

# **An Analysis of Three Approaches of the Historical-Critical Method of Interpretation: Radical (Bultmann), Moderate (Uniting Lutherans) and Conservative (Boer)**

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There is no question that the historical-critical method of interpretation is the prevailing method of Bible interpretation in most religious circles of our day. It has cut a wide swath through Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Lutheranism.

But when one tries to describe the historical-critical method, it is a bit difficult because this method has come to mean different things to different people. There are those, like Bultmann, who combine the results of rationalistic literary criticism with existentialism to create a very radical form of the historical-critical method. There are those, like the Uniting Lutherans, who limit the use of rationalistic criticism to the human portions of Scripture while insisting that the divine portions be interpreted only according to traditional Lutheran principles of interpretation. And there are those, like Boer, a member of the Christian Reformed Church and the author of the booklet *The Bible and Higher Criticism*, who use the divine and human natures in Christ as an example of the mystery of the divine and human nature of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> The latter say that since this mystery is indefinable the “problems” raised by the rationalistic literary criticism in the historical-critical method ought neither be denied or rationalized by Bible-believing Christians.

It is obvious, therefore, that in analyzing the historical-critical method one cannot just speak in broad terms, but one will have to direct attention to each particular form of this method. In the previous paragraph only three forms of the historical-critical method were cited. There are other approaches unique to various church bodies, eg. Roman Catholicism. In order not to go too far afield, we will limit this paper to the aforementioned examples simply because they are the three types which have surfaced in Lutheranism and conservative Reformed circles in our country.

We must stress at the outset that the historical-critical method uses rationalistic literary criticism not only to “help” in understanding the meaning of the words of Scripture but also to determine how the Scriptures came into being or what the nature of the Scriptures is.

This point is basic because when the historical-critical method uses rationalistic literary criticism to determine the nature of the Scriptures, it is subjecting divine revelation to human scientific investigation. Thus the historical-critical method makes literary criticism instead of the Scripture itself the determining factor: 1) as to what is *Historie* and what is *Geschichte* (radical camp); or, 2) as to what is divine and what is conditioned by the “ancient worldview” (moderate camp); or, 3) as to how the inspiring Spirit associated himself with the conscious or unconscious processes of the human agents who wrote the Scriptures (conservative camp).

This extra-scriptural authority concerning the nature of the Scriptures allows the literary critic to: 1) take portions of Scripture which Scripture itself presents as *Historie* and treat them as existential *Geschichte* (radical camp); or, 2) take portions of divine Scripture and treat them as historically conditioned statements (moderate camp); or, 3) define Scripture as a combination of divine truth which is always absolute and of human truth which is always relative (conservative camp).

It is argued that in this way Scripture can be defended against its detractors. In reality, however, the rationalistic principle of subjecting divine revelation to human scientific investigation has been injected into Biblical interpretation. As a result the clarity, historicity, revelatory nature, unity, inerrancy and authority of Scripture can be compromised to as little or as great a degree as the presuppositions of the literary critic allow him to apply this principle.

It will be the main purpose of this paper to demonstrate the truth of this reality and its results.

## **Part One: the Literary Criticism of the Historical-Critical Method is Rooted in Rationalism**

### **Rationalism's Denial of the Supernatural**

Several times in the previous section, the literary criticism used in the historical-critical method was described as "rationalistic." Since this description contradicts the claims of those in the moderate and conservative camps who say that this literary criticism is "neutral" (Uniting Lutherans) or "not inherently incompatible with a believing study of the Bible" (Boer), the truth of this description needs to be demonstrated.

The essential characteristic of rationalism which concerns us here is its denial of the supernatural. Rationalism postulates that reality must be verifiable by modern methods of research; only that is possible which lies within the realm of human experience. In short, the supernatural is impossible.

This denial of the supernatural obviously affects the rationalist's view of what kind of book the Bible is. Since divine revelation involves the supernatural and, therefore, is not verifiable by the modern methods of historical research, divine revelation is rejected by rationalism. The verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture are denied. In place of these two scriptural doctrines which tell us what kind of book the Bible is, various theories of revelation are suggested which stress the human origin of the Bible. Some suggest the Bible authors were writers of deep religious insight comparable to historians or scientists who have deeper insights than others in their fields. Others stress the progressive advance of truth in religion down through the centuries.

The denial of the supernatural and, therefore, of the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, quite naturally affects the rationalist's interpretation of the Bible. In the 1800's it was commonly held that the only religious truths in the Bible which were to be accepted were those truths which agreed with man's understanding. Reason and logic became the basis on which the rationalists made their distinctions between what they considered to be fact and fiction in the Bible. What they identified as fiction they dismissed as the interpretation of the first century Christians. All the supernatural elements, they said, were added in order to magnify Jesus. Thus Jesus' miracles were given naturalistic or mythical interpretations. For example, the resurrection of Jesus was explained as a faint, or perhaps even a coma, from which the rest and the cooler temperature of the tomb revived him; or the miracle of the wedding of Cana was said to teach that Jesus can change an ordinary life (the water) into a very special life (the wine). One of the major factors to which the rationalists ascribed the supernatural elements of the New Testament was the ancient world-view of the writers. This element in the Bible, it was argued, could be explained by the belief of ancient people that gods could influence events among men.

### **The Four Stages of Rationalistic Literary Criticism**

Recall again that rationalism insists that reality must be verifiable by modern methods of research. The method of historical research applied to the study of Scripture was a rationalistic form of literary criticism. It was said that this study would supply the method for identifying the sources behind the Bible. Once these sources were identified it was felt that the interpreter would be in a better position to understand Scripture because he could sort out the facts of history from the many strands of interpretation which were interwoven with these facts by the early church.

In the discussion which follows on the four elements of rationalistic literary criticism, we will not make any attempt to explain each one in depth, nor will we attempt to show how this theory developed. Rather, we shall attempt to show how the four elements work together to produce a view of Scripture which can question and eliminate anything and everything. We shall use the application of rationalistic literary criticism in the synoptic gospels to illustrate the destructive results. The dates given will not reflect any one view but are an attempt to give a composite view of the progressive stages through which each of the synoptic gospels was supposed to have passed.

The first stage was the oral tradition. The study of this stage is called form criticism or *Formgeschichte*. Form criticism rests on the assumption that for about thirty to fifty years after Jesus' death (30 to 80 A.D.)

isolated incidents from Jesus' life and snatches of his teaching were repeated orally by Christians before anything of substance was written down. Some say this process went on for more than a century. These oral traditions were completely independent and self-contained stories or "pericopes" about Jesus. It is assumed that those who repeated these "pericopes" were not interested in giving facts about Jesus' life; rather they wanted to give an interpretation of Jesus' life from their viewpoint of faith in him. Jesus was greater than life to them and this was the way they wanted others to learn about him. They wanted to make Jesus known in his "exalted status as the resurrected Lord." In this process some facts were preserved as they were, but most of the "facts" were either interpreted or transformed; some were even created. Often an earlier form of a pericope could be found by stripping off the supposed later additions. In this way the original use of the form might be discovered. The original use of the form, the *Sitz im Leben*, might have been as part of a sermon, as a part of the liturgy, or it may have been used in a teaching situation. The two main categories which the literary critics of the synoptics identify are the sayings and the narratives. The sayings are subdivided in various ways but one popular subdivision is *apophthegmata* (i.e. short stories which accompany a saying of Jesus) and *logia* (i.e. a saying of Jesus with no particular historical accompaniment.) The narratives are subdivided into miracle stories and legends. A legend is considered to be a story, such as Jesus' passion and resurrection, which may or may not be historically grounded but instructs the reader about a truth. It should be obvious that already a cloud of doubt is cast over most of the words of the synoptics, but this is really only the beginning.

The second stage through which the synoptics are supposed to have passed is their development into written material. This stage covers a period from roughly 60–120 A.D. The study of this stage is called source criticism or *Quellengeschichte*. It is assumed that gradually the independent pericopes of the oral tradition were gathered and written down. The "problem" of how these gospels came to be very similar in wording and content yet also different in content and order, the so-called Synoptic Problem, was "solved" by the "discovery" of their sources. It was assumed that there was a written predecessor to Mark, *Ur-Markus*, from which Mark evolved. This same document was a predecessor to both Matthew and Luke and supposedly explains how both Matthew and Luke have material similar to Mark. Another document called *Q* is suggested as a second source for Matthew and Luke to explain the material which they have in common but which they do not share with Mark. The material which Matthew has all by itself comes from a source called *M*; the material unique to Luke comes from a source called *L*. As the synoptics evolved, each in its own way, from a source or sources, the processes prevalent in the oral tradition also took place. Thus, as these literary sources developed, preservation, interpretation, transformation, and also creation took place just as in the oral stage. This means that the interpreter may now have to reckon with a preservation (written stage) of an interpretation (the oral stage), or an interpretation of a transformation, or the transformation of a creation etc.. A heavier cloud of doubt has been cast over the words of the synoptics, but this is not yet the end.

The third stage of the synoptic development is dated anywhere from 80–200 A.D. The study of this stage is called redaction criticism or *Redaktionsgeschichte*. Because the isolated fragments of the oral tradition and the haphazard written sources ended up in an orderly book in which there is a discernible general plan or theme, it is assumed that at some point there must have been a redactor or editor who put the thing together in an orderly way. But the work of the redactor was not just the arrangement of material. It also included adding or omitting, interpreting or reinterpreting, emphasizing or deemphasizing. The redactors are also "credited" with the creation of temporal, geographical or even ideal or typical contexts into which they placed the material which they took from both the oral and written sources. Thus, if the redactor did take something from the written source, the interpreter today is faced with the distinct possibility that he may be reading an addition (redaction) to an interpretation (written stage) of a transformation (oral stage), or a deemphasizing of a transformation of a creation and so on. Nor is this the end of the study of the development of the synoptics according to rationalistic literary criticism.

