

Wesleyan Theological Perspectives

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INTERPRETING GOD'S WORD FOR TODAY

An Inquiry into Hermeneutics
from a
Biblical Theological Perspective

Edited by

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Evangelicals and Critical Historical Method

“**THE THEOLOGICAL** pietism of today lacks the courage and desire for spiritual adventure, the readiness to think something through to the end come what may, in brief the most important presupposition of systematic thinking.” This timidity, Ernst Käsemann notes, stands in contrast to the creativity and theological resourcefulness of progenitors like J.A. Bengel and A. Schlatter.

This lament also applies to what in the United States is called evangelical or conservative Christianity. What Käsemann is describing is a lack of freedom before the Word, perhaps even a failure of nerve to remove filters that both history and tradition have laid over the reading of Scripture.

While one may see certain encouraging signs, especially in some evangelical exegetical work, and while there are **exceptions**,² it is nevertheless quite true that **evangelicals** have been uncertain and hesitant to engage in what might be

called a post-Cartesian or post-Enlightenment approach to Scripture. The consequence has been a retreat into dogmatic norms that become the measure or standard for biblical interpretation and theological statement. There has also been a loss of creativity and relevance due to an insistence that “we go back to Scripture **through the Reformers**”,- and, strangely but certainly, we have seen a decrease in the significance of Scripture. One of the ironies of church history is that those segments of the Church that speak so strongly for the full and fixed authority of Scripture have often been the ones in which deduction rather than induction, dogma rather than exegesis, have become the **modus operandi**.

Käsemann’s words in another essay have not been sufficiently heard: “The relationship of the community and the Word of God is not reversible; there is no dialectical process by which the community created by the Word becomes at the same time an authority set over the Word to interpret it. . . . For the community remains the handmaid of the Word.”³ If faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ,⁴ then the evangelical who seeks a biblical faith response will require a commitment to all that enhances the hearing of the Word.

The purpose of this essay is to put forth what may appear to be a somewhat outdated proposal, namely that **evangelicalism**, in order to recapture the priority of Scripture and to make possible a modern understanding of Scripture; embrace wholeheartedly the critical and historical approach to the study of the biblical texts-in short, employ critical method-as a first step toward a recovery of vital faith and a capacity to confront the modern world. Only in this way can **evangelicals** hope to regain the upper hand in ethical innovation and be a genuine alternative-a new Adam-to modern society.

Such a call may appear ill-timed. In a recent survey of the status of biblical studies, Paul Achtemeier and Gene Tucker comment, “To call the situation a ‘crisis’ may be a bit too

melodramatic, but it is obvious that the historical-critical method, in various forms the dominant **modus operandi** since the Enlightenment, is under fire from many **directions**.⁵ Similar sentiment expressed more pointedly is found in the opening sentence of Walter Wink’s often provocative book *The Bible in Human Transformation*. It reads, “Historical biblical criticism is **dead**.⁶ But a question may be raised as to whether the debate relates to historical-critical method per se or to the way it has been practiced and the presuppositions that have preceded most research.

Our position is that, given a better understanding of the nature of historical critical study and an adequate critique of certain modern manifestations, the method itself is ideally suited to enhancing our understanding of Scripture and, more important, our appropriation of its message. Throughout this essay we shall drop the definite article and speak of historical-critical method rather than **the** historical-critical method. The definite article not only presupposes one specific perception to which all must submit, but also expresses a dogma that is not consistent with scientific inquiry.’ To substantiate a commitment to historical-critical method we will need to examine the origins of critical inquiry and some of its determinants, offer a critical response, and then vindicate the proposal by looking at the nature of Scripture and the exegetical task itself.

THE HISTORY OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

The **seedbed** for historical-critical investigation is to be found in the Renaissance period. At the end of the Middle Ages, the freedom to read and to study was completely restored. The ancient classics as well as materials from other cultures were made known. Ecclesiastical control of thought and of education was broken. The shackles of medieval control were gradually but certainly loosened. This freedom

expressed itself in architecture, painting, and travel as well as literature. New worlds were discovered. A new freedom to ask questions filled the air.

The Reformers gave theological expression to this new freedom, while at the same time providing necessary checks to a freedom that threatened to become license. But since the authority of the Church had been challenged, it was only a matter of time before Scripture also would be questioned. Freedom always seeks to 'be true freedom, and while the process is drawn-out it is nevertheless unyielding. When a child is taught to ask questions, the child cannot be taught to refrain from certain questions, but can only have all questions treated fairly. Freedom is contagious, and once breathed it becomes a demand. It may need to be structured, informed, and otherwise defined, but once enjoyed it can never quite be denied. The Renaissance inevitably worked its will. It not only made possible the asking of questions, but demanded that the questions be asked. The Church, its centuries-long domination threatened, fought (e.g., Galileo) but could not contain this rebirth of the spirit of creativity and inquiry.

More precise antecedents to historical-critical method, however, are to be found in the methodical and thoroughgoing skepticism of Rene Descartes (d. 1650). Marc Bloch⁸ has laid out in impressive fashion the clear impact made by Descartes's *Discourse on Method* (1637), in which radical doubt as a methodological principle was set up as the starting point of all inquiry. Though expounded with reference to philosophy, the transference of this principle to the field of history was both simple and automatic. Up to that time, documents and materials were accepted at face value; the historian's task was simply to put it all together into one picture.⁹ But from the latter half of the seventeenth century, the burden of proof was put on the one who would accept the evidence of a document. Its veracity must be established first. A number of medieval forgeries were brought to light

as critics pointed out the biased nature of these supposedly ancient writings and the absence of **objectivity**.¹⁰ By the eighteenth century, historians were assuming that all material was suspect until verified.

