which are short stories about Jesus which illustrate a saying of Jesus found toward the end of the story; 3) the tales, which are the miracle stories; 4) the legends, which are stories about various people associated with Jesus; 5) the sayings, which were longer collections of words of Jesus; and 6) the myths, which were stories in which Jesus is regarded as God, such as the virgin birth, the transfiguration, resurrection and ascension.

These various forms of literature found in the New Testament represent stages in the evolution of the Gospel. Bultmann speaks of them as "layers" of which the Gospels are composed. He writes,

Critical investigation shows that the whole tradition about Jesus which appears in the three synoptic gospels is composed of a series of layers which can on the whole be clearly distinguished, although the separation at some points is difficult and doubtful."⁵⁶

It is generally assumed that these various layers represent successive stages in which the picture of Jesus gradually developed in the tradition of the early church. In the early days of form criticism it was assumed, for example, that the Judaism of Palestine was very different from the Judaism found in other parts of the Roman empire. It was held that the Jews outside the holy land did not have the same horror of polytheism as the people of Judea. Because the critics held that no Palestinian Jew could have accepted any man as being God incarnate, therefore any Gospel account that implied that Jesus is God must have originated late and outside of Palestine, where such views, because of the prevailing polytheism, were not so offensive. The stories of the virgin birth, for example, therefore, must have originated in the Gentile world.

The place and the conditions in which the stories originated are called their "*Sitz im Leben*." This is considered of tremendous importance by form critical scholars because they

⁵⁴ Robert C. Schulz, "Scripture, Tradition, and the Traditions," *Dialog*, II, (Autumn 1963), p. 277

⁵⁵ Martin H. Woudstra, in Kistemaker, op. cit., p. 58.

⁵⁶ *Jesus and the Word*, p. 12.

believe that it enables them to understand how the story originated and thus helps them to determine whether and to what degree the account is factual.

Kaiser and Kümmel say that in determining a story's *Sitz im Leben* we must ask what class of people would have a special interest in what is being reported and what institution or group of people could benefit from it.⁵⁷ If it can be shown that a special interest group in the early church might have had some reason for inventing a certain story, the historian has reason for doubting that the story is factual.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand may be cited as an example. In that story we are told that Jesus blessed the five loaves and broke them and gave them to the disciples. Those words, it is said, clearly show that the story has something to do with the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the early church. The early Christians were very likely intent upon showing that Jesus was able to give His body to thousands of Christians scattered in many places in the Roman empire. This story of the feeding of the five thousand would help to demonstrate that He could do this. Therefore "the miracle may be a post-resurrection story," and consequently it is said that "the historical critic is justified in questioning the historical probability of this miraculous feeding even apart from considerations of whether the event could have happened."⁵⁸

The whole method of form criticism presupposes that the critic must decide whether a certain story could have originated in Palestine during the years when Jesus lived there. The critic tries to determine by historical research what kind of world that was, and if he finds that something is described in the Gospels which he believes is out of character so far as Jewish culture and history of that period is concerned, then he feels justified in denying that the account is historical. In other words, he is sure that what is recorded did not happen. On the other, hand, if the account does reflect what he believes was an early first century Palestinian *Sitz im Leben*, he is sure only that it could have happened, not that it did happen.

The vicious character of form criticism is well illustrated by the remarks of Harvey McArthur, who writes,

The more complete our knowledge is of this period the more easily we may determine which narratives in the Gospel tradition "fit" into the pattern and which, on the contrary, reflect a somewhat different cultural or historical situation. Stories in the latter category are, presumably, not strictly historical - at least not in their present form. On the other hand stories which "fit" the original milieu are not necessarily authentic. They could be the products of the earliest Palestinian Christian community.⁵⁹

It is clear that form criticism is a scholarly discipline that can lead only to doubt in regard to the veracity of Scripture. But as the confident conclusions of earlier form critics are becoming increasingly questionable in the light of later discoveries we can only expect that form criticism will go the way of source criticism, for its own conclusions are becoming ever more questionable.

As we have already seen, the older form critics held that Palestinian Judaism was radically different from Jewish life and culture outside Palestine. But today "it is increasingly recognized that this difference has been grossly exaggerated."⁶⁰ A half century ago C. H. Dodd

⁵⁷ Kaiser and Kümmel, op. cit., p. 22.

⁵⁸ Spivey and Smith, op. cit., p. 194f.

⁵⁹ McArthur, op. cit., p. 12.

⁶⁰ Davies, op. cit., p. 26

could write that the speeches of Jesus in the Gospel of John bear "the stamp of an environment different from that in which the recorded events took place," and that they therefore "cannot be regarded as historical."⁶¹ We have also already seen how wrong some more modern form critics consider that conclusion to be. It is therefore not at all surprising to hear a modern advocate of this method say that "in spite of the very fruitful beginnings of form criticism. . . the study of form has not yielded objective criteria for separating older from later material to the degree expected."⁶²

Redaction Criticism

In recent times several new types of historical criticism have appeared on the scene. The most important of these is redaction criticism, which seeks to correct some of the weaknesses of form criticism. It is held that form criticism laid a one-sided emphasis on the influence that the Christian community had on the developing tradition in shaping it into the form in which we now have it in our Gospels.

Redaction criticism, while not rejecting many of the conclusions of form criticism, lays more stress on the Gospels as literary productions and on the modifications of the tradition made by the individual authors of the Gospels.

The spirit of redaction criticism is the same as that which produced source criticism and form criticism. Redaction criticism, too, assumes that what we have in the Gospels is not a factual record of what actually happened but an edited version that is more or less founded on fact but that has been freely altered and modified in the interest of a certain point of view. It is certainly true that the evangelists selected their material and left the imprint of their interest and their purpose in writing on the Gospels they produced, but that in this way they created conflicting theologies does not follow.

There are other types of criticism that might be mentioned, as, for example, tradition criticism and *Sachkritik*, but the three that have been treated in some detail are the chief types in which we meet the historical critical method in our time. Having seen them for what they are, we are now ready to consider how this method affects the church today.

II. How Does the Historical-Critical Method Affect the Church Today?

The one thing that stands out as a common denominator in all the various forms of historical criticism, whether it be source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, tradition criticism, or *Sachkritik*, is always this that the method sets the learned scholar above the Scriptures in the position of judge. Whether this is admitted or not, it is always and invariably true. And this is no accidental part of the process, but rather it is built into the method as part, if not the whole, of its essence. Without the assumption that the human scholar is able and authorized to determine what is historical and factual in the Bible and what is not, there simply could not be a historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. One student of the method has written

⁶¹ C. H. Dodd, in McArthur, op. cit., p. 83.

⁶² N. A. Dahl, in McArthur, op. cit., p. 131.

The splitting of the biblical text into human and divine elements is in fact an inner necessity for criticism, for only in this way can "free biblical research" be "safeguarded."⁶³

The "Neutrality" of the Historical-Critical Method

It is, therefore, very strange to hear the proponents of the method insist again and again that the method is neutral. In its defense of the method the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, asserted that "in and of itself the so-called 'historical-critical' methodology is neutral."⁶⁴ Yet how can a method be described as neutral if its very existence depends on the assumption that it is possible to separate truth from error in the Bible by applying to it the rigorous discipline of historical research? That kind of neutrality in a secular context was once described by a famous American orator who said that "neutrality means sneering at freedom and sending arms to tyrants."

