

HISTORICAL CRITICISM IN THE DOCK: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN GERMANY

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In Germany the intensity and fervor of the ongoing debate over the historical-critical method rises and falls with the emergence and disappearance of powerful, articulate spokesmen on one side or the other. In the NT discipline (to which I am restricting myself in this paper) Rudolf Bultmann brought the discussion to a fever pitch in the 1940s and 1950s, especially with his essay entitled "New Testament and Mythology." At the beginning of the 1980s Peter Stuhlmacher, 48-year-old Lutheran professor of NT at Tübingen, has emerged as the leading figure in the ongoing debate over the value and limits of historical criticism. Since 1971 a stream of essays relating to this problem has come from his pen. The first batch was gathered in 1975 into the volume *Schriftauslegung: Auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie*. One of these five essays was translated by Roy Harrisville and published as *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (1977). The essays continued after 1975. On the basis of his work in this area Stuhlmacher attained the privilege of writing the sixth Supplement to *Neues Testament Deutsch* on hermeneutics and the NT. This appeared in 1979 under the title *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik*. Thus here we have the ripest fruit of Stuhlmacher's reflection and a statement worthy of our consideration on this side of the Atlantic. My main concern here will be with this book.

But before examining Stuhlmacher's recent thought we should at least note that the critique of historical criticism in Germany is much more widespread than the limited concern with Stuhlmacher might suggest. It comes from at least three directions: conservative evangelicals outside the guild of university professors, Roman Catholic scholars, and what Stuhlmacher calls "positive critics" like himself—namely, the moderate NT scholars in the universities.

The two conservative evangelicals in Germany whose work has received greatest attention are Gerhard Maier, whose 1974 book was translated as *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, and Gerhard Bergmann, whose little book *Alarm um die Bibel* by 1974 had gone through five editions (but to my knowledge is not translated). I leave this branch of the German discussion on the periphery of this essay because Maier's work is familiar in English and I have already offered my assessment of it in *JETS* 22/1 (March 1979) 79-85.

The Catholic NT scholar Anton Vögtle has written: "It can scarcely be denied in the area of New Testament studies that not only the impulses toward new methods, but also the decisive questions and insights into the New Testament materials themselves . . . have had a protestant origin."¹ But twenty years after Pius XII issued the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, Siegfried Schulz observed that there had been a Catholic "storming of the protestant domain of

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¹A. Vögtle, "Fortschritt und Problematik der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft," in H. Vorgrimler, *Exegese und Dogmatik* (Mainz, 1962) 65-66.

Biblical interpretation, namely the so-called historical criticism."² So now, especially since Vatican II (*De Revelatione*), Rudolf Pesch can state as a matter of fact: "The historical critical method stands today also among Catholic exegetes as *the* appropriate method for the scholarly interpretation of Scripture."³

This development has had at least three effects on the debate concerning historical criticism.

1. Since, unlike Protestants, Catholic NT scholars are still bound in their exegetical conclusions about faith and morals by the official teaching of the Church they have been forced in part to criticize and modify the radical forms of historical criticism. Two outstanding examples would be "Exegese und Theologie des Neuen Testaments als Basis und Ärgernis jeder nach neutestamentlichen Theologie"⁴ by Otto Kuss of the University of Munich and "Der hermeneutische Horizont der historisch-kritischen Exegese"⁵ by Karl Lehmann at Mainz. This Catholic critique of the historical-critical method has had all the more effect since it is no longer being fired from outside the main scholarly arena.

2. A second effect of the Catholic stampede onto the Protestant field of historical criticism is that one of the most fervently espoused arguments for the method has been relativized—namely, the argument of Gerhard Ebeling, Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann that the historical-critical method is the hermeneutical corollary of the Reformation doctrine of *sola fidei* and therefore a uniquely Protestant phenomenon.⁶ It is not anachronistic to quote Bultmann at this point because as Stuhlmacher has just written: "Till this very day there is a whole line of exegetes who are of the opinion that no system of interpretation is better than that of Bultmann's."⁷ Bultmann's consistent and radical use of the historical-critical method was carried out under the catchword "demythologization." The justification for this method was primarily theological. He explained:

Demythologization is in fact a parallel task to the formulation of Paul and Martin Luther in their doctrine of justification by faith alone without works of law. More exactly, demythologization is the radical use of the doctrine of justification by faith in the area of knowing and thinking. Like the doctrine of justification, demythologization destroys every demand for security. There is no difference between security on the basis of good works and security which rests on objectifying knowledge. The one who believes in God must know that he stands as it were in a vacuum (quoted in VNT, 181).

But Stuhlmacher points out now that "in view of the ecumenical victory of historical criticism one can no longer maintain that the courage to undertake radical historical criticism springs from a specific doctrine of the protestant reformation" (VNT, 28).