It is also assumed that all three strata of synoptic material just mentioned were influenced by various religious philosophies of the first two centuries. This, it is said, necessitates a study of comparative religions, also called *Religionsgeschichte*. The purpose is to identify what was taken over from the religious environment of the day and to show how it was molded into biblical thought. For example, if anything reflects Jewish or

Hellenistic thought, it may *a priori* be eliminated as historical for the life of Jesus. In this way the interpreter is supposed to be able to identify what is unique and distinctive in the religious thought of Jesus in the synoptics.

This is the type of literary criticism which is called “scientific” and “scholarly” by its ardent supporters and “neutral” or “not inherently incompatible with a believing study of the Bible” by those who want to grant that the historical-critical method has some value. But note that this form of literary criticism begins with a totally false view of how the Bible came into being and also places man above the Bible as the arbiter of what Scripture says and means. And note especially that this is true because oral, source, redaction and religious criticism are rooted in rationalism and its denial of the supernatural.

### **Part Two: Bultmann’s Existential Demythologizing**

The result of rationalistic literary criticism being used in Christianity was devastating by the early 1900s. Christian morality was said to be the only purpose for which religion existed. Bible interpretation made Jesus the teacher of the proper moral life. The liberal theology which resulted was characterized by the Social Gospel. Jesus was reduced to a marvelous example of how men should love one another unselfishly, and the rest of the Bible was reduced to books about man’s religious experiences and moral ideals.

In the 1920s, however, a new Lutheran “champion” rose to “rescue Christianity” from the denial of most of the Bible into which it had fallen. By his fusing of existential demythologizing with rationalistic literary criticism, Bultmann supposedly enabled Christians to hold on to the whole New Testament as the “Word of God” without giving up the “scientific” insights of historical research.

We could choose to use any one of the many theologians in the radical camp to illustrate this form of the historical-critical method, but Bultmann seems to be the most logical. It was his essay *New Testament and Mythology* which instigated a whole new direction in New Testament interpretation. Interpreters in the radical spectrum of the historical-critical method can be measured by the degree that they move either to the right or to the left of Bultmann’s approach.

In the process of interpretation called *Hermeneutik*, or the New Hermeneutic, hermeneutics is widened from one of the “mere interpretation” of the words of Scripture (*Erklaerung*) to the “understanding” of the whole human existence (*Verstehen*). To pursue the deciphering of what the texts of the New Testament books had to say to an ancient group of unknown readers who lived in a non-scientific world is dismissed as idle curiosity. However, to make sense of these texts and to interpret them in terms of human existence for the modern man who lives in a scientific age—this is considered the true work of the interpreter.

The first step in the *Hermeneutik* is to use the insights of rationalistic literary criticism to determine what was done, by whom, at what time, and for what purpose in all three strata of the New Testament material (i.e. oral tradition, the literary sources, the redactionary material). Once one has identified what kind of material he is reading, the second step is to interpret this material from the perspective of existential demythologizing. Thus modern man will supposedly be confronted with the gospel kerygma.

### **Existentialism**

A brief word about existentialism is necessary before we continue with Bultmann’s approach.

The existentialist philosophers felt that rationalism promoted scientific metaphysical views which minimized individuality. Existentialism became a philosophy which emphasized the importance of individual existence. It protested against any view which regarded man as if he were just a thing; it was opposed to any type of human organization which treated a man as part of a mass and stifled spontaneity and the uniqueness of the individual.

Existentialism’s view of truth distinguished sharply between subjective and objective truth, especially in matters where the individual’s “being” and its “ultimate concerns” were involved. Objective truth was considered far less important since it meant knowing about things in an impersonal and detached way.

Subjective truth was considered more important because it is truth which grasps the individual personally and affects him in all the things in life which involve his “being.”

The goal of the existentialist is to find his true individual existence, his “authentic being.” From without, man is a spot in the universe; from within he is the universe within himself. The problem with man’s existing as a part of the universe is that it makes his “being” fundamentally ambiguous. One side of a man’s “being” is at war with the other; a man is free but at the same time man is a part of the human situation which makes him unfree; a man is finite but man is capable of rising above the limits of any situation in life and *become* something more than he is now; a man is bound by time but he also has an attachment to eternity. The existentialist feels he can reach his goal of finding his “authentic being” by wrestling with these ambiguities in each new situation in life. The two important keys are for him to remember his individual existence as a man, and to remember that the present situation is the only real one, not the past or the future.

After this side trip to summarize existentialism briefly, we return to Bultmann’s approach to interpretation.

### **Kerygma**

The key to understanding the New Testament, according to Bultmann, is the realization that its message is not actual history (*Historie*) but the kerygma of the early church (*Geschichte*). This kerygma or “preaching” of the early church is said to employ the form of historical narrative, but it has no objective meaning apart from its meaning at the time that it is read or proclaimed. Note the existential overtone that only the present is real.

Kaesemann, a disciple of Bultmann, writes, “The early church wrote primarily as reportage and in its kerygma overlays and conceals the figure of the historical Jesus...It interprets out of its existence what for it has already become mere history and employs for this purpose the medium of its preaching. It is precisely by this method...[that it] rescues the facts of the past from being regarded only as prodigies and wonders...and allows the historical events...to pass into oblivion...and replaces them by its own message.”<sup>2</sup>

It will be apparent at once that kerygma is really nothing but a new form of allegorizing. The basic fault of allegorizing is that it permits the interpreter to ignore what the words of Scripture say objectively and then to substitute what he subjectively determines they might mean. The same thing is true of kerygma. The objective meaning of the words is replaced by their existential meaning which is determined subjectively.

This aspect of kerygma is not considered a weakness by Bultmann. Rather it is proclaimed as its real strength. Kerygma, he insists, is what sets the New Testament apart from any other book and thus makes it unique, for kerygma is the special form of theological statement in which God chooses to encounter the individual and call him to decision. This is done by a new use of language, mythical language, in which God meets man in the form of words.

### **Mythical Language**

Bultmann argues that the “false *skandalon*” caused by the supernatural element in the New Testament is removed by recognizing that the New Testament kerygma is couched in mythical language. “Myth” is a peculiar kind of truth. It is the truth of picture language which expresses in story form the theological significance of certain events or realities. For example, the truth that in Jesus we can be changed from living a useless to a useful life is pictured by the story of Jesus changing water into wine.

Bultmann felt that taking the words of the New Testament literally would be putting an unnecessary stumbling block (*skandalon*) in the road which an unbeliever must travel to become a believer. The stumbling block is the supernatural event which the literal meaning of the words presents; this he called the “false *skandalon*” because it represented an ancient world view which he said is no longer acceptable today. People at Jesus’ time believed that world events and also events in their own personal lives were influenced by gods, angels and devils. We know in our modern scientific world, Bultmann said, that we live in a closed world with a roof over us, through which no gods or angels can reach down to influence our lives, and a floor under us,

through which no devils can reach up to influence our lives. In his essay *Jesus Christ and Mythology* Bultmann wrote, "The world view of Scripture is mythological and...unacceptable to modern man whose thinking is shaped by science...Have you read anywhere in newspapers that political or social or economic events are performed by supernatural powers such as gods, angels, or demons?"<sup>3</sup>

But recognizing the language of the New Testament as mythological does not remove every *skandalon*. It removes the "false *skandalon*" because it no longer requires a man to sacrifice his intellect by forcing him to accept by faith a view of the world which he denies in his everyday life. The "true *skandalon*" still remains because the New Testament kerygma with its mythical language challenges a man to make the momentous decision to enter an authentic kind of human existence. Before a man is confronted by the true *skandalon*, however, this mythical language must be demythologized by him or for him. Only from the demythologized words will he become aware that God is challenging him to find his true being. The key to demythologizing or unlocking the meaning of the mythological language of the New Testament is found, Bultmann insisted, in existentialist philosophy.

### **The Role of Existentialist Philosophy**

Some might feel that a handicap is imposed on the ordinary person by the mythological form of the New Testament message because it makes the Bible a closed book to the layman. This does not happen, Bultmann argued, because every man is absorbed in the question of the meaning of his own life. Thus every man has the basic existential "pre-understanding" which will prompt him to ask questions of Scripture. To begin with he will ask a very general question: What does Scripture have to say about human existence? When man addresses this question to Scripture, he in turn will be asked challenging questions by Scripture which will give him deeper existential insight. With this new insight he will be able to ask more specific questions of Scripture. In turn he will be challenged by the new questions which Scripture will put to him. This is Bultmann's hermeneutical circle.

Again let Bultmann speak for himself.

The method is nothing other than a kind of questioning...I cannot understand a given text without asking certain questions of it...If we must ask the right questions which are concerned with the possibilities of understanding human existence, then the proper conceptions by which such understanding is expressed must be taken from philosophy...The philosophy today which offers the conceptions for understanding human existence is directly the object of attention. ...Existentialist philosophy urges man 'You must exist!' Without this decision, without the readiness to be a human being, no one can understand a single word of the Bible which speaks to personal existence...Whether the interpreter can enter into it (what is meant) depends then on how far he is open to the range of what is possible for man. In the end therefore, the question regarding the possibility of understanding a text depends on what openness the exegete has to the existential possibility as a human possibility, what interpretation the exegete has of himself as a man.<sup>4</sup>

The task of the interpreter then is to exhibit the existential meaning of the kerygma which is couched in mythical language. He does this by showing what each passage says to man about his authentic being. Several examples from Bultmann's sermons will illustrate how this is done.

In a sermon on the Pharisee and the publican, Bultmann sees the Pharisee as a man who is obsessed with his position in this world, that is, whether he is worth something in the eyes of other people or not. The publican has found freedom and security in the knowledge that he is worth something. He does this not by concerning himself with the world but by fleeing from himself and seeking refuge in God. His true self-knowledge, his true existence, does not come from comparing himself with others but from knowing he must flee to God's grace if he is to have any value. Bultmann's summary of the meaning of this text is that the justified man is the man

who in true spiritual freedom has lowered his eyes before God and thus become one who has a spirit of sincere, honest, and “self-forgetful” service. The final sentence states, “If our parable persuades anyone to adopt this new way of life, on such a one Jesus has exercised his liberating redemptive power.”<sup>5</sup>

In a sermon on the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1–10) Bultmann states at the outset “I consider it to be pious fiction ... a poetic image mirroring the power Jesus exercises over a human life.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that this myth takes place after the disciples toiled all night shows that Jesus’ wonder-working word will come to us only when we realize that our own resources are exhausted. Then he will tell us to put out into the deep and let down our nets and we will no longer choose what we want to do, but we will act at God’s command. When we do this our net will be filled, that is, we will find our authentic being in a life of love. We will bear witness to what God has done in us by the way we act toward our fellowmen.