What the defenders of the method evidently mean by neutrality, at least in part, is that one can, in using the method, approach the Bible without prejudice, without in advance rejecting anything the Bible has to say. Each individual account of a historical nature in the Bible is simply studied without any preconceived notion of whether it is right or wrong, factual or non-factual. Paul Tillich gives us a clear description of this kind of neutrality in regard to the miracle accounts in the New Testament when he writes,

The historical method approaches the miracle stories neither with the assumption that they have happened because they are attributed to him who is called the Christ nor with the assumption that they have not happened because such events would contradict the laws of nature. The historical method asks how trustworthy the records are in every particular case, how dependent they are on older sources, how much they might have been influenced by the credulity of the period, how well confirmed they are by other independent sources, in what style they are written and for what purpose they are used in the whole context.⁶⁵

What Tillich does not say in that connection is that many critical scholars are fully convinced that if such methods are employed, the conclusion that will always be drawn, even by the man who does not reject miracles *a priori*, is this that the miracle stories of the New Testament are, for the most part, to be rejected as historical accounts of actual events, which present a correct picture of what actually happened. And even if such a conclusion is not drawn, it must still be perfectly obvious that if the historical method must ask "how trustworthy the records are in every particular place," it is already assumed that at least the possibility of error must be there, for there is no point in asking whether the record is trustworthy at some particular place if one already knows the answer because he believes that what he is reading is the errorless Word of God.

Edgar Krentz gives us some insight into what the faculty of the St. Louis Seminary meant when it spoke of the neutrality of the method when he says that "the historian seeks information as complete as possible not in order to discredit his source, but to understand its credibility and use its witness."⁶⁶ Yet he obviously means that even if the scholar does not set out to discredit his

⁶³ Kurt Marquart, "In the Name of God...What 'False Doctrine'?", *Christian News*, VIII, 2 (Apr 5, 1976), p. 7.

⁶⁴ *Faithful to Our Calling*, I. p. 41.

⁶⁵ *Systematic Theology*, II.

⁶⁶ Krentz, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

source, he will sometimes find that the source he is studying, in this case the Bible, is in error, for earlier in the same context he had written,

Historical sources are like witnesses in a court of law. They must be interrogated and their answers evaluated. The act of interrogation and evaluation is called criticism.⁶⁷

In a court of law the purpose of interrogation or cross-examination is always to determine the truth of the testimony given and the assumption under which the interrogation is carried on is that the witness may be lying or at least incompetent as a witness.

It is apparent also that when it is said that the method is neutral in and of itself, those who make this claim want it to be understood that the method can at times be used to emphasize and to demonstrate the veracity and facticity of some Biblical accounts. Thus Spivey and Smith say that it is highly probable that the story of the burial of Jesus is based upon a kernel of historical fact. They draw this conclusion from the mention of Joseph of Arimathea, for they say that it would be very difficult to account for the appearance of Joseph in the story if he was not actually involved in the burial.⁶⁸ Neutrality evidently means that the method can be used to demonstrate a higher as well as a lower degree of probability, and while it may at times cause us to doubt some of the assertions of Scripture, it may very well at other times increase our confidence in other statements of the Bible, and the unsuspecting believer may be led by examples of the latter use of the method to adopt an approach to Scripture which will in the end be disastrous to his faith.

This does not mean that those who use the historical-critical method may not occasionally make discoveries that are of value, and that they may not at times point out features of a text that those who employ the grammatical-historical may have overlooked. We gladly grant that many of the biblical critics are diligent and thorough scholars who pay close attention to the text of Scripture. We may also expect that such serious and careful scholarship, even if it is carried on in a spirit of unbelief will at times discover something of value for all students of the Bible. Our German ancestors had a proverb that said that even a blind hen occasionally finds a kernel of corn. But the benefits to be derived from the method are consistently overrated and overwhelmingly outweighed by the damage done by it.

As an example of the good fruits of criticism Edgar Krentz cites the interpretation of Mt 11:28-30, where Jesus invites those who labor and are heavy-laden to come to Him and to take upon themselves His easy yoke. Krentz says that it has been customary to understand this as an invitation to "the oppressed, the weary, the overburdened housewife," but that the historical-critical method has demonstrated that Jesus is here calling those who are burdened by the demands which the law makes on them, since His words are the antithesis of Sirach 51:23ff, where men are urged to take on the yoke of the law.⁶⁹

That this is an insight that the critical method has made possible is a ridiculous claim. The historical-grammatical method is just as capable of producing that understanding. In fact, the reference of Peter in Ac 15 to the ceremonial law as a "yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear" is even a better basis for this application of Mt 11:28-30 than Sirach 51:25,26, since Sirach does not speak specifically of "the yoke of the law" but of the yoke of wisdom. Moreover, when Krentz appears to ridicule the application of the words of Jesus to the harried, housewife, he certainly limits the interpretation of the passage in a way that is not justified. If

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 42

⁶⁸ Spivey and Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 231f.

⁶⁹ Krentz, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

this is the best example that Krentz can produce, then the case for the critical method must be weak indeed.

But entirely aside from the question of whether the method may or may not produce beneficial results, it must be emphatically stated that the method is not neutral. It clearly rejects the claim of Scripture to be a book which is different from every other book in the world. Repeatedly the critical scholars insist that the Bible must be read precisely as every other book in the world is read, namely with a critical eye. Kurt Marquart says that

basically. . . the point of the method is that the Bible must be treated exactly like any other ancient piece of writing - with human reason (science, history, etc.) sitting in judgment over the sacred text, deciding what is fact in it and what is fiction.⁷⁰

Arlis Ehlen makes exactly this assertion in *Faithful to Our Calling*, when he says that we "must use the same historical, critical methodology that is appropriate for the study of other human writings."⁷¹

A Bible-believing Christian would never call such a method "neutral." The Reformed theologian, Marinus J. Arntzen, has correctly evaluated the historical-critical approach to the Bible in saying,

In reality, this new theology displays an overbearing and haughty feature in its performance: man decides on the basis of scientific research which part of Scripture is or is not historical.⁷²

The vaunted neutrality of the critical scholar is really a neutrality between the Bible and science. If the Bible says one thing and the natural scientist or the scientific historian says something different, then the words of the Bible must be weighed against the word of the scientist in a purely neutral way. This is the theory apparently. In actual practice, however, it becomes very clear that the words of the Bible are given even less weight than the opinions of modern scientists and historians, as we are told unendingly that the holy men who wrote the Bible were children of their time who were limited in their knowledge and understanding of science and history by the undeveloped state of the culture in which they did their work. In other words, they believed all the wrong things that ordinary men of their time, with a similar background and training, believed.

Even if the method *were* perfectly neutral in the sense that the Bible is given equal weight with natural and historical science, yet it would still be a disgrace to a Bible-believing Christian. In the days when the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was still an orthodox church body, one of its great teachers wrote,

God's Word commands us to "bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5) and to accept Scripture, every statement of Scripture, as God's truth, as authoritative and binding. Carnal reason, however refuses to do this. It claims supreme authority for its own judgments. It assumes the right to criticize and to correct Scripture.⁷³

⁷⁰ Marquart, op. cit., p. 7.