²Cited in R. Pesch, *Neuere Exegese: Verlust oder Gewinn?* (Freiburg, 1968) 13.

³Ibid., 13.

⁴In J. Ernst, ed., *Schriftauslegung: Beiträge zur Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments und im Neuen Testament* (Paderborn, 1972) 359-408.

⁵In J. Schreiner, ed., *Einführung in die Methoden der biblischen Exegese* (Wurzburg, 1971) 40-80.

⁶Cf. R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York, 1958); G. Ebeling, "Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche," in *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen, 1962); E. Käsemann, "Vom theologischen Recht historisch-kritischen Exegese," *ZTK* 64 (1967) 259-281.

⁷P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen, 1979) 184. The page numbers in the text will refer to this volume (hereinafter VNT).

3. The third effect of widespread Catholic adoption of historical criticism is the renewal of serious dialogue between Protestant and Catholic exegetes with each side admitting its own hermeneutical quandaries as well as the strengths of the other side. Stuhlmacher has been at the front of this ecumenical effort, which has begun to achieve concrete results with the publication of the interconfessional *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, of which Stuhlmacher wrote the initial and model volume on Philemon.⁸ The methodological discussions leading up to the actual writing of the commentaries are found in four volumes of *Vorarbeiten*. Especially noteworthy is Volume 4 from 1972. Stuhlmacher's own critique and adaptation of the historical-critical method has been influenced by this ecumenical dialogue.

Apart from the conservative evangelicals and the Catholics, the moderate "positive critics" themselves have caused the greatest stir with their methodological critique. Of these Stuhlmacher is the chief spokesman but by no means the only one who has written on the issue. Those whose works we might have discussed (but will not) are Martin Hengel, Stuhlmacher's colleague at Tübingen; Ferdinand Hahn in Munich; Jürgen Roloff in Erlangen; Edward Schweizer, now at Zurich; and Leonhard Goppelt, who died in 1973 but whose posthumously published *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* is having a remarkable reception in Germany.

But we turn now to consider the recent hermeneutical reflections of Peter Stuhlmacher. By no means does this analysis include all the important elements of Stuhlmacher's position. It only attempts to show the direction he is going and some of the problems in getting there.

In 1978 Stuhlmacher wrote: "The question that presently drives me in my interpreting work is this: Can the church to which we belong still lay claim to the Bible as the basis for its confession and its preaching of Christ or must we put a question mark after every essential sentence of the Apostle's Creed and the gospel of Christ in order to be faithful to the truth?"⁹ He gives his own answer over against Bultmann as follows:

I gladly follow Bultmann and all others who call us to a proclamation of the Biblical gospel which really meets and touches men of today, but I cannot see why in this proclamation the gospel must be stripped of all its decisive contents. . . . Historically I can no longer agree that the message of Jesus' messianic claim, his substitutionary death for us, his resurrection and the hope of his coming Kingdom are merely subsequent expressions of faith or projections onto Jesus of pious wishes which have no historical experience or substance as a basis. I would say rather that in each of these cases real historical givens and experiences elicited and made legitimate the expressions of faith in the Biblical texts. . . . The expressions of faith (for example) concerning the virgin birth were not late hellenistic but early Jewish-Christian expressions, which stand in the O.T. messianic tradition but surpass it both in language and substance. In other words these texts invite us to worship and to reflect about the uniquely creative act of God in the miracle of the earthly appearance of Jesus in which the messianic promises for an "Immanuel" who would lead Israel back to God are fulfilled and at the same time completed. Why shouldn't I as an exegete and theologian accept this invitation?¹⁰

⁸P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* (Zürich: Benziger, 1975).

⁹P. Stuhlmacher, "Hauptprobleme und Chancen kirchlicher Schriftanslegung," *Theol. Beit.* 9/2 (1978) 63.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 62-64.

Thus Stuhlmacher with his own use of the historical-critical method has not seen it necessary to strip away any of the Creed's essentials. On the contrary he sees himself among those who would give the Church courage that its confession and gospel are true and critically defensible (cf. *VNT*, 22).

But Stuhlmacher is keenly aware that the widespread use of historical criticism has not in general led to such a constructive goal. On the contrary he admits that it is the "agony" of Protestant NT scholarship that one can easily find "two or three diametrically opposed answers to every important question, all of which claim to be scientific, that is, based on historical criticism and thus true" (*VNT*, 28, 209-210). In any other discipline that claims scientific status this state of affairs would be intolerable. The "extravagant theses" of mainline historical-critical exegesis have "made of the biblical canon a ruinous heap of hypothetical possibilities." It has "destroyed its own relevance" and aroused "uncertainty and skepticism" in the Church.¹¹ Some scholars, like Herbert Braun, Luise Schottroff and Dorothy Soelle, without leaving the theological faculties have followed what Adolf Schlatter in 1905 called an "atheistic method" to its logical conclusion and even rejected the reality of a transcendent, personal God. They have transferred the word "God" to refer in a socio-political sense to "the totality of our world not yet attained" (Soelle) or the humanistic ideal of neighbor love (Schottroff, Braun).