Bultmann’s treatment of the wedding at Cana and the Good Shepherd chapter in John illustrates how much rationalistic literary criticism pervades his exegesis and how very similar existential demythologizing is to allegorizing.

In the wedding of Cana he says that there can be little doubt that this story is taken over from heathen legend since it is so typical of the Dionysius legend. The wine stands for both the gift which Jesus gives man and for Jesus himself as the Revealer of man’s true existence. The water stands for everything that man substitutes for Jesus in his attempt to find his true existence, that is, everything by which man thinks he can find true happiness in the world and which inevitably fails him when put to the test. Jesus’ refusal of Mary indicates that the event of God’s revelation to us of our true being is independent of human desires and cannot be forcibly brought about by man’s supplication. Rather it comes to pass where and how God wills, and then it surpasses all human expectation.

In the interpretation of the Good Shepherd chapter, Bultmann first undertakes a rearranging of the material to get the “right slant.” He dismisses Jesus’ statement that he is the door as a gloss by John which confuses things. When Jesus says that he will lay down his life, this is called an interpolation which interrupts and really does not follow at all because the surrender of Jesus’ life is his exaltation. Bultmann says, “It is precisely because he (Jesus) is nothing for himself, he has absolute freedom...and truly shows himself to be the Revealer.” Since John’s shepherd speaks of a reciprocal relationship of shepherd and sheep (i.e. Jesus knows them and they hear his voice and follow him), it is supposed to have been taken over from the Mandaean Gnostic tradition. Bultmann says that John jettisons much of the Gnostic elements but retains the idea “that man’s true being is more than his temporal historical existence...Man (cf. the sheep) has from the very beginning a relationship to the Revealer...and everyone has the possibility of discovering his true being in belonging to the Revealer.”<sup>7</sup>

One final example from Bultmann’s exegesis of the raising of Lazarus will demonstrate how death and resurrection are understood in existential demythologizing. Jesus is said to “correct” Martha’s idea of a future resurrection by the immediate resurrection of Lazarus. This myth, therefore, stresses only a present resurrection which is grasped by faith. The Scriptural expressions of human death and resurrection are only images and hints. One may suffer the earthly death but this cannot disturb the “life” which, Bultmann says, the man who finds his true being has in a higher ultimate sense. Thus death to one who has found his true being is unreal. “Do you believe this?” Jesus asks Martha; by this Bultmann suggests that Jesus is asking whether man is ready to let life and death, as he has known them, be unreal. Martha’s answer shows that she recognizes that in Jesus the eschatological invasion of God into the world has taken place.

As the interpreter in this way exhibits to people the existential meaning of the kerygma which is couched in mythical language, the “eschatological event” takes place. This means that God encounters man and challenges him to make the decision to be what he is meant to be (*Sein*).

### **“True Existence”**

If man makes the decision (faith) in this encounter with God to be what he is meant to be (true existence, *Sein*) then God will lead him to make the cross of Christ his own. This means he will deny the ever present

temptation of trying to allay his anxiety (flesh) by surrendering himself to the world and immersing himself in its being (law). This is the negative side of his eschatological or Christ event (finding his true being). The positive side is that while God is leading him to make the cross of Christ his own, God is also leading him to participate in Jesus' resurrection (the Easter event). He will then find the freedom (gospel) to be his own true self (spirit). That he is now open to God's love will be evident by his living the present in unselfish love toward others. He will also trust in God alone. This will be evident by his complete lack of concern for the possessions and the pleasures of the world and also by a nonchalance about the future.

Bultmann writes, "Jesus' word invites man to decide for the reign of God breaking in....Do men really want God's reign? Or is it the world they want? The decision they must make is a radical one....to abandon all earthly ties...to turn away from himself and place himself at the disposal of others."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Historical Jesus**

Because the New Testament is said to be couched in mythical language, the point is argued whether the historical Jesus is important or not. Bultmann felt that the "quest for the historical Jesus" must be abandoned since faith does not rest on the knowledge of the historical Jesus. It is not important to establish facts about Jesus; it is important that you share his existential experience. The Christian's faith, he said, rests only on his being comforted ever anew by the kerygmatic call to decision as voiced by the early Christian proclamation in the New Testament. Bultmann even says that it is a sure sign of "unfaith," to seek support for faith in historical facts about Jesus. The message of Jesus, he insists, is a *presupposition* for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself.

The post-Bultmannians (Fuchs, Ebeling, Kaesemann), though disciples of Bultmann, argue that the historical Jesus must not be entirely ignored lest faith become only a faith in the early church. They admit that to establish facts about Jesus is a difficult process because of the strata of Biblical material, but they also firmly believe that the knowledge that some facts and sayings of Jesus are genuine should spur the scholar on. Scholars may vary in their opinions as to what is historical, but all sincere searching and the resultant propositions, they feel, ought not be ignored. Careful panning for flakes of genuine gold from the original vein of history must be done. These flakes will be hard to find, they admit, because they are concealed in the early Christian kerygma by the processes of interpretation, transformation and creation. But any kind of discovery, no matter how little, is worth the effort.

### **Summary**

The radical historical-critical method of Bultmann takes over the rationalistic literary criticism and uses it fully. At the same time it attempts to preserve the New Testament as God's Word first of all by ascribing to the New Testament *a new use of language* which is mythological. Understanding this language requires that it be demythologized since it is the kerygma of the nonscientific early Christian church. Secondly, this approach ascribes to the New Testament *a new purpose* which is existential. Discovering this new purpose requires that the reader approach Scripture with the willingness to find his true existence in his Christ event.

### **Part Three: The Gospel Reductionism of the Uniting Lutherans**

Bultmann's existential demythologizing was too radical for Lutheran church bodies where the laity was still well instructed in the doctrines of Scripture. Thus in a church such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod the historical-critical method of interpretation took a different form. The attempt was made to retain Lutheran doctrine while accepting the historical-critical approach as the modern method of interpretation. To do this, the divine content of Scripture was equated with the Gospel, and therefore the Gospel was considered the only doctrine of Scripture with which the interpreter had to concern himself. Thus the term Gospel Reductionism. In



this paper this approach will be called the mediating or moderate position to distinguish it from Bultmann's radical stance.

As in the previous discussion of Bultmann, we have chosen to concentrate on one example of this kind of interpretation rather than trying to cover all the examples. We could have taken the TALC situation or the Southern Baptist situation. Instead we will look at the approach to interpretation used by the men who left Concordia Seminary at St. Louis to form Seminex and are now joining forces with the LCA and ALC. One major source for the material of this section is the articles in the 1968–1973 issues of the *Concordia Theological Monthly* for which these men had editorial responsibility. A second source is their position as it was enunciated in *Faithful To Our Calling—Faithful To Our Lord*.<sup>9</sup>

In 1972, after he had received the report of a fact-finding committee about the new approach to interpretation being promoted in the Missouri Synod, President J. Preus wrote, "While the principal doctrines of the Christian faith in most instances still appear to be upheld, the stage has been set for an erosion of the very fundamentals.... Not only does this method of Biblical interpretation introduce the principle of uncertainty into Christian faith and theology, but its underlying assumptions about the nature of Holy Scripture and its authority are so foreign to the Bible, classical Christianity, and the Lutheran Confessions that we must regard it as a false doctrine of Holy Scriptures."<sup>10</sup> It is the essential truth of this analysis which we wish to illustrate.

### **The Basic View**

To begin with let's take a look at the way in which this mediating position views the development of the New Testament books. The results of rationalistic literary criticism are accepted as facts. The Synoptic Gospels, for example, are considered the product of three stages of development—from oral tradition to written sources to the work of the redactors. However, it is said that the Holy Spirit influenced this whole human process. Rather than an inspiration of individual writers it is suggested that there was an inspiration of the community. This does not mean that every word is divinely inspired; rather a divine process took place, at the same time as the human process, by which the accounts of Jesus' life as they evolved through three stages were infused by the Holy Ghost with divine truth. Thus the gospels are at the same time both a human account and a divine word.

The Bible, therefore, has a human side which is considered a legitimate field of investigation for the principles of the rationalistic historian. At the same time the Bible is said to have a divine side which goes beyond historiographical research and can be investigated and understood only by the believer in whom the Holy Ghost has worked saving faith.

Thus the basic view of the Bible is that a division can be made between its human side and its divine side. For the answer to the question how this division is handled by the Christian who wants to retain the basic Christian doctrine, we will have to look at the characteristics of the Bible according to the mediating position.

### **The Characteristics of the Bible**

It is argued that any serious inductive study of the Bible as history will lead to the conclusion that the Bible participates in human weakness and error. References are made, for example, to the "contradictions" in some of the parallel accounts of the gospels. But this characteristic of the Bible, it is argued, should not disturb a believer.

By faith the Christian has a spiritual perspective which recognizes that the Holy Ghost is able to rise above the human process from which the New Testament emerged. The Christian expects that through his investigation of the divine side of the Word he will hear God address him in both judgment and mercy. In other words, another characteristic of the Bible is that the Holy Ghost reveals truth in it despite the erroneous historical setting in which this truth appears.

As history, then, the Bible is not considered totally accurate. Its statements on history and nature are open to challenge. However, since it is a record compiled by the early Christian church, it nevertheless remains

the most important historical evidence for those events to which it witnesses and which it interprets. Any challenge made against its historical accuracy must be carefully investigated before the Biblical record can be called erroneous. Despite this supposedly conservative precaution, note how the Biblical record has been shifted to a position where its accuracy is subject to the decisions of “scholars.” Without the “scholar’s” help a person no longer can be sure that what he reads in the Bible about history or nature is literally true.