⁷¹ *Faithful to Our Calling*, II, p. 48

⁷² In Kistemaker, op. cit., p. 183.

⁷³ Theodore Engelder, *Scripture Cannot Be Broken*, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1944, p. 47.

To a Bible-believing Christian, who takes that attitude, neutrality of the kind claimed for the historical-critical method, is a sin. No man, and above all, no believing child of God has a right to be neutral between God's wisdom and man's wisdom. With Dr. Martin Luther we will confess that God has more wisdom in His little finger than all the learned scholars in the world and all the devils in hell on one heap. That judgment of his has, significantly, become part of the Lutheran confessions (FC, ThD, VII, 22) and it might well be considered by those who speak of using the historical-critical method with Lutheran presuppositions.

The Historical-Critical Method and Inerrancy

It is obvious from what has been said that the method certainly cannot be neutral on the question of Biblical inerrancy. It is a foregone, fixed conclusion, presupposed in the practice of this kind of interpretation, that the Bible can be wrong at almost any point. The more conservative practitioners of the method try to safeguard what they call the theological side of Scripture, but even they hold that the Bible could be wrong on almost every point at which it treats either history or natural science. In those areas, at the very least, the method is definitely opposed to Biblical inerrancy and even Biblical authority. Kurt Marquart very correctly says that the method cannot begin to operate unless the divine authority and inerrancy of the Bible has first "been stripped away as irrelevant to the scholarship enterprise."⁷⁴

That a hostile attitude toward inerrancy is part and parcel of the method is not only charged by its opponents, it is admitted by its defenders also. Emil Brunner writes that "if the Bible is an infallible book, written under the dictation of the Holy Spirit" (and by that he means "verbally inspired") "then no Biblical criticism could exist," and he makes the existence of criticism dependent on the admission that there are "inconsistencies, errors, or mistakes in the Bible."⁷⁵ That premise is also accepted by Paul Bretscher in his book *After the Purifying*.

Over against the critical approach to the Bible we hold that the Bible is different from every other book in the world. In the sense in which Brunner understands that term we hold that the Bible is dictated by the Holy Ghost, at least, the words in which the apostles proclaimed the message they were sent to carry to the world were taught to them by the Holy Spirit. And because the words of this book are the words of God, they are true, infallible, and inerrant. Because of this, the Bible cannot be read in the same way in which any other human book is read. No man has a right to sit in judgment on the statements made in this book. Just this is what the historical-critical method denies.

When Martin Scharlemann in 1959 paved the way for the open adoption of the historical-critical method in the Missouri Synod by his denial of inerrancy, such a roar of protest was heard in that church that Dr. Scharlemann was finally persuaded to agree to the use of the word "inerrant" even though he reserved the right to redefine the term. However, the bad seed had been sown, and today many professors and pastors in the Missouri Synod in a more or less open way reject the inerrancy of the Bible.

One of the more veiled denials of inerrancy is found in the repeated assertion that the Bible must be read as every other human book is read, as we have already seen, even though to many, at first glance, that statement seems to be harmless.

Another veiled denial of inerrancy on the part of the critical scholars is found in their assertion that the Bible is not a book of science. John Constable of Seminex, for example, writes

⁷⁴ Marquart, op. cit., p. 7

⁷⁵ Emil Brunner, op. cit., p. 274.

in *Faithful to Our Calling* that the Scriptures "are not given to us to answer every problem of man's existence or to solve every historical or scientific question."⁷⁶ Remarks such as that also seem harmless enough on the surface, for no one has ever claimed that every scientific question has been answered in the Bible. Such statements cannot be challenged in themselves, but, except when they are thoughtlessly repeated by those who do not know what is involved, they always serve as a prelude to the open attack on the reliability of Bible statements in the area of natural science. We have all heard apparently learned theologians say that the Bible is not a book of science and that it does not answer every scientific question as a premise from which one can conclude that the Bible must sometimes be mistaken when it speaks of scientific matters. Such a conclusion, however, is not logical. A mathematics book which contains all the arithmetic tables from one to one thousand does not answer every mathematics question, but that is no reason for assuming that there must therefore be mistakes in the tables themselves.

At the present time the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture by the Missouri Synod scholars who have adopted the historical-critical method is no longer veiled. In the collection of statements made by the members of the former faculty of the St. Louis seminary, Robert Grunow, (whose confession, by the way, is one of the better ones in the booklet), writes,

If perchance a statement of historic fact in the Bible could be proven wrong, this would not alarm me or cause me to question its truthfulness in spiritual matters. To insist that the Bible is a book of science, etc., in my opinion is a misuse of Scripture.⁷⁷

While Grunow only indicates that there could be mistakes in the Bible, others go far beyond this. Dean Rep writes that he does not consider "inerrancy" a useful way of describing Scripture.⁷⁸ President Fuerbringer says that there is

obvious disagreement between what the Bible says in one place from what it says in another, or between what the Bible says and what is discerned from scientific observation or known from geography, geology, history or some other branch of human knowledge.⁷⁹

Kenneth Breimeier says that it would be well not to use the term "inerrant" as a description of the Scriptures.⁸⁰ The whole St. Louis faculty confessed that

The reliability or "inerrancy" of the Scriptures cannot be determined by twentieth century standards of factuality. Nor do the Scriptures link the work of the Holy Spirit with this kind of "inerrancy."⁸¹

This attack on inerrancy has proceeded so far that just this year (1976) a Missouri Synod pastor in Kansas published a little booklet of 43 pages in which he points out one alleged error after another in the Bible and ends up by saying that the Bible is inerrant even if it contains "faulty science, inaccurate quotations, and various discrepancies" and concludes that therefore it might

⁷⁶ Part II, p. 33

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 65

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 54

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 15

⁸¹ *Faithful to our Calling*, I, 37.

be best not to say that it is inerrant.⁸² That kind of doubletalk is deceiving, dishonest and reprehensible.

Yet these deniers of inerrancy repeatedly imply that the defenders of inerrancy are either dishonest or ignorant or worse. C. H. Dodd holds that while many people think they believe in inerrancy, "no balanced mind has ever tried to carry it through with complete logic."⁸³ An unsigned article in *Missouri in Perspective* implies clearly that those who believe in an inerrant Bible have never seriously searched the Scriptures by saying,

When a Christian takes God's Word seriously enough to search the Scriptures, he or she discovers that there are in fact numerous discrepancies, errors - whatever in the Scriptures. Some of these can be harmonized. . . but some simply cannot A supernaturally-authored book simply cannot have such discrepancies.⁸⁴

An editorial in the Lutheran magazine *Dialog* says that to call the Bible inerrant in all its parts would deify the Bible and so would prohibit treating it as a book and bar the use of the historical and literary methods by which alone any book can be understood.⁸⁵

Perhaps a few words should be said about the charge that only someone who is naive and who does not seriously search the Scriptures can believe in inerrancy. The evidence which is cited to prove that there are errors in the Bible does not impress us as being particularly indicative of careful and logical thought and serious scientific research.