R. G. Collingwood refers to the new school of historical thought in the latter half of the seventeenth century as "Cartesian historiography because it is based, like the Cartesian philosophy, on systematic skepticism and thoroughgoing recognition of critical principles."¹¹ Paul Hazard reinforces the link of historical-critical method to Descartes by noting that it builds upon reason that proceeds from within, from the subjective, which is the value and significance of Descartes's method.¹² In Collingwood and Hazard, then, we find attributed to Descartes the two factors of skepticism (with reason) and subjectivity (reason from within) that characterize subsequent historical investigation. So the word **critical** in the expression historical-critical method is basically **tautological**; it serves to remind us of the Cartesian origins of modern historical research. That is, we are discussing not merely historical method but a historical method spawned from Cartesian thought. The historical-critical method is, therefore, an event as much as it is a method.

Another historical influence also contributed to the rise of the modern historical-critical method. The Enlightenment was a powerful force in altering the nature and concept of faith. It marked the triumph of atheism, not in the sense of a denial of God but in the sense that humanity by virtue of its own capacities and its innate destiny was freed to think and work apart from transcendence. The Enlightenment insisted on the necessity of thinking apart from reference to God. Whatever transcendence was preserved took the form of deism or one or more shades of immanentism, neither of which intersected with the historian's task. Henceforth, all causation was to be found within history and the historical process, apart from resorting to talk of divine activity. **Post-Enlightenment** people-and this is especially true of the

historian and theologian-now tend to regard it as axiomatic that we cannot go back to another thought world, that we must work in modern categories, and that we cannot resort to the supernatural in critical examination.

Willi Marxsen, for example, assumes that the resurrection of Jesus did not occur in the sense in which orthodoxy has commonly understood it. The Resurrection, according to Marxsen, is an interpretation; but in its traditional sense "it is forbidden to us in the present **day**."¹³ Elsewhere he comments, "For our **relation** to history since the enlightenment has, after all, been different from that of the New Testament **writers**."¹⁴ By this he is saying that, as a post-Enlightenment person, he is forced by that fact itself to establish an alternative to the traditional understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. Whatever it may mean to speak of Jesus' having been raised from the dead, it cannot mean what Christians have traditionally understood it to **mean**—not because Marxsen finds the narratives to be hopelessly confusing and contradictory, but rather even before he begins an examination of the texts he knows that he is a post-Enlightenment person. Therefore such an understanding is **ipso facto** precluded. So we cannot, according to Marxsen, do our work as though the Enlightenment did not occur.

This, too, was the understanding of D. F. Strauss in his monumental work on the life of **Jesus**,¹⁵ which proceeded on the basis that modern people can no longer believe what people in the first century believed. So we must jettison such things as angels and demons **and** such ideas as miracles, though at the same time we maintain belief in the **ideas** such expressions intended to convey. A century later, **Bultmann**¹⁶ continued this program in his essay on the need to demythologize the New Testament in order to get to its basic message. Though transcendence is preserved for theology, it is removed from the field of history. On matters of history and historical inquiry, then, Bultmann and Marxsen are seen (and would want to be seen) as atheists. In their work

the full impact of the Enlightenment is clearly seen, though consciously worked out within the context of the Church.

Against this persistent working within the framework of the Enlightenment Adolf Schlatter raised his voice in a significant **essay**¹⁷ regarding the then-prevailing method in New Testament theology. According to Schlatter the documents of Scripture, filled as they are with the language and claims of transcendence, cannot be studied apart from those claims. To do so is to do violence to the texts themselves and therefore to go contrary to the demands of scientific work. Scholars cannot lay their own preconditions on the text, for by so doing they forfeit their own objectivity and the capacity to see. The scientific study of the biblical documents demands that we "see," that we observe, that we respond to the data. It is not "scientific" merely to bring our own presuppositions to the texts and stand in judgment over them.

The Enlightenment, for all its strength, for all its beauty of human expression and creativity, for all its warmth and desire for humaneness, must be seen as representing a **significant** loss of objectivity in its very claim to be scientific. The fact that we commonly speak of **the** historical-critical method rather than simply historical-critical method suggests that we do not speak so much of a method but of a particular expression of method conditioned by the **Zeitgeist** of that era. Nonetheless, it has been assumed that the historical-critical method (viewed through Enlightenment lenses) is a **sine qua non** for all exegesis and biblical theology. Its validity is simply assumed; it has become a given in biblical studies.

A CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

But such claims overlook the fact that historical-critical method is itself a historical phenomenon and as such must

be subject to the same scrutiny, criticism, and revision as any other part of history. If the present crisis of faith in the Church is due in some way to the destructive work of the critics-as **evangelicals** often allege-the response cannot be to abandon critical study and thereby deny certain obvious facts regarding Scripture, but to reassess the application of a method. Much that has taken place in the name of historical-critical method is due to the period in which historical criticism has been practiced rather than to the method itself.

What Schweitzer demonstrated so well about **nineteenth-century** attempts to write the life of Jesus with the result of producing only a nineteenth-century Jesus,¹⁸ needs to be said regarding all research, namely, the potential danger of reducing Jesus and the faith of the primitive church to whatever prevails in the modern mood. Very little effort would be required to show that the work of the last half century has tended to produce an existentialist Jesus. And to the extent that conservatives have been involved in a similar endeavor, they have produced a conservative Jesus.