The unity and inerrancy of the Bible are also called into question. It cannot be maintained, it is said, that the Bible agrees perfectly in all that it records and teaches. Rather the unity of the Bible is *reduced* to an agreement only in what Scripture teaches about God’s judgment and mercy. The inerrancy of the Bible is *reduced* to include only what Scripture says about sin and grace. But by this witness, it is argued, God accomplishes all that he ever intended his Word to accomplish, namely, to call men to faith. Only in this sense and only in the fulfillment of this function is the Bible considered to be inerrant, in perfect agreement, and wholly reliable.

Thus the Bible becomes in a sense a collection of timeless truths with no real, vital, historical connection. Lest this conclusion seem overdrawn, consider the following quote from *Faithful To Our Calling*, noting the stress on the relative unimportance of the historical dimension of Scripture.

The historical character of the Scripture means that we cannot demand that the Biblical authors possess the same knowledge of science or geology as we do, or that they operate with the same criteria of what is history or accuracy. 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.” The purpose of the Spirit imparted by our Lord is to lead us into the whole truth about what God was doing in Jesus Christ, that we might be redeemed and He may be glorified. In disclosing that Truth God does not err, and in achieving that purpose the Spirit active in the Word does not lead us astray; to that the Spirit within us bears witness.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Principles of Interpretation**

When dealing with the New Testament in its historical dimension, the same principles used to interpret any other literature are adopted. Among these are the necessity of using the literary and historical contexts and the fact that each passage has only one literal sense. That this approach also includes the methodology of rationalistic literary criticism is evident in this quotation from *Faithful To Our Calling*. “Basically all the techniques associated with ‘historical critical’ methodology, such as source analysis, form history, and redaction history, are legitimated by the fact that God chose to use as His written Word human documents written by human beings in human language.”<sup>12</sup>

The fact that source analysis, form history and redaction history are based on rationalism’s denial of the supernatural is ignored, and the historical-critical methodology is declared neutral. Since this methodology is considered “neutral,” it is assumed that if Christian presuppositions are used in employing this methodology the results will bring “great blessing to the Church.” The Christian presuppositions are listed as the centrality of the gospel in Scripture, the distinction between Law and Promise, and the Spirit’s gift of faith as the necessary prerequisite to understand the Promise and receive it. Notable by its absence is any mention of verbal inspiration. This Christian presupposition is dropped because it is incompatible with rationalistic literary criticism. The denial of the supernatural necessitates a denial of divine verbal inspiration.

It is also noteworthy that the false methods of interpretation which have worked so much havoc in the Christian church down through its history are given a nod of approval. It is said that just as the Holy Ghost worked through the allegorical and mystical Alexandrian school of exegesis and through the fourfold sense of the medieval exegetes, so also today the Holy Ghost works through the historical-grammatical and the historical-critical methodology. Why do they seemingly ignore the evil of those earlier methods and actually approve them? The purpose becomes clear in the statement which follows. They are seeking to establish that

there is a constant need for change in the method of interpretation in the church: “Sometimes two contrasting methods proved to be complementary. As the weakness of a method became manifest in the encounter of the Church with new situations, the Church gradually abandoned or modified the method to accommodate new insights. In these situations there were always some who believed that the abandonment of a given method meant the destruction of the Biblical message.”<sup>13</sup>

On the basis of such reasoning the position is adopted that the interpreter must learn to adapt to our modern situation. He must not begin to read the human side of the New Testament as a statement of fact to be taken at its surface meaning. Rather he is expected to treat it as a theological view of the world, of history, and of man which is expressed in terms which are derived from the ancient culture from which it emerged.

Obviously this way of interpreting the human side of Scripture injects an element of subjectivity into the study of the Bible because it denies the objective meaning of the words of Scripture. However, it is maintained that the true doctrine of Scripture still can be retained by the proper interpretation of its divine side. To do this the interpreter must study the New Testament with the expectation of hearing exclusively law or gospel.

In fact, they condemn the interpreter who concerns himself with the matter of whether a passage is historically factual or not. He is said to be leading people away from Christ because he is leading them to accept God’s Word on the basis of historical verification rather than by faith alone, and his interpretation is labeled a subtle attempt to substitute sight for faith.

This narrowing of what is divine in Scripture is “Gospel Reductionism” pure and simple. The gospel is made normative in such a way as to deny the normative authority of the whole Bible. A false antithesis between the gospel and the Bible is set up. In *Faithful To Our Calling* this statement is made: “The Gospel gives the Scriptures their normative character, not vice versa. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, not through faith in Christ and something else, even if that something else be the Bible itself.”<sup>14</sup>

This rejection of Scripture as God’s revealed and inerrant Word except for its gospel content leads to disastrous results since it is an attempt to ride the fence between skepticism and confidence in the reliability of Scriptures. Scripture warns us and history proves that any attempt to balance skepticism and confidence will slowly but surely tip in favor of skepticism. A look at the doctrinal results in *Seminex* reveals how clearly the balance has tipped in this direction.

### **The Doctrinal Results**

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the results is to look again at what happens in the gospels. The gospels are considered composites of conflicting traditions of what Jesus meant to the early Christians. Many of the words and works of Jesus are considered to have been freely adapted or even contrived. For example, in an article in the 1972 *Concordia Theological Monthly* titled “Parables in the Gospel of Thomas” the possibility is allowed that the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas may have a more primitive, and thus perhaps a more accurate, form of Jesus’ parable about the husbandman and the caretakers of the vineyard than is found in Luke’s gospel.

The standard for determining whether something is historical or not is supposed to be based on whether the writer intended the passage to be historical or not. At first glance this does not sound too bad since obviously if the writer intended what he wrote to be understood figuratively instead of historically, that is the way we should interpret it. But a closer look at this statement reveals that the “writer’s intent” is not to be determined objectively from the writer’s own words. Rather the writer’s intent is something which the interpreter may determine subjectively.

The result is that there are divergent views about the historical nature of the words and works of Jesus which are recorded in the Gospels. The doctrinal stance is taken that Jesus’ words and miracles are possibly historical but not necessarily so. This vague position allows for varying opinions. On the one hand there are those who deny that all the words of Jesus are historical. They do not deny that God could have inspired the early Christian community to retain some of Jesus’ actual words; they just do not think God did. These same men usually deny all the miracles of Jesus also. They do not deny the supernatural and, therefore, they do not deny that miracles could have happened; they just do not think they did. On the other hand, there are those who

believe that most, if not all, of the words and miracles of Jesus are historical. But they grant that it is not necessary for the retention of the gospel that their view be accepted by their colleagues. Thus the former who deny the words and miracles of Jesus are willing to grant the possibility that they might be historical, while the latter who accept Jesus' words and miracles are willing to grant that they may not be historical.

However, this tension does not disturb those of the mediating position because all are agreed that "to edify the Church, we ought to focus on the central meaning of the miracle accounts for us instead of dwelling on the authenticity of isolated miraculous details." Thus in the feeding of the 5000 it is said that it is not of major importance whether 5000 or 2000 people were fed or whether this was done 1000 or 2000 years ago; the important thing is that we should believe that God in love provides for our bodily needs.<sup>15</sup>

Often the parable of the Good Samaritan is cited as an illustration of how a spiritual truth can be conveyed even though the event itself may or may not be historical. That is the way the whole New Testament should be handled, it is argued. Then historical discrepancies will not invalidate passages as God's Word because faith will rest in God's ability to teach us what he wishes by these words rather than on the accuracy of the historians of an ancient culture. This is also applied to the resurrection account in which it is alleged that there are contradictions. Whether Jesus really rose and the circumstances of his resurrection are said to be matters of lesser importance. What is important is the gospel message in this account that Jesus completed our salvation.

While one's first reaction might be relief that at least the gospel is being maintained, even this is short-lived when we find out that there is a lack of clarity as to just what the gospel is. Often the fruits of the gospel, such as good works or social action, are confused with the gospel itself. In a system of interpretation which proclaims that it is concerned with nothing in the Bible except the gospel, confusion about the meaning of the gospel is the final step by which Satan robs its adherents of the truth.

That there has been a noticeable drift in the mediating position away from Scripture's message of salvation toward a very vague understanding of the gospel is evident in two ways. One is the definition of the Gospel given in *Faithful To Our Calling*; the other is the writings of various men of this position in the *Concordia Theological Monthly*.

In *Faithful To Our Calling* this statement is made, "In the last analysis, the gospel message is for each of us. God declares that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ he has acted in the past on our behalf, and now promises to free us from any force that enslaves us."<sup>16</sup> The last part of this statement is so vague that it could serve as a definition of the gospel for almost anyone who believes in some kind of benevolent God. In *Faithful To Our Calling* the gospel is often referred to as "the promise." In this way a contrast is made between the historical events by which God accomplished our salvation and what God says he did in those events. This contrast seems like a very slight shift, but it is a very dangerous one because it tries to separate two things which cannot be separated without disastrous results. For example, what Jesus tells us his resurrection means for us loses all its meaning if his resurrection is not a historical fact (Cf. 1 Cor 15:14, 17–19).

Accompanying this shift to trust merely in God's Promise is a move to a very vague understanding of the gospel. This is evident when the effect of the Promise is defined as a confidence in the believer that God is at work in human history to bring blessings to the family of man.