When Martin Scharlemann in 1959 sought to show that the Bible was mistaken in some things he cited two examples of error, one of which was repeated by his brother Robert in 1963.⁸⁶ The first "error" is found in Mt 27:6, where the evangelist says that Jesus' betrayal for thirty pieces of silver was foretold by Jeremiah whereas the thirty silver pieces are actually mentioned in the book of Zechariah. Several solutions to this seeming contradiction have been suggested, but it ought to be clear that we are here by no means even dealing with a seeming contradiction. It should be noted that Matthew does not say that it is written in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. That would be an error. He does not even say that it was written by Jeremiah. Is it not possible that Jeremiah spoke this prophecy? How can any man know that Jeremiah did not say this? Just because Zechariah wrote about the thirty pieces of silver does not mean that Jeremiah could not have said this also. We know from the Bible itself that the prophets knew and used each others work. To say under such circumstances that Matthew is obviously wrong, is illogical, not to say anything about intellectual pride and arrogance.

The second "error" cited by Scharlemann has to do with the locale of Jesus' ascension. He said that Matthew records that Jesus ascended into heaven from Galilee while Luke tells us that He ascended from the Mt. of Olives, which is not in Galilee but in Judea. When a careful reader notes that Matthew does not mention the ascension at all, it becomes obvious that it was not Matthew or Luke that made a mistake here, and it becomes clear that someone has not seriously searched the Scriptures, and that someone was not a believer in inerrancy.

⁸² John D Frey, *Is the Bible Inerrant*, Prairie Village, Kansas, Rev. John D. Frey, 1976, pp. 42f.

⁸³ C. H. Dodd, op. cit., p. 10.

⁸⁴ "Needed: Luther's 'Theology of the Cross'," *Missouri in Perspective*, July 7, 1975, p. 5.

⁸⁵ Unsigned editorial, *Dialog*, II, 4 (Autumn, 1963), p. 273

⁸⁶ Robert Scharlemann, "The Scientist and Genesis 1: a Reply," *Lutheran Scholar*, XX, 2 (April, 1963), p. 11 (39).

We do not have the time at this convention to consider this question of the inerrancy of the Bible in greater detail, but if we wish to cling to the inerrancy of Scripture we shall need to resist the historical-critical method in its entirety.

The issue has been well stated by Carl Braaten in the Autumn, 1972, (p. 251) issue of *Dialog*:

Preus and his committee make an all-out attack on the historical-critical method, because they realize that it was the results of just this method that blew apart the older dogmatic conception of the doctrinal unity of the Bible. This method opened our eyes to pluralism, divergent trends, historical conditionedness and relativity, and also theological contradictions in the Bible.

One more thing, however, should be said before we leave this matter of inerrancy. The charge is often made against us who defend inerrancy that we have a docetic view of the Bible. Docetism is an ancient heresy that said that Jesus Christ was not really a human being: He just *seemed* to be a human being.

When it is said that our view of Scripture is docetic we are being accused of refusing to admit that the Bible is really written by man. They know of course, that we have never denied this, but they insist that if the Bible is really written by men, then it must contain mistakes and contradictions, for it is human to err.

Again it ought to be pointed out that this sort of thinking has been rejected by the Lutheran confessions. When Flacius said that original sin and human nature are the same thing, the Formula of Concord explained in its very first article that it was possible to be a true human being without being subject to sin. God can create and did create a sinless man in Adam. God could send and did send a sinless man to be our Savior. God can and will make pure and sinless men out of all of His believers in the resurrection. And so God could and did give the world a sinless and errorless Bible. When the critics therefore say, as was said in *Dialog*,⁸⁷ that since the living voice of the Gospel is a human voice, it is on that account liable to fail, they are not speaking as Lutherans, no matter how often they defend themselves against the charge of radicalism by saying that they use the historical-critical method with Lutheran presuppositions.

If the argumentation of the critics were correct, we would also have to conclude that since Jesus was a true human being He could also be mistaken. Many of the critics have reached that conclusion long ago, which only serves to point out once more the dangers in the method. I myself heard a professor who is now on the Seminex faculty say, "Jesus was a human being, -- He could make mistakes."

We on our part can only respond by saying with Dr. Walther that if the possibility that Scripture contains error would be admitted, it would become the business of man to sift truth from error in the Scripture, and that places man over the Scriptures. And this is exactly what the historical-critical method does.

The Historical-Critical Method and Inspiration

In order to use the method of Bible interpretation the critics not only are compelled by their method to surrender the biblical doctrine of inerrancy, but once that method of interpretation is adopted the doctrine of verbal inspiration also must be given up. It is true, that in a church like the Missouri Synod, which had a long tradition of firm adherence to the verbal

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 272.

inspiration of the Bible, it is difficult for theologians to admit that verbal inspiration is being denied.

But the fact remains that the doctrine of verbal inspiration and the historical-critical method are absolutely incompatible. Long ago Emil Brunner made that crystal clear when he wrote,

So long as the ecclesiastical principle which governed the view of the Scriptures was understood in terms of the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration, even the smallest concession to "Biblical criticism" - whether from the side of natural science or from that of historical science - was a catastrophe for the whole fabric of the doctrine of the church."⁸⁸

Whenever men have given up the doctrine of biblical inerrancy they have eventually come to realize and admit that if that premise is once accepted, the doctrine of verbal inspiration simply cannot be maintained for long. In his book, *The Authority of the Bible*, C. H. Dodd asserts that any attempt to reconcile the doctrine (he calls it the "theory") of verbal inspiration with "the actual facts that meet us in the study of the biblical documents leads at once to such patent confusions and contradictions that it is unprofitable to discuss it."⁸⁹ Those words, from one who does not accept either verbal inspiration nor inerrancy, at the very least, indicate very definitely that belief in inerrancy and belief in verbal inspiration are closely linked.

Wherever men have been honest with the church they have had to admit that Brunner and Dodd are correct in what they say. Verbal inspiration and historical criticism simply cannot exist side by side. Robert Preus, president of Concordia Seminary in Springfield, Ill., is quoted as saying, "I have never found a Lutheran who has even tried to harmonize our Confessional high view of Scripture with the form-critical method."⁹⁰

Yet at first glance it appears that those who use the critical methodology often try to make it appear that they still believe in verbal inspiration. One repeatedly hears them say that the Bible is inspired, that all of it is inspired, even that it is verbally inspired. But it is safe to say that eventually such confessions of inspiration will have to be surrendered if inerrancy has been given up. Leigh Jordahl, of the LCA, has written,

The classical Lutheran doctrine of verbal inspiration, as so vigorously articulated by Franz Pieper and Missouri's entire tradition, is utterly antithetical to the historical-critical method. Outside of Missouri I know of no theologian who even tries to hold both views⁹¹

When some of the early leaders of the movement to introduce historical criticism into the Missouri Synod found difficulty in rejecting inerrancy directly, they managed to accomplish their goal finally by redefining what was meant by inerrancy. Since it had always been asserted in the Missouri Synod that there were no errors in the Bible, they redefined error to mean "a mistake that is made intentionally in order to deceive." They held then that the mistakes made by

⁸⁸ *Revelation and Reason*, p. 274

⁸⁹ C. H. Dodd, op. cit., p. 35

⁹⁰ Quoted by Louis Praamsma, "Authority and interpretation of Confessional Standards" in Kistemaker, op. cit., p. 218.