Our intent is not to bury historical-critical method here and now, once and for all. On the contrary, if a certain critique can be applied, and if certain revisions can be made-revisions that do not affect the nature of historical method but only our practice of it-then historical-critical study of Scripture **can** be of service to the Church. Moreover, it is our conviction it **must** be undertaken for the sake of the life and witness of the Church.

The most fundamental point at which revision must be made is allowance for the possibility of concrete transcendence in history. The assumption that historians must work without recourse to the possibility of divine causation is a misplaced assumption. The fact that they must work with documents that make such claims may create for them personally a serious problem, but it cannot justify their taking a stance over against the possibility of divine activity.

One is forced to ask if it is truly critical to insist that historical explanation must be sought without reference to God.

This seems to be Van Harvey's criterion when he refers to the "morality of historical knowledge": one who seeks to be a historian must be a historian all the way and may not abandon principles by any reference to God as an explanation of historical events. This statement would be acceptable only if it is also assumed that historians acknowledge that it may be possible to arrive only at partial explanations and a limited reconstruction of history. If, on the other hand, they seek a full explanation and reconstruction of events while they preclude **a priori** the possibility of divine causation, then they are limiting the number of possible explanations: their objectivity is incomplete.

Robert Morgan has recently focused in on the problem:

Modern historical method questions all traditional views about the sources of the New Testament; it sets them in a larger historical and causal context; and it excludes in principle dogmatic presuppositions such as the notion of revelation, since it is methodologically uncommitted to any particular theology.¹⁹

But Morgan creates a dilemma for himself. To "exclude in principle" a certain notion that may relate to historical explanation is not to be "methodologically uncommitted." The critic who proceeds on the basis that revelation is not involved in the historical process may distort history by failing to consider what may be a component part of the whole. Again, Wilhelm Wrede,²⁰ who insists that all historical investigation proceed entirely apart from recourse to divine activity and that all historical results be built on the assumption that the historical causation is to be found within the historical process, is theoretically as capable of distorting history as is the supernaturalist.

The objection to this is obvious. Historians have no way

by which they can examine any claim or evidence of divine causation. Such claims and evidence, on the other hand, presumably are capable of a natural explanation. So, for example, even if one could prove the tomb of Jesus were empty, it would prove nothing about his resurrection. Such explanations as the swoon theory or the theft of the body may be more plausible. In any case, historians, when they ply their trade, are not able to deal with God. That is axiomatic.

But it is not axiomatic that historians must proceed on the assumption that God and history do not or cannot intersect and then go on to reconstruct history as atheists. To say that they cannot *inquire into* an alleged act of God means they cannot affirm or verify by historical method any alleged act of God; it also means they cannot by that same method deny the possibility of such an act. Yet in practice this is what Wrede and Harvey do. For them theology and history are separate disciplines and neither can infringe on the other. Only in this way is the “morality of historical knowledge,” as Harvey calls it, able to be maintained.

Hendrikus Boers²¹ has expressed this perspective on historical-critical method in its most categorical form. He quotes from unpublished papers of two of his students, describing as irreconcilable the conflict between historical-critical work and religious claims: “There could be no resolution of the conflict between critical inquiry and the biblical view of history because the historical-critical understanding can have no place for God’s repeated ‘intrusions’ into the course of the Old Testament history.”²² Boers continues to state the case by saying that either historians offer a natural explanation of the origins of the Exodus traditions and are hence true to historical-critical method-but in so doing they destroy the basis of the Jewish faith; or they maintain the religious tradition by offering a nonnatural explanation-in which case they are then untrue to historical-critical method. That is, if one uses historical-critical method, one’s explanations of historical events must be *natural*.²³

According to Boers, God is excluded *a priori* (presuppositionally) from being any part of an explanation of a historical event. There is no room for a transcendent element in explaining history. This is true, according to Boers, because of the *nature* of historical-critical method, which by definition must come up with a natural explanation of, say, the exodus from Egypt. It does not matter that philosophically and logically a case may be made for divine intervention to facilitate the exodus. Nor does it matter that, hypothetically, God may indeed have delivered them in an active way from the hand of the Egyptians. Even though God did indeed bring about the Exodus (a position at least theoretically defensible since multitudes do understand it that way), nevertheless the historical critic must come up with another (i.e., a natural) explanation. It seems, then, not to matter whether it is the true explanation of the event but only that it is a natural one; for the critic, according to Boers, the natural explanation is the only permissible one.

One is justified in asking whether historical-critical method-defined this way-is truly scientific, since its goal is not so much truth as it is an “explanation-within-limits.” A method that denies that Y may be the explanation for event X and requires explanation Z is neither scientific nor objective; this is true even though explanation Y may have data that the historian may find impossible to scrutinize. We may illustrate this from the most acute issue in the New Testament, namely the resurrection of Jesus as traditionally received. On the basis of one’s view of deity, it is either possible or not possible for the corpse of Jesus to be made alive by God and transformed into a “spiritual” body. Even though the traditional claim is possible, the historical critic must, according to Boers, come up with an alternative explanation of what happened and why. This alternative explanation, even though it may not in fact be a true explanation, is nevertheless mandated by the method employed. Again we ask the question, Can a method that excludes from the outset any particular solution claim to be scientific?

Boers criticizes both Peter Stuhlmacher and Hermann Diem for “retreating into the Christian ghetto”²⁴ by protecting the Christian proclamation from being delivered up to critical scrutiny. But one may respond by asking if Boers has not retreated into an academic ghetto by his requirement that historical explanations be provincial (i.e., within the province of the natural). This is not to argue that any and all supernatural claims be accepted; rather it is to say that a truly scientific method will not and cannot limit automatically the boundaries of explanation.