Several quotations from the *Concordia Theological Monthly* illustrate the unclarity about Scripture's message of salvation which characterizes many who take the mediating position. Note how the following quotation mistakenly makes love among mankind, a fruit of faith, the essence of Christ's redeeming work: "So God gave us Christ, who is, as the writer to the Hebrews says, 'the express image of the Father,' meaning that God's oneness is in him, that perfect fellowship which God has within himself and with all men. Why else does the Lord become flesh and die and rise from death, except that God by these acts wants to resolve the broken and fragmented life of man, to remove hostility, to reestablish fellowship and community".<sup>17</sup>

Note in the next quotation that any clear mention of God's gracious forgiveness of sin is significant by its absence and is replaced by a very vague reference to God's love:

How in all God's world are we to be imitators of our Lord? What in all the heaven is God like? The answer to both questions is the same. Look at Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ is more than the carbon copy of God. He is! He is God made flesh for us. His whole life was a making visible to us the invisible things of God. But more—the purpose of His perfect loving was to create copies of His love on this earth, a real creating again, something out of nothing. He did this by the magnetism of His love. He drew us into His pattern by his love. He gave Himself up for us—that much He loves—a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. His life was God's love offered up for us, drawing us to him as He was lifted up on the cross, a sacrifice. Fragrant—well pleasing—He did not come crabbing, crying, and complaining, but committed to love the Father and to loving us. By His offering, He changes us so that we can offer what He did, our lives and our love.<sup>18</sup>

In the final quotation, note how the real meaning of the Lord's Supper is beclouded, if not completely lost: "We go to the altar to receive the gifts of God in order that we may be able to offer ourselves to Him. We go to the altar of God to offer our public praise and thanksgiving for gifts received. We go to the altar of God so that we might there be empowered to share as God shares, to give as He gives, so that we might be available to others as He is to us".<sup>19</sup>

All of these quotations, it might be argued, could be understood correctly. However, when such quotations come from the pens of men who define the Gospel, or Promise, as vaguely as is done in *Faithful To Our Calling*, it is obvious that there is a studied attempt to remain vague enough so that any individual understanding of the gospel which might be somewhat different will not be disturbed.

### Summary

The mediating position is an attempt to use the historical-critical methodology without ending up with Bultmann's existential gospel. The attempt is made to divide the New Testament into a human side and a divine side. This division, however, allows a great deal of subjectivity in the realm of Bible interpretation. The result is that where the line is to be drawn between the human and divine side of Scripture has become a matter of personal choice. This subjective reduction of the divine side of Scripture has slowly but surely beclouded the true understanding of the gospel. Thus the gospel, the one thing which is supposed to be the divine part of the Bible, has become the victim of the very method which was to sustain it. President Preus' analysis of this method was correct. While the principal doctrines of the Christian faith appear to be upheld by this method, at the same time it sets the stage for their complete erosion.

### Part Four: Boer's Divine—Human Mystery Approach

In what has been called a conservative view of infallibility and inspiration, the Dutch Reformed writer, Harry Boer, makes an attempt to avoid Seminex's partial surrender to rationalistic literary criticism. His attempt draws heavily on the mystery of the union of the two natures in Christ. He argues that just as this mystery is impenetrable by reason and received only by faith, so it is with the "mystery" of the human and divine in the nature of the Scriptures. The result of his approach is the argument that just as one is not able to resolve all the problems which the union of the two natures in Christ poses for human reason, so one ought not to expect that he will be able to solve the problems which the union of the human and divine in Scriptures poses for human reason.

Faith, he says, will be able to overleap all the inadequacies of human expression and all the literary, cultural, numerical, or geographical disparities, gaps, inconsistencies, clashing data, contradictory phenomena and discrepancies. Faith will let these vicissitudes in Scripture, which are common to all human writing, stand side by side with the Holy Spirit's inspiration of all of Scripture, which is divine in nature, without attempting any harmonizations which are contrived to satisfy human reason.

## Higher Criticism and Textual Criticism

Boer begins by arguing that rationalistic literary criticism is not to be excluded from the study of the Bible. As a technical academic exercise he believes that higher criticism is as neutral as lower criticism or textual criticism. This conclusion is based on his faulty analysis of textual criticism as a science which uses rational, systematic methods and so sets the scholar who practices it “above the divine revelation given in Scripture as its analyst and critic.”

There are at least two things which are faulty in this analysis. One is that Boer does not give enough emphasis to his own observation that the judgments made in textual criticism are far more objectively bound than are those of higher criticism. This, he says in passing, is a “functional” difference, not a “formal” difference. The fact is that textual criticism has a great deal of objective data, namely, the more than 5000 witnesses to the New Testament text in papyri, uncials, minuscules, lectionaries, translations and quotations by the church fathers. In higher criticism the data is almost entirely based on subjective conclusions.

It is true that for the past century a textual theory based on “intrinsic probability” was built on such subjective concoctions as recensions and genealogical families of texts. One family was supposedly the most reliable, a second family a very loose text, and a third family a late and corrupt text. But this subjective theory has crumpled slowly but surely because of the objective facts presented by the witnesses to the New Testament text.

There is a second flaw in Boer’s equating higher criticism with textual criticism. The two do not deal with the same thing. While textual criticism deals with how certain passages were read differently in various areas of the Christian church in the early centuries, higher criticism deals with how the Scriptures came into being and with how the words are to be interpreted.

It is true that rationalistic textual critics have tried to harmonize the objective facts of textual criticism with their subjective views of the nature of Scripture, but, as was noted above, their theory has been discredited. This will not prevent them from trying again. But Boer’s use of their approach to draw the conclusion that textual criticism and higher criticism are very similar is way off base.

## The Divine Garbed In The Human

However, Boer’s main point is not to prove that textual criticism and higher criticism are exactly alike. Rather, his point is that both remind Christians that the Bible is a human product as well as a divine product. It is particularly in this way that Boer feels that the historical-critical method and its form of literary criticism has rendered service to the Christian church.

Boer argues that the human nature of Scripture was being lost in the church by an overemphasis on the divine nature of Scripture. Higher criticism has called attention to the human side of Scripture by emphasizing its inconsistencies, its gaps, its clashing data, its contradictions. By pointing out these things, Boer says higher criticism has had the effect of making Christians realize once again that the “Bible is not only *the Book* among the many books, but also *a book* among the many books.”<sup>20</sup> He welcomes this realization of the Bible’s “incarnation in a book” as an antidote to “fundamentalism’s” tendency to view as suspicious and even heretical any stress that the Bible is a human book as well as being divine.

It is at this point that Boer introduces the thought that the Bible is as fully and truly a human book as Christ was fully and truly a human being. He cites as illustrations of this fact some of the problem passages in the synoptic gospels: the differences in John the Baptist’s words about Jesus being mightier than he, the healing of the blind man while leaving and entering Jericho, the request of James and John made in person or through their mother to Jesus.

These problems, he says, illustrate the divine and human blend in the synoptics. They show that the beauty of the Word of God is dressed in the literary garment of man. They illustrate, he adds, that inspiration leaves both the inspired writer fully human as well as the writing mediated by his mind and heart and will. They illustrate that just as the humanity of Christ both hides and reveals the divine nature which found embodiment in

him, so the humanity of Scripture both hides and reveals the divine reality that is embodied in the Bible. They illustrate that in one sense the Bible cannot be said to be infallible or inerrant since they demonstrate that the definition of the infallibility of Scripture cannot include the thought that Scripture is without contradictions.

The fundamentalist, Boer says, will minimize these problems or will try to harmonize these passages rather than face the higher critics' pricking of his balloon overblown with his "docetic" view of the nature of Scripture. Rather than trying to strong arm the differences in the text by forcing on them a harmonistic exegesis demanded by a dogmatic notion of congruity, rather than making Scriptures perfect as we want them to be, or as we were taught somewhere along the line that they have to be because God is perfect, Boer suggests that one look to the humanity of Scripture which veils the divinity of Scripture for the solution. To illustrate this he returns to the union of the human with the divine in Christ.

Boer says, "It is hardly correct to say that Jesus in the days of his flesh was omniscient." As the Son of God, Jesus had the power of omniscience, but as a man his knowledge was limited. And Boer adds, "Closely related to this limitation is the fact that Jesus again and again accomodated himself to existing beliefs"<sup>21</sup> which we no longer accept in the same form or which are open to question today. As examples Boer cites Jesus' accomodation to the popular belief that sheol has two adjoining divisions, gehenna and paradise, and to the belief that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and that Isaiah wrote all of Isaiah.

In the same way, Boer argues, it is impossible to say that Scripture written by human beings is absolutely true and in complete harmony. Inspiration does not deprive the scriptural writings of their normal human character which is subject in all respects to the laws governing the writer's psychical, moral, spiritual and rational faculties.

Therefore, Boer continues, we cannot simply deal with the events recorded in Scripture as such, but we must also deal with the events as interpreted by the writers. We must bridge the gap between the way the writers' contemporaries were expected to read these writings and the manner in which we, after more than 19 centuries, can understand them. Just as the span of these centuries has tended to make us less aware than Jesus' contemporaries of his humanity, so this span has also made us less aware than those contemporaries of the human quality of the Scriptural writers. The task, Boer concludes, "is to ascertain not how inspiration annuls this human quality of the writers, but how it uses it."<sup>22</sup>

### **Infallibility of Scripture**

Boer suggests that the Christian church use the relative terms reliable and trustworthy rather than the absolute term infallible to describe the inspired Scriptures. Or more specifically, he suggests that the term infallible be defined by these two terms rather than by the term inerrant. Not that Boer wants to drop the term inerrant; he simply wants to limit its use to the abiding truths which Jesus spoke and then leave the contradictory passages lie as a mystery which no one has to worry his head about. The disparities these passages pose, he says, can be solved only by constant and often artificial harmonizations or by sundry assumptions. Rather than "contriving an escape from embarrassment", he suggests an "excision" from the understanding of infallibility, namely, "the conception that the Bible as a human literary product is a book in which literary, historical, geographical, numerical, or other disparities do not and cannot exist."<sup>23</sup> By this excision, Boer argues, the Christian is properly putting the infallibility of Scripture in its proper place as an article of faith which is to be believed but not proved, like other articles of faith such as creation, the deity of Christ, the atoning power of his death, his resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit and others.

Such a view of infallibility, he says, will relieve the Christian mind of a great deal of tension. When discoveries are made which call into question certain data of Scripture, the Christian with a "true view of the infallibility of Scripture" will not be disturbed. The Christian does not surrender the Bible to the unbelieving critic to play fast and loose with it; he continues to see the whole of Scripture in terms of the adoring esteem of Psalm 119. "Standing on this rock that cannot be moved" the Christian can "afford fearless honesty in handling the human garment that both hides and reveals the infallibility with which the divine Author has spoken to us."