⁹¹ Editorial: "Old Missouri is Gone," *Dialog* 13, 2 (Spring, 1974), p. 86

the holy writers were not made intentionally, or if they were made on purpose they were not made to deceive men but to glorify God.

The critical scholars have now reached that same stage in regard to inspiration. We and the old Missouri Synod have always, in accord with the teaching of Scripture defined inspiration as that act of the Holy Spirit whereby He gave to the holy writers the very thoughts they expressed and the very words in which they expressed them.

But the faculty of Seminex as a body has defined inspiration as "the breath of God working in and through the Scripture,"⁹² and they say that "the inspiration of the written Word pertains to the effective power of the Scriptures to bring men and women to salvation through the Gospel."⁹³ If these words mean what they say then the faculty is only saying in reality that the Scriptures are an inspiring book that is able to touch human hearts. This is, of course, true enough, but this is not what the Missouri Synod meant in days gone by when it spoke of the inspiration of the Bible.

In *Faithful to Our Calling*, Part II, the members of the faculty of Seminex again and again emphasize that the Scriptures do not tell us much about the manner of inspiration.⁹⁴ If they mean by this that it is a mystery which we cannot explain, they are, of course, correct. But those who are familiar with the history of the controversy over verbal inspiration know that it was this very same language which was used by the theologians of the LCA in the thirties when they tried to defend their denial of verbal inspiration. Richard Caemmerer goes so far as to say that he teaches his students to keep this action of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the Scriptures at work also in their preaching.⁹⁵ Herbert Mayer writes in his book, *Interpreting the Holy Scriptures*,

Because the Bible says practically nothing about the "how" of inspiration, it may be best to think of inspiration as St. Paul thought of it. He connected inspiration with a statement about the Bible's purpose.⁹⁶

Carl Volz, of the Seminex faculty, clearly implies that verbal inspiration actually harms our faith in Christ when he says,

The desire to prove the authority of Scripture through such categories as verbal inspiration and inerrancy displays a fear that the Person, Words, and Works of Jesus Christ are not a reliable ground of faith. Attempts to apply such categories to Scripture reflect an underlying doubt in quest of certainty, which is basically a rationalistic enterprise.⁹⁷

If such statements are not intended to prepare the way for a denial of the biblical doctrine of verbal inspiration by maintaining that the doctrine is not important for Christian faith and even a hindrance to faith, it is difficult to understand what purpose they serve.

Almost forty years ago Theodore Engelder said that an inspiration which leaves room for errors and contradictions in the Bible is not real inspiration.⁹⁸ Yet today, even in what was once

⁹² *Faithful to our Calling*, I., p. 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹⁴ See e.g., *Faithful to Our Calling*, II, pp. 11, 36, 37, 53.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁹⁶ Herbert T Mayer, *Interpreting the Holy Scriptures*, St. Louis, Concordia, 1967, p. 20.

⁹⁷ *Faithful to Our Calling*, II, p. 142.

⁹⁸ Theodore Engelder, "'Verbal' Inspiration No 'Theory,'" *Concordia Theological Monthly*, X, 1 (Jan, 1939), p. 66.

regarded as conservative Lutheranism, many theologians hold that the Bible is totally and infallibly inspired, but that such inspiration does not produce an inerrant Bible because it is infallible only in accomplishing what God intends to accomplish through it.⁹⁹

It is therefore safe to predict that those Lutherans who have adopted the historical-critical method will eventually openly reject the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The process is already well underway. Robert Schultz writes in *Dialog*, "The doctrine of verbal inspiration and even the assertion that the New Testament was written primarily by the apostles are becoming more and more questionable,"¹⁰⁰ and it may be that before too long Berkhof's statement that the proponents of the historical-critical method "were all one in the denial of verbal inspiration and of the infallibility of Scripture,"¹⁰¹ will again be true.

We cannot in this essay present even a small part of the biblical evidence for verbal inspiration, but as important as that doctrine is for us, so careful we ought to be in guarding against the introduction of biblical criticism into our midst, for it is certain that when criticism gets a foothold in a church the doctrine of verbal inspiration will be dislodged and any attempt to pretend that it has not been lost will be sheer hypocrisy. As Kurt Marquart says, "When *everything* in the Bible is believed just because the Bible says so (John 10:35, Acts 24:14) there simply is no scope for the critical method at all."¹⁰²

The Historical-Critical Method and the Word of God

When the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures are denied, the doctrine that the Bible is the Word of God can no longer be maintained. If the words of the Bible are not given by God to the holy writers and if, as is universally asserted by those who hold to the historical-critical method, the statements of the Bible are in numerous places contrary to fact, then it must be clear that not all of this book, and perhaps none of this book, can really, in a literal way, be called God's Word.

This introduces a completely new view of Scripture into the theology of Christendom; for up to relatively modern times all branches of Christendom, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Lutheranism equated the Word of God with the Bible. The German scholar Ebeling, for example, says that orthodox Protestantism purely and simply identified God's Word with Holy Scripture.¹⁰³

This was also the view of Martin Luther. In spite of everything that is said to the contrary, Luther never distinguished between the Bible and the Word of God. Even a rather superficial acquaintance with his writings will very quickly demonstrate that he uses the two terms interchangeably. Jaroslav Pelikan exercises absolutely irresponsible scholarship when he says that "the Scriptures were the 'Word of God' in a derivative sense for Luther,"¹⁰⁴ and when he writes in another place that for Luther "the 'Word of God' in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ."¹⁰⁵ Luther did not believe that the Bible was the Word of God in a "derivative" sense. He believed that the Scriptures were God's Word because the words of Scripture are the words of God, because God Himself says what is said in Scriptures. It is significant that, in denying this, Pelikan does not cite statements made by Luther, but almost all

⁹⁹ John Warwick Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, I, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1967, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ Robert C. Schultz, "Scripture, Tradition and the Traditions," *Dialog* II, (Autumn, 1963), p. 281.

¹⁰¹ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1950, p. 31.

¹⁰² Kurt Marquart, "In the Name of God—What 'False Doctrine'?", *Christian News*, VIII, 2 (April, 1976), p. 7.

¹⁰³ Quoted by Rene Marle, *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1967, p. 74.

¹⁰⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p. 67.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

the footnotes in that section of his book are taken from the writings of those who have written about Luther. Nor did Luther believe that "the Word of God" in the New Testament is "essentially the historical Christ." In a volume of the American edition of Luther's works edited by Pelikan, Luther himself says that when the evangelist John calls Jesus the Word this is odd, obscure and uncommon language.¹⁰⁶

Luther's habit of equating Scripture with the Word of God is reflected in a rather remarkable way in the very first paragraph of the preface to the Book of Concord. The German version of the preface says that the Augsburg Confession was prepared on the basis of the divine, prophetic, apostolic Scripture, and the Latin text in the same place says that the Augsburg Confession was collected out of the Word of God and the most holy writings of the prophets and apostles, and throughout the preface the terms Scripture and Word of God are used interchangeably.

This identification of Scripture with the Word of God is viewed by historical-critical methodology as the basic error of orthodox Christendom. Gerhard Maier finds the beginning of the historical-critical method in the conviction of Semler that the root of all evil in theology is to be found in the confusion of Scripture with the Word of God.¹⁰⁷ Semler's view has been adopted by all liberal forms of Christian theology, and Semler is very correctly called both the father of rationalism and the father of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation.