What then is this historical-critical method, which according to Stuhlmacher has created out of the NT a ruinous heap of possibilities but which when modified (not rejected) can discover and support the truth of all the essentials of historic Christian faith? Concerning Ernst Troeltsch's essay, "Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie" (1898),¹² Stuhlmacher says that it "offers a thus far unexcelled explanation of the structure of historical criticism."¹³

As an idealist who paid explicit debt to Hegel, Troeltsch insisted that his view of history was not atheistic. He says: "It is the essence of my view that it opposes historical relativism, which results from the historical method only for an atheistic or religiously skeptical attitude; my view demands that this relativism be replaced with a concept of history as the unfolding of the divine Reason" (*Vernunft*).¹⁴ In this idealistic view the totality and interconnectedness of history takes on a sovereign importance. One does not look beyond or above history for the divine reality. Rather, "the divine depth of the human spirit is being revealed in history."¹⁵ The immanency of history exhausts all of reality.

From this idealistic concept of history follow the three famous principles of the historical-critical method: (1) The principle of correlation—that is, of causal interconnectedness: If all of reality comes to expression only within history then, as Troeltsch says, "at no point does a change occur without preceding and following changes at other points, so that all that happens stands in constant correla-

¹¹P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1977) 74-76.

¹²Reprinted in G. Sauter, ed., *Theologie als Wissenschaft* (München, 1978) 105-127.

¹³Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 44-45.

¹⁴Stuhlmacher, *Theologie als Wissenschaft*, 122.

¹⁵Ibid.

tive connection, and must necessarily form a flow in which each and everything hangs together and every event stands in relation to the other."¹⁶ (2) The principle of analogy. If all events and appearances in history are thus interconnected, no event or appearance can be wholly unique. In every case there must at least be a kernel of similarity. Every past occurrence will have some analogy elsewhere in history that we can observe. (3) The principle of criticism—the passing of probability judgments upon the claims of historical records, on the basis of what is analogous to our present knowledge. To quote Ernst Troeltsch:

The analogy of what happens before our eyes and is found within us is the key to criticism. Illusions, alterations, construction of myths, deceit, factiousness which we see before our eyes are the means of recognizing such things in the traditions. The mark of probability for events which criticism can allow to have happened or not is agreement with normal, usual or often witnessed actions or circumstances as we know them. The observation of analogies between similar past events makes it possible for us to accord them probability and to interpret the unknown of one from what is known of the other.¹⁷

As Stuhlmacher observes, critical NT scholarship still moves within the shadow of Troeltsch (*VNT*, 24). Two quotes may illustrate. Of course, Bultmann: "The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect . . . [T]his closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural powers."¹⁸ Similarly Wolfhart Pannenberg: "There should be no talk of supernaturalism which is unacceptable for the critically oriented reason of the historian, because it arbitrarily cuts off historical investigation of immanent causes and analogies through the assertion of a transcendental intervention."¹⁹ In summary Stuhlmacher defines the historical (or historical-critical) method as "that procedure of historical scholarship developed in the wake of the enlightenment with whose help written historical traditions are methodically analyzed and subjected to the modern judgment of reason" (*VNT*, 22). It has been the goal of historical criticism to be methodologically communicable and accountable to the contemporary view of truth. Therefore in general the "judgment of reason" to which the traditions have been subject has been "the limited horizon in which all modern science moves, namely the *innerweltlichen Vernunft* (immanent rationality)."²⁰ Stuhlmacher also points out that in common parlance the term "historical-critical method" embraces not only the fundamental principles just discussed but also a wide array of individual submethods (text criticism; literary criticism; form criticism; word studies; general historical analyses; religious, social and psychological investigations; and so forth). We must keep in mind that these sub-

¹⁶Ibid., 108.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸R. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?", in *Existence and Faith* (Cleveland, 1960) 291-292.

¹⁹W. Pannenberg, *Grundfragen Systematischer Theologie* (Göttingen, 1967) 75.

²⁰H. Schlier, "Zur Frage: Wer ist Jesus?", in J. Grilka, ed., *Neues Testament und Kirche* (Freiburg, 1974) 361.

methods often share the limitations of the underpinning principles and may need to be corrected and broadened (*VNT*, 219-220).