Boers argues against Bultmann’s insistence that the **thatness** of Jesus is necessary to the primitive kerygma. Moreover, according to Boers, Käsemann’s response (“the new quest”) moves in the wrong direction because it would limit the scope of critical inquiry. Boers finds the solution of Herbert Braun to be more consistent with historical-critical method. Braun completely surrenders the New Testament claim of the historical grounding of the proclamation in the ministry of Jesus.²⁵

The New Testament scholar is compelled to abandon also to the “flames” of critical scrutiny the New Testament understanding that faith is grounded in the history of Jesus as the event of salvation. What is devoured by the flames is not merely the *Christos kata sarka* but the New Testament proclamation that his *history* is the event of salvation on which faith is grounded.²⁶

That is to say, by the adoption of historical-critical method and by its application, the critic removes Jesus and his history as the event that brings about faith.

To such a claim we must ask, By what method or on the basis of what evidence does the historian and the critic dislodge what is essentially a faith claim, namely, that salvation is rooted in, and derives from, the event of Jesus? How does a historian reach such conclusions? Is this historical criticism or philosophical criticism? Does not such a posture justify the charge of Schlatter²⁷ that too much of the

study of the New Testament is philosophical and speculative rather than historical and concrete? And does not the argument of Boers show that Paul Althaus is fundamentally correct in describing Bultmann (and here we would have to add Braun and Boers) as hostile to history and the historical elements of the tradition?

It is true that Boer’s position derives not only from his own understanding of historical-critical method, but also from certain conclusions regarding the gospel traditions. “Each gospel, as a matter of fact, presented its own ‘theological’ unhistorical Jesus.”²⁸ He shares the pessimism of Bultmann, Braun, and Bousset²⁹ concerning the ability to know the historical Jesus or that the historical Jesus is the Jesus of the Gospels. Yet apparently he is able to discern what the self-understanding was that underlay the ministry of Jesus and occurred “around Jesus.”³⁰

But given his predisposition to any intrusions of God in critical study, one has to wonder if such pessimism is the result of critical study or whether it is demanded *apriori* by it. One may grant freely that the Gospels are theological tracts, that they present different portraits of Jesus, that they display the faith of the early church, and that they tell us as much (or more?) about the early church as about Jesus. Yet it is to be doubted that the degree of pessimism expressed by Boers is warranted.

Perhaps the issue may be put this way: Whatever the Enlightenment might have meant in terms of creative impulse, yet at the same time it reduced in an unacceptable way the definition of scientific study. We need to regain the freedom of the Renaissance and the systematic probing of Descartes, and by so doing amend the impact of the Enlightenment, so that *all* questions concerning the text may be allowed. This would lead to more circumspection and less fantasy in our critical study of Scripture.

And since historians can only scrutinize but neither substantiate nor refute faith claims or claims of revelation, it

follows that historians ought to assume a more humble posture. They may have less than complete explanations. Marc Bloch has even raised the question of whether historians are right to speak of **explanations** of historical events. The historian may be able to approximate the cause or causes of events. Yet, according to Bloch, at the same time a certain open-endedness has to characterize such work—not in the sense that some new evidence may require the rewriting of history, but in the sense that a cause not susceptible to historical inquiry may lie behind an event or epoch. Reflecting on the concern of historians for “origins,” Bloch comments, “In popular usage an origin is a beginning which explains. Worse still, a beginning which is a complete explanation. There lies the ambiguity and there the **danger**.”³¹ He adds, “In any study seeking the origins of a human activity, there lurks the same danger of confusing ancestry with explanation.”³² By accepting more limited goals for their work, historians may move freely in their discipline, assuming all the demands of scientific inquiry, not compromising in any way the data and the evidence, while at the same time confessing that it is not within the province of their discipline to propose definitive perspectives on the past or present history of the human race.

It is the historians’ presuppositions, or the **Zeitgeist** of their experience, or their own religious commitments—and not their academic work—that inform their judgments regarding the faith claims of revelation in history. If they could but acknowledge this fact, then they would be able to establish truly what Harvey has called “the morality of knowledge.” The best historians recognize the peril not only of modernizing Jesus³³ but also of reducing God to human terms and historical categories.

In addition, the critics of the biblical texts—and all other historical data, for that matter—must be critical of themselves, their methods,³⁴ and especially their use of the term **historical**, as in **historical facts** or a **historical event**. Gerhard

Ebeling, in his excellent study of faith, has created unnecessary problems for himself and for the Church in his discussion of issues relating to the “historical Jesus.”³⁵ He recognizes the acute problems of historical criticism when working through the traditions about Jesus.³⁶ But then, Ebeling begins to use the word **historical** in unacceptable ways. Because Jesus is undoubtedly a historical figure, the traditions address that history. But is that to say that the whole content of the tradition is history **in the sense that it is valid material for historical critical study**? Ebeling writes, “For apparently we are being asked to hold as true of a real man something that contradicts all experience of real human life, to acknowledge *as a historical event* something that we could not accept as historical in any other account.”³⁷ Ebeling has in mind the Resurrection and Ascension, and speaks of the great difficulty of believing in such “alleged historical facts about Jesus.”³⁸

But again we have to ask if these statements about the experience of the historical Jesus are part of a set of historical facts. It does not follow that everything said about historical persons and their experiences can be included among the historical facts about them. Indeed, not everything that is true about a person’s experience can be called a historical fact. One may speak, for example, of the conversion of Augustine as a historical fact in a certain sociological and psychological sense. But in a theological sense it cannot be a historical fact because the historian cannot begin to establish whether Augustine was truly converted in the evangelical sense. Or put in another way, when there is an aspect of a historical fact that is inscrutable, that fact becomes more than historical. In the sense that the conversion of St. Augustine is described as an act of a gracious God, it could not be a historical fact even if it were true. If that account of conversion were called a historical fact, then God himself as well as his grace are historical facts, since both are components of the larger historical fact.