The identification of Scripture with the Word of God is today being openly rejected also by Lutheran theologians who still want to be known as conservative, or at least "moderate." In 1965 Walter Bouman wrote in the *Encyclopedia of the Church*,

Some forms of Christian fundamentalism have sought to identify the Bible with the Word of God in such a way that the term "Word of God" is simply equated with the Bible.¹⁰⁸

His words clearly imply that in Lutheranism such an equation should be rejected. Ten years later Paul Bretscher carried that rejection a step farther when he wrote that in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod "the Word of God is simply equated with the Holy Scriptures"¹⁰⁹ and comments that when this is done the Gospel is robbed of its honor.¹¹⁰ One of the basic themes of Bretscher's book, *After the Purifying*,² is just this that it is un-Lutheran and wrong to identify Scripture and the Word of God.

It was this rejection of the identification of the Bible with the Word of God that provoked the discussion of the question, "In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?" Where Scripture and the Word of God are identified there is no need to ask that question, and for centuries Lutherans knew the answer. It was therefore difficult for many Lutherans to understand why the discussion of this question agitated the faculty of Concordia Seminary in the days before the founding of Seminex. This question has always been a problem for those theologians who know that they are expected by the church to say that the Bible is the Word of God but who feel uncomfortable in making that confession. On the other hand, many Lutherans who have adopted

¹⁰⁶ LW (Am. ed.), 22, 115

¹⁰⁷ Gerhard Maier, *Das Ende der Historisch-Kritischen Methode*, Wuppertal, Germany, Theologischer Verlag Rolf Brockhaus, 1974, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Walter Bouman, "Bible as Word of God," in J. Bodensiek, *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1965, I, p. 230.

¹⁰⁹ Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying*, River Forest, Lutheran Education Association, 1975, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the historical-critical method would not be comfortable in saying, as C. H. Dodd did, "Not God but Paul is the author of the Epistle to the Romans,"¹¹¹ nor would they be willing to say, as Dodd does, that when the prophets claim to have heard the voice of God speaking to them, this was either a case of "hallucination under trance conditions" or "the creative imagination of the poet" at work.¹¹² And yet it is certainly true that Dodd expresses the basic view of the critics when he says,

. . . in the expression "the Word of God" lurks an equivocation The Eternal has neither breath nor vocal cords; how should He speak words? Clearly enough the term "Word of God" is a metaphorical expression.¹¹³

Lutheran advocates of the historical-critical method have usually not been as grossly blasphemous as C. H. Dodd, but they still agree with Dodd in the opinion that the statement, "The Bible is the Word of God," is a figurative expression. They may prefer to say that the Bible is the Word of God in a "derivative" sense or in a "secondary" sense, but they still mean that it is a figurative way of speaking.

What they usually intend to say by such remarks is that the Bible is not the Word of God because the words are inspired by God. Rather they would agree with E. C. Blackman, who writes,

Christ is, in the primary sense of the classic term, God's Word. The Bible is the Word of God in a secondary sense To insist on the Bible itself as the Word of God is Fundamentalist heresy, which creates more problems than it solves.¹¹⁴

A very similar view is expressed by Emil Brunner, who says "The Scriptures are the word of God, because, and in so far as, they give us Christ."¹¹⁵

Simply stated, the view of the critics is that Christ is the Word of God and since the Bible tells us about Christ, therefore we can also call the Bible the Word of God. When these men therefore use the words, "The Bible is the Word of God," they do not mean what orthodox Lutherans have always meant by them. Thus Walter Bouman has written that "The Bible is the Word of God because of its relationship to Christ,"¹¹⁶ and John Tietjen holds that "the Bible is the Word of God because, as Luther said, it is the cradle of Christ."¹¹⁷ Perhaps it ought to be pointed out that while it is true that Luther said that the Bible is the cradle of Christ, he never said, as Tietjen implies, that it is the Word of God on that account. Tietjen's words are only one example of the desperate lengths to which these men will go to claim Luther for their point of view. A similar example is found in Bretscher's argument that since Luther says in the third article that the Holy Ghost has called us by "the Gospel", therefore "it is clear from the Catechisms that in Luther's mind 'the Word of God' is not simply equivalent to the Bible."¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Op. cit., p. 16.

¹¹² Op. cit., p. 81.

¹¹³ Op. cit., p. 16.

¹¹⁴ E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1957, p. 154.

¹¹⁵ Emil Brunner, op. cit., p. 280

¹¹⁶ Walter Bouman, "Bible as Word of God" in J. Bodensiek, *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1965, I p. 230.

¹¹⁷ *Faithful to Our Calling*, II, p. 7

¹¹⁸ Paul G Bretscher, op. cit., p. 14.

The verbiage of these Lutheran critical scholars is only sheep's clothing with which they hide their denial of the orthodox Lutheran doctrine that the Bible is the Word of God because it is verbally inspired. But these words help to make it clear how correct it is to say that historical-critical method cannot be practiced where the Bible is identified with God's Word.

The Historical-Critical Method and Biblical Authority

Once the critic has disposed of the doctrines of verbal inspiration and inerrancy and has given up the identification of the Bible as the Word of God, the concept of biblical authority has also been undermined. If the words of the Bible are not the words of God and if what those words are not true just because they are the words of God, then obviously it is no longer possible to believe what the Bible says just because it is written in the Bible. "It is written" becomes not a final argument, as it is in the New Testament and on the lips of Jesus, but just the proposal of a human opinion which may or may not be true. In that spirit, *Missouri in Perspective* ridicules the idea of a "supernaturally authored and therefore authoritative Scripture."¹¹⁹

The final outcome of this critical approach to the Scriptures is well illustrated by the position enunciated by C. H. Dodd in his book, *The Authority of the Bible*. He holds that we cannot accept any statement of the Bible as true just because it is found in the Bible, because there is too much written there that is simply impossible for us to believe. According to him, we cannot accept a saying as authoritative simply because it is presented to us as a saying of Jesus. According to him, we will have to be convinced by rational argument that it really was said by Jesus. And this, he says, means in the final analysis, that we will have to be convinced that it is worthy of Him, that it is true, and that it is important.¹²⁰ It is obvious that, according to Dodd's premises, the subjective opinion of the Bible student will decide whether what the Bible says is to be accepted.

A position as extreme as that of Dodd, while it is not at all uncommon among the critical scholars, nevertheless probably would be rejected by the more moderate theologians who have adopted historical-critical methodology. When they are told that the premises they have adopted will finally leave them defenseless against such radical conclusions, they often answer that the Lutheran confessions and their own confessional loyalty will keep them from going too far astray. But this surely robs the Scriptures of their authority by transferring the final decision from the Scriptures to the confessions. Such an argument places the writings of men over the Word of God.

This was not Luther's way of approaching the study of the Bible. He said,

Necessity compels us to run to the Scripture with all the writings of the doctors, and from there to get our verdict and judgment upon them; for Scripture alone is the true overlord and master of all writings and doctrines on earth. If not, what are the Scriptures good for? Let us reject them and be satisfied with the books of men and human teachers.¹²¹

The critics who like to claim Luther for their side in this debate must finally admit that Luther treated the Scriptures as endowed with final authority. Emil Brunner finds fault with the great

¹¹⁹ "Needed: Luther's 'Theology of the Cross'," *Missouri in Perspective*, July 7, 1975, p. 5.