He can yield datings that cannot be defended and acknowledge disparities when they are evident since he sees “a time conditioned context as the bearer of a verity that cannot change.”<sup>24</sup>

Boer warns against the setting up of “standards for the reading and study of the Word of God that are not given or sanctioned by that Word.”<sup>25</sup> He argues that the literal inerrancy of the Bible is a human deduction from the doctrine of inspiration; and he concludes that the doctrine of literal inerrancy sets the scene “for an exegesis that is basically an exercise in the reading of the Bible in terms of the received tradition” to the exclusion of any serious examination of the depth of its history, poetry, prophecy, or any study of the Bible’s relationship to the environment in which the writers grew up and received their religious, cultural, historical mindset.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Doctrine of Creation**

To avoid such sterility, Boer pleads that Christians “give full weight to the doctrine of creation and its implication for God’s activity in history and in nature.”<sup>27</sup> God’s redemptive activity did not take place in a vacuum, but operated wholly within the context of creation. God did not cast off his creation after the Fall, but, Boer says, he revived, healed and made it serviceable again to his divine purpose.

Thus there is a powerful “linkage” between the work of the Redeemer God in things spiritual and the Creator God in things natural. This truth about God must be borne in mind, Boer adds, also in connection with the Spirit’s work of inspiring the sacred writings. Here, too, there is a constant intertwining of the spiritual with the natural and the historical. This “distinctly human element is everywhere in evidence in the composition of the sacred writings.”<sup>28</sup>

Because the spiritual is intertwined with the natural and historical, “There is therefore nothing that is obvious, self-evident, easily defineable or analyzable about the primary work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> The Spirit, Boer says, works incognito, he hides his divinity in the garment of the human writers. For this reason the Spirit suffers the perfection of his work to be reflected in the “brokenness and imperfection” of the lives of men.

### **The Mystery**

Boer’s conclusion is that wherever the divine and the human meet, there is mystery. Therefore, “It would not seem that the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of Scripture is any more definable than is the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Boer insists that to those who understand the inability to define inspiration, Jesus’ words “Scripture cannot be broken” will be clear witness to the infallibility of Scripture, but infallibility defined as the conformity of the written words to the truth that only faith can discern, an infallibility which can only be comprehended by the Christian mind.

The touchstone for such Christians, Boer says, will not be the inerrancy of Scripture but an embracing in faith of Jesus Christ. They will not be indifferent to the clashing data and the contradictory phenomena in the Bible, but they will refuse to let the certitude, the unbreakable validity of the gospel, be obscured by such things. They also will decline to attempt any contrived harmonizations which somehow are supposed to strengthen faith by bringing disparities into the area of infallible revealed truth.

What is to be said about this approach? There is one thing that Boer stresses that is valid, but there is much with which we must take serious issue. His warning about getting so involved with the “problem” passages in Scripture that we lose sight of its essential message of salvation is well taken. But his understanding of the doctrines of Christology and of Scripture is not correct.

### **The Synoptic Problem**

What about the “problem” passages of Scripture, particularly those in the synoptics? Each of these passages and the difficulties they present are studied at the Seminary in the progression of the first-year Isagogics course on the synoptics. There in Burton-Goodspeed’s harmony of the gospels, the Greek texts are laid out in parallel columns for comparison. The so-called contradictions are pointed out, but no “contrived



harmonizations” are foisted on the class. Rather, the key things to remember about difficult passages in the Scriptures, which were discussed in the introduction to the course, are recalled. A list of them follows without development:

1. A distinction must be made between a difficulty (something which requires more than a passing glance to grasp fully) and a contradiction (something which is said to be true and not to be true about the same person in the same place at the same time).
2. Verbal inspiration does not always mean the writers quoted verbatim.
3. The order of recording does not always reflect the order in which things transpired, particularly in Matthew and Mark.
4. The failure to mention a detail by one of the synoptics does not mean he denies or is ignorant of it.
5. Different emphasis does not mean each writer had a different theology.
6. For the sake of brevity a writer may simply present the substance of an event, as Matthew often does, while the actual details are provided by another writer.
7. Some of the difficulties are due to our ignorance of all the facts. For instance, it was thought that Luke’s historical references were sometimes in error, but the more that has been learned about the Roman rule the more this supposition has been proven to be incorrect. If a possible solution is suggested, it is not done as a prop for faith but only to show that the unbeliever’s contention that this *must* be a contradiction is not true.
8. Jesus often repeated the same words and thoughts while teaching different audiences, sometimes crowds and sometimes disciples, at different times, such as in the Galilean ministry and the Perea. Often these same words and thoughts took a slightly different form because of the different occasion.
9. The synoptic accounts are very similar because the accounts are true, the common outline is the outline of Jesus’ life, and those who were not eyewitnesses carefully followed the words of the apostles (Lk 1:2; 2 Pe 1:15). Luke’s words at the beginning of his gospel do not say that there were all kinds of conflicting reports about Jesus floating about at that time. Instead, he says that those who had drawn up accounts did so “*just as they were handed down*” by the apostles. And Luke adds that his account would serve to assure Theophilus of “*the certainty of the things*” he had heard.
10. The accounts are different because the writers had more material than they could possibly record, each was writing with a different purpose and selected accordingly, and each had a different writing style.

These are not strong-armed attempts to wrestle Scripture into a preconceived mold, but these are simply the facts which demonstrate themselves again and again when one studies each of the synoptics separately and then in harmony with the others.

### **Christology**

What about Boer’s doctrine of Christology? It is in error because it fails to distinguish between the humanity of Christ and his humiliation. To put it another way, he mistakenly equates Christ’s incarnation, or being man, and his exinanition, or his choosing not to make use of all his divine attributes at all times. When Boer asserts that because Jesus was human he did not know everything, he errs. It was not because Jesus was human that he did not know everything. Rather it was because in his state of humiliation or exinanation he did not at all times fully use the divine attribute of omniscience which was communicated to his human nature in his incarnation. He knew all things (Jn 16:30) and at the same time he did not know all things (Mk 13:32). To us this is a psychological mystery. But his not knowing was not the result of his being a man. He is and always will

be not only true God but also true man. In his state of exaltation he still possesses his human nature in personal union with his divine nature. To say, then, that Jesus did not know all things because he was a man would mean that also in his exaltation he does not know all things. No, it was part of his humiliation, not his incarnation, that Jesus did not fully use his omniscience at all times.

But this humiliation of Jesus does not mean, as Boer suggests, that he ever employed or even accommodated himself to “existing beliefs” which were erroneous. Jesus was and is the truth (Jn 14:6) and without exception bore witness to the truth (Jn 18:37). When Jesus identified Moses and Isaiah as the authors of the books ascribed to them (Jn 5:46, Mt 15:7), he was not just expressing himself in terms of the “common deposit of belief” in those days about such matters. Jesus’ human nature was never separated, even for a moment, from his divine nature. As the God-man he never deviated from that which is the absolute truth.

In short, Boer’s Christology is not that of Scripture. And neither is his doctrine of Scripture.

### The Doctrine of Scripture

An improper, unscriptural emphasis is put on the human trappings in which the divine Word is revealed. To say that the “discrepancies” in Scripture compel us to view the Word of God as dressed in the literary garment of man, to say that inspiration does not deprive the Scriptural writings of being subject to human vicissitudes, to say that the Bible is not only the Book among books but a book among books does not do justice to the fact that God says to his prophet, “I have put *my words* in your mouth” (Jr 1:9) or to what Paul confesses in 1 Corinthians 2:13, “We speak, *not in words* taught us by human wisdom *but in words* taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in *spiritual words*.”

Scripture does not explain the mystery of the process of inspiration. But when David declares, “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue” (2 Sm 23:2), and when the psalmist describes his tongue as “the pen of a skillful writer” (Ps 45:1), they are not asserting that the Spirit’s divine work was hidden by the weakness and brokenness of their human words.

Inspiration was a unique process. The result was not an imperfect work which is an intertwining of the spiritual which is absolute and the natural and the historical which is relative. The Bible is not an embodiment of the absolute truth of divine reality in the garb of the relative truth of the human record. Such descriptions of Scripture do not square with what happened according to 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is God-breathed” or 2 Peter 1:19–21, “We have the word of the prophets made more certain ... No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Boer’s view implies furthermore that God does not assure us infallibly of *all* things which are in Scripture. He limits infallibility to those things which are in the area of divine certitude. Such a limitation creates uncertainty as to whether a particular passage belongs to such certitude or not.

Boer undermines the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture further when he says that we dare not make Scripture what we want it to be rather than the way the writer’s contemporaries were expected to read these writings. The warning is valid if it is aimed at a twisting of the Scriptures, but Boer implies instead that people back then spoke less exactly than what we expect today. There is no warrant, however, for the assumption that people spoke any less exactly than we do today. Facts were facts then just as they are now, and people used rounded numerical figures and figures of speech in the same way and for the same purpose as people do today.

Boer’s tipping of the hat to the historical-critical method as a useful tool for the Christian is based on the assumption that higher criticism is a technical exercise which is neutral in the hands of a true believer. The fact is, as was demonstrated earlier in this paper, that the literary criticism of the historical-critical method is thoroughly rationalistic. This unbelieving approach cannot be divorced from the method itself because it is part and parcel of the unbelieving spirit with which the negative critic views the nature of Scripture or how it came into being.

## Summary

This “conservative” position of Boer’s, then, tries to say that the Scripture is infallible and yet it is not infallible, that the Scripture is inerrant and yet it is not inerrant, because at one and the same time it is both divine and human. This approach is built on an erroneous view of both Christology and the doctrine of Scripture. This attempt to make the inspiration of Scripture a mystery of faith which remains undisturbed by the “disparities” the believer meets in Scripture fails for the same reason that the approaches of Bultmann and the Uniting Lutherans do. It places man at least in part above Scripture as its analyst and critic. The subjectivity this approach lets loose in the interpretation of Scripture can in time only wreak havoc with God’s Word.