Can the preexistence of Jesus, his virgin birth, his resurrection, his ascension, or his present session at the right hand of God—even if true—ever be called historical facts?³⁹ Whether such claims are true or not is another matter. When we speak of historical facts, what are we saying? The matter has been endlessly debated, but the answer should be rather clear and simple: a historical fact is a historian's fact. To speak of a historical fact is to speak of something the knowledge of which has been established, or might reasonably be expected to be established, by historical research. The above list of items in the story of Jesus cannot belong to such a category. Even though they may have happened and may truly be part of his history, they will never achieve the status of historical facts because they are not subject to either verification or refutation. They can be neither substantiated nor disproved. If they are hard to accept, it is only because of what one brings to the task in terms of presupposition and world view.

A TEST CASE: JESUS RESURRECTION

The Resurrection is a crucial point at which both believers and nonbelievers have stepped beyond legitimate limits. What statement or claim would lie within the historian's area of investigation? Certainly the historian can examine the statement that the disciples believed Jesus had been raised from the dead. It might also be possible to examine whether Jesus was (still) alive after his (supposed) death. But none of this strikes to the heart of the biblical witness of the early church, namely, that God has raised Jesus of Nazareth beyond death by quickening and transforming his mortal body.

On the basis of historical-critical method, the historian is able neither to affirm nor deny the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. That is, the historian *qua* historian—

Christian or otherwise—cannot pass judgment on an alleged act of God or deny the possibility of it, apart from concrete and irrefutable evidence (such as the discovery and undoubted identification of the remains of the body of Jesus—in which case the New Testament witness to resurrection would need to be revised). To attempt, by historical method, to confirm an alleged act of God would be to believe that one could by that method establish the existence of God.

So when we say that the resurrection is not a historical fact, we are making no judgment as to the truth of the biblical pronouncement.⁴⁰ We are only saying that it is not a historian's fact. When historians deny the resurrection, it is not primarily because of evidence. Such denial does not follow from their inquiry; it grows out of the frame of reference within which they have chosen to **labor**.⁴¹ Not all that occurs can be established as historical fact. God may save and heal individual persons and nations, but we could never refer to such events as historical facts. Again, if we say, "It is a fact that God delivered Israel out of Egypt," then God himself becomes a fact. But then facts and faith claims have become confused.

G. G. O'Collins, who writes from the position that the Resurrection was a real bodily event involving the person of Jesus of Nazareth, similarly asks if the Resurrection may be called **historical**.⁴² His thesis is compelling: not everything that happens in history, nor everything that is said about events that happen, is subject to historical scrutiny. Otherwise, what we call revelation could be made subject to confirmation by the historian.

To define and acknowledge these limits is neither to destroy the field of historical inquiry nor diminish theological affirmation; rather it is to define the true value and significance of each. To question whether the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event (a different question from whether it "happened") is not the end of Christian faith. That Word, though examined by historians, is not subject to them.

When texts involving claims of revelation are the object of scrutiny, what is clearly demanded is not only an unequivocal commitment to authentically scientific historical-critical research, but also a degree of restraint. An affirmation of the Resurrection as traditionally understood is not a flaunting of historical-critical method; nor is it moving away from historical method. Such claims may move, so to speak, on the wings of historical research in that certain powerful warrants may exist to say that something much out of the ordinary happened that requires an adequate explanation. Historians can never be in a position to establish any truly decisive theological affirmations.⁴³ They cannot establish the fact that God raised Jesus. They cannot establish that the resurrection of Jesus was a vindication of his ministry and word. They cannot establish its eschatological significance. While the event may have been within history and therefore a proper object for probing, it is more than history (assuming it truly occurred) and therefore not subject to confirmation.

Here, it seems, some conservative thought has overreached legitimate bounds. Some of Daniel Fuller's comments,⁴⁴ for example, cannot be reconciled with historical method and may represent as serious a distortion as do the views of H. Boers at the other extreme. Fuller criticizes Gerhard Koch because the latter is not willing to say that the nature and meaning of the Resurrection as well as the fact of it.⁴⁶ Later in his own analysis of Lucan statements, Fuller writes, "Hence, according to Luke, the resurrection of Christ **as the** meaning of the resurrection as well as the fact of it."⁴⁶ Later in his own analysis of Lucan statements, Fuller writes, "Hence, according to Luke, the resurrection of **christ as the basis for faith** can be known through historical reasoning as having taken place in history."⁴⁷ But, unless historians can establish the existence of God, they cannot establish anything about an event that may involve God.

The same tendency to extend the possibilities of historical method too far is found in T. A. Roberts's often provocative

study *History and Christian Apologetic*.⁴⁸ At one point he writes, "It may be undeniable that Z is the significance which the early Church saw in events Y. The historian's principle duty is to ask whether Z is in fact the true significance of events Y."⁴⁹ Elsewhere in comments on C. H. Dodd's *History and the Gospel* Roberts notes, "From the historian's point of view, however, the crucial question still remains-is the primitive kerygma **true**?"⁵⁰ Again, with reference to the death of Jesus he states, "**But the** historian is in a better position than [the early Christian] to explore its full significance, the real meaning of that momentous **event**."⁵¹ Finally, he alludes to the testing of "the historicity of Christian **claims** by applying the techniques of historical criticism."⁵² These statements ignore the goals and limitations of historical method.