¹²⁰ C. H. Dodd, op. cit., p. 233.

¹²¹ WA. 7, 308f.

reformer because, in his controversies with those who did not accept his doctrines, he appealed "to the letter of Scripture as infallible because it was wholly and literally inspired by God."¹²²

Dr. Walther said that when it is once assumed that there are mistakes in the Bible and that scholars are able to correct Scripture, this places man over God. Such a charge is repudiated by the critics because they will argue that what they are rejecting in the Bible is not God's Word. That very argument, however, demonstrates once more why the identification of the Bible with the Word of God is so obnoxious to them. Prof. Klug of Concordia Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, has very correctly described the attitude of the critics and the incompatibility of that attitude with an acceptance of the full authority of Scripture as the Word of God. He writes,

When God speaks, the *hearer* is under obligation to *listen* obediently. The historical-critical methodology proceeds in precisely the opposite direction. It talks. It is constantly talking, demanding that *it* be listened to, even by God (emphasis his).¹²³

The Final Results of the Historical Critical Method: The Rejection of Miracles

When once the full and final authority of Scripture has been surrendered, as it must be surrendered whenever the historical-critical method is adopted, every single doctrine of Scripture become questionable. Those who have been brought up in an atmosphere where the Word of God was respected and honored may indeed in spite of their methodology retain a great deal of the Christian faith by what Franz Pieper used to call "a happy inconsistency."

But even in those who insist that they will never surrender the Gospel it is easy to see the doctrinal decay that goes hand in hand with the adoption of the historical-critical method. One area in which this decay can be seen is in the attitude toward miracles. The more radical critics reject miracles out of hand as simply impossible. Semler denied all miracles and to this day many scholars hold that one cannot really be consistent in the use of the historical-critical method unless one is willing to admit that history is a closed, causal continuum of events and that supernatural causes must be ruled out if one expects to make the New Testament or the whole Bible, for that matter, understandable for modern man.¹²⁴ It is admitted that the writers of the Bible believed that God could be regarded as a possible link in the chain of historical events, but it is asserted that this view is no longer possible for twentieth century scholars.

Even though the adoption of the historical-critical method by the theologians of the Missouri Synod took place only about twenty years ago, the influence of this denial of miracles is already apparent. At times the denial is still thinly veiled. When John Constable of Seminec, for example says, "I personally believe in Biblical miracles culminating in the miracle of the resurrection. I do not, however, believe that a person can be saved by faith in miracles alone,"¹²⁵ this is not direct attack on the miracles, but there is no point to his second statement unless somehow faith in the miracles is being downgraded. It would surely be difficult to find even one person in the whole world who believes that "a person can be saved by faith in miracles alone." Moreover, it should be noted that Constable does not say that he believes in all Biblical miracles or even in the Biblical miracles. Besides, his words, "I personally believe in Biblical miracles," seems to indicate rather clearly that he is willing to recognize the denial of at least some miracles

¹²² Op. Cit., p. 275.

¹²³ Eugene Klug, "The End of the Historical-Critical Method" (book review), *Springfielder*, XXXVIII, 4 (March 1975), p. 291.

¹²⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, *An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1969, pp. 57f.

¹²⁵ *Faithful to Our Calling*, p. 34.

as a viable option for others in his fellowship, which is, and must be the case, for anyone in fellowship with Seminex.

Moderate critics always insist that some miracles cannot be surrendered. E. C. Blackman, for example, writes that there is "one basic miracle about which Christian faith can make no parley, the miracle of God's redemptive activity."¹²⁶ While those words leave wide room for wholesale denial, Blackman himself accepts more miracles than that remark may seem to indicate, but he does specifically reject the miracle of the money in the mouth of the fish, the rent veil in the temple, and the stilling of the storm. The spirit in which that denial is made becomes very evident when he writes,

These incidents cannot be regarded as having taken place exactly as recorded. Their literal sense is inadmissible: they must be pronounced unhistorical. Reason permits no other verdict, and adoration does not forbid this verdict. This is not a judgment on Jesus, but on the mentality of the early Christians, and particularly the Gospel writers They had not the questionable advantage of living in an age of science and scientific history, and of being schooled to a conception of the uniformity of Nature which leaves no place for divine intervention.¹²⁷

Even when miracles are still accepted, however, it is common to discover that in many cases acceptance is largely limited to those cases in which it is possible to find some rational explanation for the miracle. It will be noted that the Miracles specifically denied by Blackman are all nature miracles. The nature miracles usually are very difficult to explain by any means acceptable to modern science. On the other hand, many historical-critical scholars are willing to admit that Jesus healed the sick and they find corroboration for their faith not in the assertions of Scripture but on the basis of modern conceptions of psychosomatic illnesses.

One approach to the miracles that the moderate critics seem to have in common consists in this that it is repeatedly said the attention is not to be focused on the miracle itself but that we ought to be concerned rather with the significance of the miracle. No one, of course, can quarrel with that statement, for the very fact that miracles are often called "signs" in the Bible already suggests that this approach is proper.

It does not take very long, however, to discover that such statements, when made by the critical scholars, are intended to divert attention from the historicity of the miracles and from too close attention to the details of the biblical reports of miraculous events. The Bible says that the miracles have been reported to convince us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This is the basic significance of the miracles of Jesus. This meaning of the miracles, however, is destroyed by the critic who says,

the important question about Jesus' miracles is not whether he healed - undoubtedly he, as well as others, did - but what use the early Christians made of this healing tradition,¹²⁸

for if the healing miracles of Jesus are not important or if they are no more than psychosomatic cures, which could be accomplished without divine power, then the miracles have nothing to say to us about the deity of Christ. The same critic says also that in the context of the first century,

¹²⁶ E. C. Blackman, op. cit., p. 188

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

¹²⁸ Spivey and Smith, op. cit., p. 92

which had many miracle workers, "the miracles of Jesus are not quite so unusual,"¹²⁹ and that the raising of Jairus' daughter "might rest on an actual incident in which he aroused a girl who was in a coma."¹³⁰

The same tendencies which one notices in historical criticism generally are manifested also in the Lutherans who have adopted the method. In 1962 a professor of the Missouri Synod who objected to the denial of the inerrancy of the Bible met with the praesidium of the Missouri Synod, the administrative officers of the St. Louis seminary, and the clergy members of the seminary board of control. At this meeting Dean Arthur Repp of the seminary faculty openly said that it was impossible for the snake in the garden of Eden to talk because snakes have no vocal cords. To believe that the snake actually spoke, he said, was the kind of fundamentalism that had to be rooted out of the Missouri Synod.

While the published statement of the doctrinal position of the St. Louis faculty is not quite that extreme, it nevertheless clearly reveals that the attitude toward miracles is very similar to that expressed by other advocates of the critical method. The statement of the faculty says,

Many are misled into focusing on a given miracle for its own sake. Either they measure it against the standards of modern scientific method and find the miracle wanting, or they demand an absolute acceptance of each detail of the miracle, precisely as it is reported, as a test of their own faith and the faith of others. Both approaches are misleading. The miracle accounts of the Scripture are neither scientific reports nor tests of just how much we are willing to believewe ought to focus on this central meaning of the miracle accounts for us instead of dwelling on the authenticity of isolated miraculous details.¹³¹

Such remarks clearly lay the groundwork for the denial of at least some of the miracles of the Bible, and when once this process has begun it will finally end in a denial of fundamental articles of the Christian faith. It is well-known that the "moderate" theologians of the Missouri Synod are ready to surrender the "biological" miracle of the virgin birth, even though they still believe that the "doctrine" of the virgin birth is important.