### **Part Five: A Comparative Evaluation of These Three Approaches of the Historical-Critical Method**

In the past three sections we have looked at three forms of historical-critical method of interpretation. All accept the literary criticism of rationalism as useful. One is characterized by existential demythologizing; the second by gospel reductionism; the third by divine-human mystery. However, all three have more in common with one another than they have with the true Scriptural method of interpretation. The truth of this statement can be illustrated by examining all three approaches by six touchstones. We can see what these approaches really say about the Bible by noting what each says in regard to the clarity of Scripture, Scripture as history, Scripture as revelation, the unity of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and Scripture’s message of salvation.

It is important to do this kind of probing because a proponent of any one of these approaches can often hide certain limitations which he places on any one of these six matters unless he is asked to declare not only what he believes about them but also what he does not believe about them.

### **The Clarity of Scriptures**

Is Scripture clear in what it says and means? It is obvious that in reading the New Testament no one but the “scholar” is prepared to apply the intricacies of form criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism and comparative religions study. So everyone is dependent on the “scholar” to clarify much of the New Testament text for him. When we see that the “scholars” also disagree very often in their conclusions, it is quite obvious that Scripture is not very clear for the “scholar” either. The clarity of Scripture has become a very subjective matter.

In our overview of the radical approach we noted that subjectivity results from the fact that demythologizing is really the old allegorizing of the Middle Ages in new dress. Only, in this modern type of allegory there is not even a body of doctrine, such as the tradition of the church was in the Middle Ages, as a point of reference for the interpreter. The goal of finding one’s “true existence” or “authentic being” is the only thing which serves as a restraint on the subjectivity of the interpreter.

The mediating position restricts the clarity of Scripture to those places where it deals with the gospel. However, we noted that the casting of doubt on the rest of Scripture has led to a loss of clarity in regard to the gospel also. The clear statements of Scripture no longer are regarded as clear. Rather, each person is encouraged to find what Scripture means to him, but he is warned not to try to impose on others what he understands Scripture to be saying, even in regard to the gospel. This too is not clarity but subjectivity.

Those of the radical and mediating position both praise this subjectivity. They applaud it since, they say, subjectivity rids the church of a fixed meaning for any Bible passage, which they call “dogmatism”, and leaves the meaning of the text open. The danger of an open text can be overcome, it is said, by the sharing of “insights.” In this way the subjectivity of one man will be tempered by the “insights” of others if he tends to drift too far afield.

The conservative position tries to temper this subjectivity by removing the portions of Scripture which contain disparities from discussion. The problem is who is to be the final judge whether a passage contains a

disparity or not? One person may well stop with a few difficulties in the synoptics, while another may choose to include many other passages which he feels are the human garment in which the Word of God is dressed.

It is obvious that in all these three approaches of the historical-critical method of the clarity of Scripture is compromised. Instead, there is a great deal, or at least some, subjectivity which is introduced. Scripture is no longer regarded as clear in *all* that it says and means; rather the individual is “free” to find his own meaning or to omit portions from discussion.

### Scripture as History

Since the historical portions of the Bible are subjected to rationalistic literary criticism, anything supernatural in Scripture is either denied or questioned or limited. Those of the radical position deny the supernatural; those of the mediating position allow the possibility of the supernatural but question its probability; those of the conservative position limit the supernatural by its intertwining with the human.

The New Testament history is looked upon as the reporting of the early Christian church. For those of the radical position, this means that what is really known about Jesus is very little. Kaesemann writes in *Essay on New Testament Themes*:

We know nothing at all about the latter (i.e. Jesus’ exterior) save only the way which led from Galilee to Jerusalem, from the preaching of the God (who is near us) to the hatred of official Judaism and execution by the Romans. Only an uncontrolled imagination could have the self-confidence to weave out of these pitiful threads the fabric of history in which cause and effect could be determined in detail. But conversely...we need not let defeatism and skepticism have the last word...The primitive Christian community did identify the exalted Lord with the earthly Jesus...[there are] still a few pieces of the Synoptic tradition which the historian has to acknowledge as authentic.<sup>31</sup>

For those of the mediating position the view that the New Testament history is the reporting of the church means that the interpreter is free to decide what he thinks was meant to be historical. In this way the kerygma is not necessarily denied or accepted as history, but the emphasis is shifted entirely to the spiritual message of the kerygma. In *Faithful To Our Calling*, we read, “Any approach to the Scriptures which focuses on the need for historical factuality rather than on the primary need for Christ leads us away from Christ rather than to him...The fact that a given biblical episode is historical is not important in and of itself. The importance of such historical events lies in what God was doing in and through them...Even though we may not be able to harmonize historical discrepancies which appear in the New Testament Gospel accounts, that fact does not shake our faith or invalidate these accounts as Word of God. Our faith rests in the promise of a faithful God, not in the accuracy of ancient historians.”<sup>32</sup>

The difference between the radical position and the mediating position, then, is more a difference of degree than of kind. The clear testimony of Scripture that a given text is historical will be denied by one and ignored by the other. Both maintain that truth exists in the Bible, but they insist that the Bible conveys this truth, not through the statement of historical facts, but in the form of historical narrative. The parables of Jesus, particularly the parable of the Good Samaritan, are cited as examples of how a spiritual message can be taught without the necessity of knowing whether an event really happened or not. The whole New Testament, it is implied, is literature of this kerygmatic genre.

Thus in these two approaches little of the New Testament is maintained as actual history by the historical-critical method. Since rationalistic literary criticism is incompatible with a supernatural God working our salvation in historical events, those miraculous historical events by which God in his grace completed our salvation have to be allegorized or “spiritualized.” In place of the simple historical events by which God objectively assured us of our salvation, “scholars” offer a God who in some vague way supposedly saves man by his *words* quite apart from anything God has *done* for man in history.

In the conservative position the supernatural is maintained, but Christ's omniscience is limited by the confusion of his incarnation with his humiliation, and the infallibility of Scripture is limited by what is called the incarnation of the Bible. Like the moderate position, the conservative position claims that faith can overleap any of the historical inaccuracies in Scripture. It relegates certain historical facts reported in Scripture to the status of the human garment in which the divine realities are hidden to all but faith. It, too, insists that we today do not really concern ourselves with the events as such, but with the events as interpreted by the canonical writers. Perhaps unwittingly, yet nevertheless undeniably, by subjecting any of the history of Scripture to the scalpel of human judgment, the door is opened for major surgery eventually.

### **The Bible as Revelation**

The historical-critical interpreters may object to being classified as a group which denies revelation. There may be some difference in degree again, but both the radical and the mediating positions agree in denying divine revelation as objectively given in historical events and as information from God mediated through chosen writers in simple intelligible words and concepts.

In the radical position biblical language is said to be a phenomenon in which man becomes what God meant him to be, an authentic being, through the disclosure of God in language. Thus the New Testament text is not objective revelation but a "witness" to the drama of God's dialogue with man in connection with Christ. As a man hears this "witness" it becomes the means whereby God's presence in judgment and promise dawns on him with the same freshness and excitement as it did in Christ. Revelation then is not the words recorded in the Bible but the experience the individual has when he becomes aware that these words are the story of his own life, the story of how God wants to fashion him to be his authentic self. Kaesemann writes in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, "Revelation ceases to be God's revelation once it has been brought within a causal nexus.... It does not convey to me an idea or program; it is an act which lays hold on me."<sup>33</sup>

In the mediating position it is not denied that the New Testament, at least in its gospel content, may have been a revelation of God to the early Christian church. However, since this gospel is so mingled with the kerygma of the early church and with its interpretations and historical inaccuracies, the important thing is not what God revealed to them *then*, but what he reveals to the reader by these words *today*.

Thus in these first two approaches revelation is considered only a modern event. While this might still seem to allow revelation to be a divine event, it cuts revelation loose from the objective meaning of the words and allows the modern reader a great deal of subjectivity in his personal "encounter" with God in the words of the Bible. The results of such a view of revelation are disastrous. These results will become even more obvious in the next three touchstones.

The conservative position does insist that the Bible is God's Word revealed to the early Christian church. It does not view the mixture of the divine and human at that time as making unimportant what God revealed then, as the mediating position does. Nevertheless, the results of the mediating position are not fully avoided. By drawing a distinction between the exactness in which God spoke then and how we speak now, revelation is cut loose in part from the objective meaning of the words. This in turn allows the modern reader some subjectivity in dealing with these words. By saying that we today should just let the disparities between then and now lie without paying any attention to them will not keep the leaven which has been introduced into the matter of revelation from doing its disastrous work.

### **The Unity of Scripture**

The radical position declares that it is a sure sign of theological immaturity if any one says that the Bible is a perfect unity. It is obvious to any honest Bible reader, they maintain, that the Old Testament reflects a tribal religion while the New Testament reflects a religious philosophy; that there is a conflict between Jesus' statements on love and his eschatological pronouncements; that Jesus and Paul differ with one another because the former preaches love and the latter atonement; that James and Hebrews do not agree with Paul on

justification; that John's understanding of faith is unique; that the New Testament either reinterprets or rejects the Old Testament law; that there are endless historical discrepancies. The listing could go on. Just as a person who has a problem but refuses to admit it has failed to take the first step to solve his problem, so it is said that any view of an underlying unity of the Bible only hinders any real progress in solving the "problems" of interpreting the Bible.

The mediating position insists that there is at least one unity in Scripture, that is in God's proclamation of the message of judgment and mercy. However, when we seek to know what this message really is, as in the subsequent section on "Scripture's Message of Salvation," we will see that there is such disunity among those who hold this position that only the vaguest of definitions of this message are forthcoming. Thus any real unity among them even in regard to the gospel seems doubtful. Could anything else be expected of a method of interpretation which makes the clarity of Scripture very subjective, the historicity of Scripture questionable, and the revelation of Scripture only a modern event?

The conservative position insists that to say the Scriptures form a perfect harmony without contradictory phenomena and inconsistencies is a failure to take the human quality of Scripture seriously. This, too, is placing the unity of Scripture into the subjective hands of the Bible analyst and critic.