Historians, to be sure, are able to examine the impact of Jesus, even his death, on subsequent history in the development of Christian culture and other areas. But by the use of what criteria and warrants can any historian confirm or disprove that the death of Jesus had the atoning significance that the early church attributed to it? How does a historian set about establishing 'the veracity of the kerygma? How does a historian test whether the biblical significance that is attached, for example, to Jesus' death is indeed its true significance?

According to Fuller, the historian by historical method can determine the nature and meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. But what criteria may be employed to establish (or disprove) that Christ was raised with a view to our justification (Rom. 4:25)? Obviously we have none. Presumably, the possibility exists of finding concrete evidence of the sort by which the historian may disprove an alleged act of God (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus). But how can the historian test any claim of revelation as to the meaning of an event (e.g., the atoning significance of the death of Jesus)?

Historians can examine the character of Christian claims,

their antecedents, and their possible derivatives, They can examine the “inherent cohesiveness” or the “disparities” of the traditions. But they reach an end to their labors without verifying the claims. They as historians can work in the proximity, but ultimately not on the property itself.

EVANGELICAL USE OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

It is important now for us to explain why it is necessary for evangelicals to embrace wholeheartedly historical-critical method, properly understood. Evangelicals believe the Scriptures are the Word of God. They are committed to hearing and understanding this Word. But they must become more aware of the obstacle tradition poses to the hearing of the Word. One may say fairly that orthodoxy, when it lays on the interpreter certain prior claims, may represent a greater threat to the hearing of the Word than any of the modern trends in criticism. On more than one occasion, Adolf Schlatter confessed his profound appreciation for the revered Professor J. T. Beck; at the same time, he was compelled to set himself over against Beck, who allowed Lutheran orthodoxy to determine his exegesis.⁵³ It was Schlatter's own insistence upon freedom before the Word that, among other aspects of his work, made him such a compelling figure. The threat that tradition represents to a clear hearing of the Word (Schlatter, for example, emphasizes seeing what is there) must be fully recognized. As has often been noted, tradition is a marvelous servant but a frightening taskmaster. It has not always served the concerns of evangelicals well.

As a **tool**, critical-historical method should serve the process of understanding rather than either substantiating or refuting Scripture. The rise of critical-historical method, despite abuses and exaggerated claims by some of its practitioners, and despite the overly confident manner in which

some of their theories (fantasies) have been put forth, nevertheless represents a tremendous achievement. Many of its “assured results,” which should have been set forth more tentatively and circumspectly, have indeed caused crises of faith for the Church. Yet, if we can permit the refining process to continue, we are convinced critical-historical method offers evangelicals potential service to an understanding of the Word of God.

The reason this is true should be quite clear: Scripture is a set of literary documents that have a history and contain historical material. To understand the history of the documents is to begin to understand the documents themselves. So, for example, if we ask about the authorship of the Book of Isaiah, we are asking a historical question. The only acceptable answer is one obtained through valid historical study. An orthodox appeal to canon or inspiration cannot be considered adequate. The same is to be said, for example, with reference to the authorship of Ephesians. To the evangelical, of course, Ephesians is part of the infallible canon. But that by itself does not settle the question of authorship; that is a historical-literary question. To suggest that the question of the authorship of Ephesians is settled by its canonical status is nothing more than a deduction from dogmatic principle, and is therefore an unacceptable response to a historical question.

The biblical documents-and in the New Testament the Gospels especially-have histories. They were written by certain persons for certain purposes, to certain historical communities that drew upon certain preexisting traditions. The Gospels themselves are a combination of histories-the history of Jesus, the history of the communities that adapted the traditions, the history of evangelists who incorporated their own and their communities' needs into the finished product.

Whether this means that the Gospels tell us more of the

early church than of Jesus,⁵⁴ reflecting a capacity to fabricate materials, or whether with Schlatter⁵⁵ it shows that the story of Jesus itself was crucial to the creating of faith, it is still of fundamental importance to an **understanding** of the material that we work in terms of the historicity of the Gospels. Even as early as the first part of the second century, Papias⁵⁶ recognized that the Gospel of Mark was not simply a chronology of Jesus' life but an adaptation of the Jesus tradition addressed to the needs of a particular audience. The lack of a precise chronology is riot a flaw, for as Schlatter has noted, the lack of interest in chronology puts the focus on the inner content of the **material**.⁵⁷ But the decision to work dogmatically rather than historically with the text commonly leads to a failure to **hear** the text and thus produces predetermined results.

Exegesis is initially a historical task. It involves the examination of the history of words, the background and function of various metaphors and forms of rhetoric, an awareness of sources as well as the context of the writer and the person or persons to whom and for whom the material was written. It involves, as James L. Mays has said, a capacity to "think in the situation" of the authors. Because interpreters of Scripture wrestle with words, they are to be trained in an understanding of the nature of language and must have strong background in biblical history.

Interpreters must also be informed in historical theology and dogmatics to know how earlier generations have struggled to bring Scripture to contemporary expression. Above all, interpreters bring their own history to the task and this invariably leaves its mark on both the process and the outcome of exegetical work. Presuppositionless **exegesis**⁵⁸ is both impossible and undesirable. Yet, because they bring their history, their traditions, and their presuppositions to the exegetical task, interpreters must be scrupulously **self-critical** so that their outcome is not predetermined by their method.