And this rejection of miracles will eventually also touch the fact of the resurrection. *Missouri in Perspective* says that this is not true, but that, in fact,

one of the greatest contributions of historical-critical study has been the heightened awareness that the early Christians' certainty about the resurrection of Jesus affects the entire New Testament record.¹³²

To understand the significance of that remark one must pay very close attention to the exact wording. It should be carefully noted that the author of that article in *Missouri in Perspective* does not say that the "certainty of the resurrection" has been undergirded by the historical-critical method, but only that the method has produced "heightened awareness" about the *certainty* of the early *Christians* about the resurrection.

That difference is significant when we remember that form criticism holds that the Gospels do not tell us what Jesus said and did, but only what the early church *believed* about

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 189.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 195

¹³¹ *Faithful to Our Calling*, I, p. 19

¹³² Nov 4, 1974, p. 5 (reprinted by Elim).

what Jesus said and did. *Missouri in Perspective* is correct that practically all users of the historical-critical method emphasize the Easter faith of the disciples. They *believed* that Jesus was alive. Bultmann, for example, teaches that one cannot doubt Easter faith of the disciples, and yet he says,

Both the legend of the empty tomb and the appearances insist on the physical reality of the risen body of the Lord But these are almost certainly later embellishments of the primitive tradition. St. Paul knows nothing about them. There is however one passage where Paul tries to prove the miracle of the resurrection by adducing a list of eye-witnesses (1 Cor 15:3-8). But this is a dangerous procedureAn historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable.¹³³

To say, therefore, that the historical-critical method has made men more certain that the early Christians believed in the resurrection is meaningless so far as the objective reality of the resurrection is concerned, and just how meaningless it is becomes clear when we hear advocates of the method say of the resurrection, "We can be reasonably certain that something happened, but we are less certain about exactly what happened."¹³⁴ It is not at all uncommon for the critics to speak of the resurrection appearances of Jesus as a "hindrance to faith," because they leave the reader with the impression that the body of Jesus really did become alive again.¹³⁵ That certainly leaves us with a resurrection which is no resurrection, and with a faith in resurrection that involves believing what is not true.

When we note what at least many critics have done with the resurrection, we must also realize how wrong Emil Brunner is when he says (see above, p. 9) that the most extreme criticism always leaves "more than enough" of the Bible to serve as a firm basis for faith. St. Paul very clearly says that if Jesus did not really come out of that grave, the faith of the early Christians was good for nothing (1 Cor 15: 14-19).

The Final Results of the Historical-Critical Method: The Rejection of Prophecy

Along with the rejection of miracles comes also the denial of biblical prophecy. This is again characteristic of the historical-critical method. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, says that the prophecies of Jesus concerning His own suffering and death "must be understood by critical research as *vaticinia ex eventu*."¹³⁶ That can only mean that the critic must hold that Jesus never predicted His passion, but that after He died His followers pretended that Jesus had spoken such words and proclaimed to the whole world that He had spoken such words. James de Young calls this "the accepted critical view" and he very correctly says of it,

At the worst, this view makes the Gospel writers pernicious ventriloquists and Jesus their puppet. At best, it raises serious questions as to the prophetic ability of our Lord.¹³⁷

Bultmann, of course, belongs to the most radical wing of the historical-critical school. The same can hardly be said about Gunther Bornkamm, who is generally counted among the

¹³³ *Kerygma and Myth*, p. 39.

¹³⁴ Spivey and Smith, op. cit., p. 242

¹³⁵ Paul Achtemeier, op. cit., p. 140.

¹³⁶ McArthur, op. cit., p. 162.

¹³⁷ James de Young, "Even and Interpretation of the Resurrection," in Kistemaker, op. cit., p. 156.

more moderate critics. Yet Bornkamm, too, looks upon the predictions of the passion as *vaticinia ex eventu*.

This denial of prophecy lies in the background of much that at first glance may not seem to involve that question. For example, it is generally held, also in moderate Lutheran circles, that the second half of Isaiah's book was not written by the prophet Isaiah in the eighth century B. C. The chief argument for the view lies in this that the chapters from 40 to 66 in Isaiah clearly speak of the Babylonian Captivity and the release of the Jews from that captivity, and that therefore these chapters could not possibly have been written prior to the close of the sixth century B.C. at the earliest. In the same way, it is generally held that the Synoptic Gospels were written after 70 A.D. because they predict the destruction of Jerusalem which took place in that year. And even though the critics in many other matters use such words as "probably," and "in all likelihood," on this point they usually express no such reservations. One introduction to the New Testament, written by two critical scholars, says, for example, that since Luke seems to know about the actual destruction of Jerusalem, "the earliest date for Luke would therefore *have* to be (our emphasis) sometime after Jerusalem's fall in AD 70."¹³⁸

The critical approach to prophecy means that the Messianic character of the Old Testament is denied. In a personal conversation more than ten years ago, one of the professors of the St. Louis seminary maintained that there are no Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament and that the Old Testament believers knew nothing of the Christ who was to come to redeem men from their sins. When he was reminded that Jesus Himself said, "Moses wrote of me," his reply was, "What if He did. Jesus was a human being. He could make mistakes." At the very best, biblical prophecy must become subject to doubt and question wherever biblical criticism is practiced.

The Final Results of the Historical-Critical Method: Summary

We cannot in the time available to us at this convention begin to list all the denials of Scriptural truth that have become a part of Lutheran theology with the adoption of the historical-critical method. It would be easy to document the denial of the six-day creation, the original sinless state of man, the historicity of the fall and of the flood, the virgin birth and even the bodily physical resurrection of our Lord. The conclusions of science are accepted as corrective of the Holy Scriptures and the judgment of historians are considered more valid than the plain statements of the Bible. The acceptance of the Scriptures as the final judge in all matters of which they speak is called Bibliolatry and it is openly asserted that our faith must not be in a book but in a person. In this way, the faith of God's people in the message of the Bible is undermined more and more. Such an approach to Scripture is surely not in keeping with the confession to which every Lutheran pastor on the day of his ordination obligates himself with a solemn oath. When the Formula of Concord says,

We receive and embrace with our whole heart the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged

that is a theological position which cannot be reconciled with the historical-critical method which makes man the judge of the Scriptures, and we can say with conviction that this method is clearly a tool of the devil which is leading all Christendom astray.

¹³⁸ Spivey and Smith, op. cit., p. 151.

Yet Lutheran scholars often defend their use of the method by saying that the heart of the Gospel will always be safe from attack in their use of his methodology, because they use it with Lutheran presuppositions. But this overview of the method and its effect on the doctrine of the church ought to be sufficient to show how correct it is to say that using the historical-critical method with Lutheran presuppositions is very much like eating pork with Jewish presuppositions. It simply cannot be done, and may God in His mercy keep us from trying it.