All three approaches of the historical-critical method allow the question to what degree there is a unity in Scripture to become a matter of individual judgment, at least in part. Thus they all undermine the basic unity of the Bible.

### **The Authority of Scripture**

Since the clarity, historicity, revelation and unity of Scripture are undermined in the historical-critical method, it is obvious that the authority of Scripture will also suffer. If all the foregoing are a matter of subjective determination, then who could ever set up any part of the Bible as authoritative without being challenged?

In fact, it is often said by proponents of the historical-critical method that anyone who makes the Bible the sole and final norm for the church fails to remember that God, not a book, is Lord of the church. To make Scripture authoritative is labelled "bibliolatry." Such an antithesis which sets the Bible over against God is, of course, a ploy which denies the simple fact that God himself has made his Word authoritative for us. But those who deny this fact will trumpet the need to remain free from doctrinal statements even though they are based on Scripture. Doctrinal statements of any kind, they insist, legalistically impose control of thought and actions on a liberated child of God.

In the radical position, since the Bible supposedly becomes God's Word only in the kerygmatic encounter, the authority of Scripture is only that which is experienced by the individual in his own personal decision of response. In the mediating position the Bible's authority is defined as its power to accomplish its purpose of saving men. The Bible, it is said, is not a source book of doctrine or the norm of faith. The Bible is not an authority which determines the body of doctrine to be believed, but it is man's authority for daring to trust that God has kindly intentions toward him. In short, the Bible is not an authority in what it says to a man but in what it does for him.

Obviously in the first two approaches of the historical-critical method Scripture has no objective authority. Instead, the Bible as the norm is replaced by dozens of "scholars" saying "the norm for me is ..." In most seminaries, and eventually in most pulpits, a doctrinal smorgasbord of the writings of various "scholars" is served and the individual student or layman is urged to select the norm which best suits his existential situation or his gospel understanding.

In the conservative position the authority of Scripture is supposedly upheld in an unquestioned fashion. Yet this is done by setting aside those natural and historical portions which reveal themselves as the human garb in which the absolute verities are clothed. This is nothing but a limiting of the authority of Scripture. To argue that these "human qualities" of Scripture do not have to do with the essence of Scripture is simply Satan's way

of getting his foot in the door to spread his attack on the authority of the rest of the Bible to which such a person still holds.

### **Scripture's Message of Salvation**

The most tragic result of the historical-critical method is what it does to the message of salvation. In the radical position this message is replaced by the existential search for "true existence." In the mediating position many have lost a clear understanding of the true gospel and drifted into vagary.

For those who follow Bultmann's existential demythologizing, salvation is equated with authentic existence. As was noted in an earlier chapter, this true being means that the individual has found "freedom" in Christ by ridding himself of all earthly anxieties and by opening himself to God to live in LOVE.

This existential experience is supposed to be a modern route between the outdated idea of actual sin and grace and the bankrupt skepticism of 19th century rationalism. But the devilish character of existential demythologizing can be seen from three characteristics: 1) Its philosophical nature makes it appeal to the human intellect. Salvation is not a matter of God's grace announced in simple words but it is a matter of the human mind searching for man's true existence. 2) Its definition of true existence challenges man to rid himself of his materialistic and selfish desires for "things" and challenges him instead to adopt an unselfish life of service to his fellowman. Thus the radical position satisfies many people who feel that the only purpose which religion is to serve is the promotion of love among mankind. 3) At the same time, its use of all the biblical terms deceives many into thinking that this is real Christianity. The pastor teaches that "salvation" is by "God's grace" through "faith" in "Christ" and that this "truth" is based on what the "whole Bible" teaches.

If one asks about the eighteen centuries of Christianity which did not understand these biblical terms as they are used in existential demythologizing, he may be told that we ought not concern ourselves with the past but only with the present, for that is what existentialism is all about. Or he may be given the suggestion that in its basic form the Bible served the people of the ancient and medieval times well because it conformed with their supernatural worldview, and, if some older people today still have this outdated supernatural worldview, the Bible will help them find their true existence in the traditional terms of sin and grace. However, for those who have the modern scientific worldview, a new approach to the Bible is needed if it is to fulfill its purpose of helping modern man find his true being. This, they say, is the "miracle" of biblical language which enables Scripture to serve so well in two totally different worldviews.

In the mediating position the reduction of the divine side of God's Word to its gospel content undermined the clarity, unity, historicity and authority of much of Scripture. Soon this leaven also affected a clear understanding of the gospel. No single, simple definition of the gospel is acceptable, they say; instead, various vague definitions of the gospel are given. It is said that since the Bible presents a rich variety of ways to portray the word of promise, one ought not to impose on another his own particular way of wording the gospel. It is enough to agree that God's Promise begets and preserves in the believer's heart a confidence that God was and is at work in human history to bring blessings to the human family. The Bible, they insist, was not meant to set up statements of doctrine to be believed, but it is the authority on which man dares to trust in God's kindly intentions toward us. Note how the definition of the gospel is so vague that anyone can put his own meaning into it.

It may be true that not all who embrace the mediating position have lost an understanding of the true gospel. But those who have not lost it yet will eventually do so simply because the attempt to maintain the gospel while denying the importance and factuality of the historical events on which the gospel is founded is an impossible task. One does not have to be a prophet to foretell this. One only needs to apply the Scripture truth that a little leaven will leaven the whole lump.

There is little doubt that in general those in the conservative position still hold a true understanding of the way of salvation. But the introduction of an erroneous Christology to undergird an erroneous doctrine of Scripture is a combination of deadly leaven which will do its devastating work if not quickly removed.

## Summary

We shall attempt to capsulize what all three approaches say about the six points which were discussed in this section. Note that the limiting word *only* appears in every answer. This little word reveals clearly how much more closely these three positions are related to each other than they are to a scriptural view. And it is these limitations which can very easily be hidden by adherents to the historical-critical method unless they are closely questioned about these points.

Is the Bible clear?

- The radical position, because of demythologizing, says that the Bible is clear *only* in what it means, not in what it says.
- The mediating position says that the Bible is clear *only* in what the Gospel “promises.”
- The conservative position says that the Bible is clear *only* where it does not contain disparities.

Is the Bible history?

- The radical position says that the Bible is history *only* in the sense of *Geschichte*, not as *Historie*.
- The moderate position says that the Bible is history *only* in those parts which one subjectively determines the writer meant to be *Historie* and not *Geschichte*.
- The conservative position says that the Bible is history *only* where what is written is not colored by the human environment in which the writer received his mindset.

Is the Bible revelation?

- The radical position answers *only* as a modern event in the kerygmatic encounter, not in doctrine.
- The moderate position says *only* as a modern event in addressing the gospel Promise to man, not as doctrine.
- The conservative position says the Bible is revelation *only* when God speaks through the human writers with the same kind of exactness with which we are familiar in our day.

The Bible characterized by unity?

- The radical position says *only* in so far as the “exalted Christ” of the kerygma has some ties by a few thin threads to the historical Jesus.
- The mediating position says there is unity *only* in those passages which contain the Word of Promise.
- The conservative position says the Bible is characterized by Unity *only* when the contradictions which are part of the human quality of Scripture are set aside.

Is the Bible the final authority?

- The radical position says *only* for each individual in his personal “Christ event.”
- The moderate position says *only* in its ability to bring people to trust the Promise.
- The conservative position says *only* in the divine certitude which is the unbreakable validity of the gospel.

Does the Bible teach salvation by grace through faith in Christ?

- The radical position says *only* in the sense of “authentic existence.”
- The moderate position says *only* in the way each individual understands God’s Word of Promise.
- The conservative position says *only* as a book which reveals human weaknesses which are intertwined with this divine verity.



## Guard the Good Deposit

At the outset it was said that there is no question that the historical-critical method of interpretation is the prevailing method of Bible interpretation in most of the religious circles of our day. It should now be added that never before in the history of the church has Satan undermined both God's Word and the truth it teaches so quickly in the hearts of so many as he has with this method of interpretation.

Not only has the radical method of Bultmann spread through Catholicism, Protestantism and Lutheranism in Europe, but it has also made deep inroads in all three branches of Christianity in the U. S. The moderate position has infected and divided the Missouri Synod, and it has its adherents in the other large Lutheran church bodies and such churches as the Southern Baptists also. The conservative approach of Boer is the most recent form of the historical-critical method to raise its ugly head. It too has begun to find adherents in conservative circles.

We need to be aware of the sly approaches with which Satan is attacking the truth of God's Word in our day. Peter warns Christians to be alert because our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pe 5:8). His methods are not always out in the open for us to see plainly. Paul warns us that Satan will masquerade as an angel and his servants will masquerade as servants of righteousness (2 Cor 11:14, 15).

By God's grace we still have the "good deposit which was entrusted" to us, but Paul's urging that we "guard" it constantly "with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Tm 1:14) are words we obviously need to heed as much as when they were written to Timothy in the early days of the New Testament church.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Harry R. Boer, *The Bible and Higher Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Kaesemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1964), pp 19–20.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pp 36f.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp 49ff.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *This World And The Beyond* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p 133.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p 158.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p 374.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity In Its Contemporary Setting* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp 90, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Herman Otten, ed., *A Christian Handbook on Vital Issues* (New Haven, Missouri: Leader Publishing Co., 1973), pp 821–826.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p 802.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p 826.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p 826.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p 826.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p 826.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p 823.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p 824.

<sup>17</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1970, p 511.

<sup>18</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1969, p 766.

<sup>19</sup> *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 1970, p 49.

<sup>20</sup> Harry Boer, *The Bible and Higher Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p 77.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p 86.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p 97.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p 100f.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p 101.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p 104.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p 106.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p 109.

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<sup>31</sup> Ernst Kaesemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, p 45.

<sup>32</sup> H. Otten, ed., *A Christian Handbook on Vital Issues*, "Faithful To Our Calling—Faithful To Our Lord," p 824.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Kaesemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, p 31.