AN EXAMPLE: THE DIVORCE ISSUE

One example might be given to show the illegitimacy of a nonhistorical approach. The issue of **divorce-remarriage-adultery** is presented in Mark 10:11ff.; Matthew 5:32, 19:9; and Luke 16:18. The main problem has to do with Matthew's exception clauses. Both John Murray and John R. W. Stott resolve the issue dogmatically.⁵⁹

Both studies reveal a deep concern for Christian marriage as well as a thorough acquaintance with the background data. Yet both studies are ultimately unsatisfactory because they fail to ask certain necessary historical questions. How did the varying forms of the saying(s) originate? Is one a derivative of another? Is there a merging of two originally separate topics (divorce and adultery)? Murray regards Matthew 19:9 as "the most pivotal passage" in the New Testament, not because it is the truly authentic (i.e., dominical) statement but because it is the most complete; that is, it has both the exception clause and the remarriage clause.⁶⁰ And Stott refers only to the form of the Pharisee's question found in Matthew.⁶¹

Both presume Mark and Matthew carry the same teaching; Mark omitted the exception clause because he assumed the exception. But what about the community for whom Mark prepared his Gospel? Did it, or could it, assume an exception? According to Murray, the "silence" of Mark and Luke respecting the right to divorce does not itself prejudice the right to divorce. But are Mark and Luke silent? Did their communities believe they were silent? Do not both Mark and Luke give a rather clear word?

More important, neither Murray nor Stott asks the historical question, What did Jesus say and how do we explain the various forms of the saying(s)? From the four texts we come up with the following statements from the lips of Jesus: (1) Remarriage following divorce constitutes adultery (Mark 10:1 1ff.; Luke 16:18); (2) Except in a case of **porneia**,

remarriage following divorce constitutes adultery (Matt. 19:9); (3) Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Luke 16:18; Matt. 5:32); (4) Whoever divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery. Murray, whose treatment of the texts is much more extended than Stott's, never asks if these are all separate sayings of Jesus or different versions of a single saying in response to the Pharisees. More important, perhaps, he does not treat the question whether the sayings have anything to do directly with the question the Pharisees asked.

In this connection two observations are crucial: (1) these sayings all relate to the question of adultery and not directly to divorce—that is, they answer the question of what constitutes adultery; (2) except for Matthew 19:9, none of the sayings in their present context are spoken to the Pharisees who asked the question. In terms of a historical—rather than dogmatic—approach, it seems Jesus answers the question of the Pharisees solely on the basis of Genesis 1 and 2, and that the various sayings derive from another context involving a discussion of the commandments. Whether they represent separate sayings or variant forms of a single saying is another matter deserving further study.

The dogmatic approach fails methodologically because it begins by assuming Matthew and Mark say the same thing. One may come to that conclusion, but one cannot begin there. Also, Mark and Luke are not, as Murray contends,⁶² silent concerning any grounds for divorce. What they say would have to be considered by any common standards of literary analysis to be both clear and unequivocal. It is as arbitrary to interpret Mark and Luke on the basis of Matthew as the reverse. The evangelists must be heard and their community traditions recognized in their own right.

The problematic element in Murray's study is seen in his variant conclusions. On the one hand, he rightly perceives that in the mind of Jesus, divorce "could not be **contem-**

plated otherwise than as a radical breach of the divine institution."⁶³ Yet elsewhere he says that Jesus "legitimated divorce for **adultery**,"⁶⁴ and indicates that divorce following **porneia** is not a sin⁶⁵ even though, as he says, it is a radical breach of the divine institution.

A historical approach would offer a less arbitrary analysis as well as probably more integrated conclusions. In the last analysis, the approach of Murray and Stott reflects a thoroughgoing legalism that focuses on texts rather than a broader perspectival approach to Scripture that recognizes the diversity of the biblical witness.

Precisely at this point one finds the critical error of the dogmatic approach to exegesis. Ultimately, this "textual" approach ignores the diversity of the apostolic witness for the sake of uniformity. By contrast, the historical approach is able to accept the multiple witness to Jesus as Messiah and to develop a better picture of primitive Christian faith. In this connection, we note that the second-century church, when faced by skeptics with the embarrassment of seeming contradictions and inconsistencies in the Gospel narratives, rejected out of hand the neat solution offered by Tatian's **Diatessaron**. Instead, the Church preferred the fourfold witness with all its ambiguities, rather than accept any reduction in the apostolic witness. That diversity is still crucial, and the exegete as historian—rather than exegete as dogmatist—will be faithful to it.

Scripture is a product of history; it grew out of the history of God's dealings with people. And the documents of Scripture reflect all the diversity of history. Evangelicals, of course, also believe they possess a fundamental and basic unity that reflects the all-encompassing purpose of God. The full scope of the biblical revelation comes to expression when we show an interest in this diversity equivalent to our concern for the unity in Scripture.

A CHALLENGE TO EVANGELICALS

The ultimate demand of evangelical scholarship is that it recognizes its contact with what the Church has called the Word of God, to which it has ascribed final authority. The only adequate response of evangelical scholarship is that it stand free before that Word and that it resolve to set aside all encumbrances that would hinder a hearing of the Word and all conditions that would predetermine the meaning of the Word. A method fully critical, fully historical, fully independent of a prevailing *Zeitgeist* that would impose conditions on the act of hearing would move evangelicalism beyond the common charges of obscurantism, dilettantism, and obstructionism.

The Church is a future-oriented body, intent on realizing the full dimensions of the kingdom of God. When its exegetical task is dominated by a method bound to *dogma*, it violates its own charter as the people for the future. Rather, the Church and its exegetes are always to be asking, What *is* the Spirit saying to us now?

Notes

1. Ernest Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 5.
2. The Tyndale fellowship with its study center in Cambridge, England, is probably the most notable exception.
3. *New Testament*, pp. 261ff.
4. Romans 10:17.
5. Paul J. Achtemeier and Gene M. Tucker, "Biblical Studies: The State of the Discipline," *Bulletin of the Council of the Study of Religion II* (June 1980), p. 73.
6. Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 1. A very different and unsatisfactory appraisal is offered by Gerhard Meier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, E. W. Leverenz and R. F. Nordon, trans. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1977). His

- assessment is dogmatic and obscurantist and merits most of the criticism given by P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, R. A. Harrisville, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 66-71.
7. Cf. also the excellent critical outline of the claims and perspective of historical-critical method by Martin Hengei, "Historical Methods and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament" in *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 127-36.
 8. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: The University Press, 1954), pp. 83ff.
 9. Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, W. Montgomery, trans. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969), p. 13, for such an example in a precritical harmony of the Gospels.
 10. M. Bloch, pp. 99ff. Cf. the skilled critical work of J. B. Lightfoot in separating the spurious Ignatian letters from the authentic ones: *The Apostolic Fathers*, Part II, Ignatius and Polycarp.
 11. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 62.
 12. Paul Hazard, *The European Mind* (1680-1715) (Cleveland, 1963), p. 13. The original French edition was published in 1935.
 13. Willi Marxsen, "The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical and Theological Problem" in *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ*, C.F.D. Moule, ed., *SBT2* (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 48.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 15. *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, 1835.
 16. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology" in *Kerygma and Myth*, H. Bartsch, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 1-44.
 17. Adolf Schlatter, "Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie," in *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik*, Ulrich Luck, ed., *Theologische Blätter* 41, 1969, pp. 134-50.
 18. Schweitzer, *Quest*, W. Montgomery, trans. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1966).
 19. Robert Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, *SBT 2* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 7.

20. Wilhelm Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'" in R. Morgan, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 68-116.
21. Hendrikus Boers, "Historical Criticism Versus Prophetic Proclamation," *Harvard Theological Review*, 65 (1972), pp. 393-414.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 393.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 393ff.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 414 (italics added for emphasis). Note that Braun does acknowledge this to be the New Testament view, but it cannot be mentioned today-not because of the evidence but because of his dogmatic starting point.
27. In his study under Steffenson at Basel, Schlatter no longer regarded his opponent to be any single philosopher, not even Kant; he perceived the opposition to be the whole field of philosophy: "All the individual antitheses were tied to the one great contrast: Greek or Christendom." He fought for freedom from the statement that philosophy is the propaedeutic for theology. Cf. "Die Entstehung der Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie und ihr Zusammenhang mit meiner Theologischen Arbeit," in *BFChTh* 25 Gutersloh, Bertelmann, 1920, pp. 36ff.
28. Boers, p. 402.
29. H. Boers, "Jesus and the Christian Faith: New Testament Christology since Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*," *JBL* 89 (1970), pp. 450-56.
30. Cf. *HTR*, pp. 403, 405, 407.
31. Bloch, p. 30.
32. Bloch, p. 32.
33. Cf. Henry J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus*.
34. Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, R. A. Harrisville, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 85ff.
35. Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith*, R. C. Smith, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1911), pp. 44-57.
36. "In the whole realm of historical investigation there is no more instructive example of the problem of the historical-

- critical method than the question of the historical Jesus." *Ibid.*, p. 45.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 46 (italics added for emphasis). Cf., p. 47, "... taking to be historical something that he cannot with a good conscience so understand."
38. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
39. A few years ago a noted churchleader spoke of "the historical fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." If so, then God himself is a historical fact. We ought not and cannot allow this type of loose theological expression!
40. It is of course possible and desirable to examine critically the traditions, the thought world of the time, and religious expectations in order to understand the development of the convictions as well as the varied problems of belief. Belief in the Resurrection has been a problem almost from the beginning; cf., C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament, Studies in Biblical Theology*, 2nd ser., 12 (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1970), pp. 4ff.
41. See Evans, p. 6; cf. also Dan Cupitt's remarks in "The Resurrection: A Disagreement" in *Theology* 75 (1972), 507-19. He comes to the text from the perspective of a modern person.
42. "Is the Resurrection an 'Historical' Event?" *Heythrop Journal* 8 (1967), pp. 381-87.
43. If Christian historians make such affirmations, it is only because they are Christians and not because they are historians. The task and methods of the Christian and the secular historian are the same, though their concerns and interests will differ.
44. See Daniel Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965).
45. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 253 (italics added for emphasis).
48. T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic*, (London: Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1960).
49. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, p. 146 (italics added for emphasis).

- 53. A Schlatter, "Die Entstehung der BFChTh ..." in *BFChTh*, 25, p. 39.
- 54. See Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*.
- 55. Schlatter, *Rückblick auf meine Lebensarbeit*, p. 23 f. Cf. also, *Die Geschichte des Christus*.
- 56. Cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III. 39.15.
- 57. *Einleitung in die Bibel*. 4. Auflage Stuttgart, Calwer Verlag, 1923, p. 338.
- 58. R. Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" *Theologische Zeitschrift* 13 (1957), pp. 409-17.
- 59. John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Maurice Jacobs, 1953); John R. W. Stott, *Divorce* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973).
- 60. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 61. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 62. *Ibid.*, p. 5 f.
- 63. *Ibid.*, p. 1; cf. p. 33.
- 64. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 65. *Ibid.*, p. 26.