Stuhlmacher attempts to find a middle way between the radical critics on the one hand, who are the heirs of Troeltsch, and the fundamentalists (or evangelicals) on the other, who reject the necessity of the historical-critical method in favor of what Gerhard Maier calls a historical-Biblical method in which the Bible is beyond the province of human criticism. He sees himself following in the tradition of Adolf Schlatter, who protested at the University of Tübingen fifty years ago against a "double misuse of the Bible." As Schlatter put it, on the one side "the Bible is forgotten, and to the extent that it cannot be forgotten, it is criticized, attacked and contradicted." On the other side the "Bible believers" who minimize the rigors of historical and critical Biblical study run the risk of "adapting the Bible to themselves and bending it to suit their own wishes. They fill the Bible with their own thoughts and then work them into a system."²¹ Stuhlmacher like Schlatter rejects the either/or.

The catch phrase under which Stuhlmacher develops his own hermeneutic is "*die Hermeneutik des Einverständnisses*." Roy Harrisville has translated this as "the hermeneutics of consent." Lest the mere phrase be misleading we should examine its most recent usage. So we turn to Stuhlmacher's explanation of his *Hermeneutik des Einverständnisses* in *VNT*.

Stuhlmacher apparently adopts the term *Einverständnis* from the emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, Hans Georg Gadamer. He writes:

In the epilogue to the third (and fourth edition) of *Truth and Method* Gadamer emphasizes . . . that real understanding of a tradition only presents itself on the basis of an *Einverständnis* (an agreement) with the tradition. . . . Thus Gadamer signals for the area of hermeneutics and understanding that a tradition will open itself more clearly, helpfully and deeply for the interpreter who says yes to it than will texts which one tries to understand without saying yes to their content (*VNT*, 199-200).

(Parenthetically I must express my regret that Stuhlmacher nowhere gives a precise definition of what he or Gadamer mean by "understanding." Thus it is almost impossible to know exactly what he means when he talks about "real understanding" or "deep understanding." One suspects that there is a mixture of cognition and evaluation in the term. In fact I think the greatest blight on all hermeneutical discussions today is a failure to define with exactness what we mean by the common terms "meaning," "real meaning," "deeper meaning," "understanding," "real understanding," "significance," "interpretation" and a dozen others. E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* is a book that, if only for its rigor of definition, we should all emulate. As for Stuhlmacher, the ambiguity remains but does not totally hinder our grasp of his thought.)

One might infer from what he just said about the need for "consent" that faith is a prerequisite for understanding Biblical texts. But Stuhlmacher vigorously denies this: "Awakening faith is God's prerogative alone. Therefore hermeneutics cannot presuppose faith as a principle of understanding." Within the hermeneutics of *Einverständnis* two guiding motives are legitimate:

²¹Cited in P. Stuhlmacher, "Adolf Schlatter als Bibelausleger," *ZTK* 75/4 (1978) 83.

The interpretation can be led either by an open, critical desire for insight into the message of the Bible or by the interest of faith in achieving precise historical information. . . . Whether one follows the historical interest in insight or the interest of faith in information, in both cases *Einverständnis* with the textual tradition of the Bible is preserved and the rule is kept that we do not have to practice a special hermeneutic of faith but rather a general hermeneutic that is appropriate to the Bible. *Einverständnis* with the texts is preserved because they were originally composed for the purpose of addressing and answering, in understandable speech, persons seeking information and direction concerning Jesus' messianic work of reconciliation and faith in him (VNT, 218-219).

Therefore the hermeneutics of consent does not imply that the question of truth is settled prior to the task of critical interpretation. Rather it implies that the commitment of faith, while not a prerequisite to understanding, is also not a scholarly liability that threatens an interpreter's *Wissenschaftlichkeit* (VNT, 200).

What the *Hermeneutik des Einverständnisses* does demand is "true openness and great interest" (VNT, 208). And herein lies Stuhlmacher's main criticism of the historical-critical method: It needs to relinquish its "insolent attitude of control,"²² which has made it "customary for critical exegesis all too quickly to view the reality spoken of in the Biblical text as antiquated and to seek for something behind what is presented instead of allowing that reality to stand with its own distinct, historical worth . . . as a challenge to our contemporary understanding of reality."²³ Stuhlmacher summons the historical critics to follow Paul Ricoeur's insight that textual understanding is first a self-understanding in terms of the text (VNT, 203). Historical criticism makes the mistake of critically adapting everything to itself instead of placing itself before the tradition and allowing itself to be put in question (VNT, 157). If our criticism is to avoid a narrow-minded, historical provincialism that screens out parts of reality, then we must "find our way to a new openness to the world, that is, a willingness to open ourselves anew to the claim of tradition, of the present and of transcendence."²⁴ This openness or willingness to sympathetically listen is the essence of what Stuhlmacher means by the *Hermeneutik des Einverständnisses*.

The crucial problem of the historical-critical method is that it becomes a "law unto itself" in exegesis. It becomes a kind of "historical critical biblicism"²⁵ that forgets that it is just as susceptible to criticism as are the Biblical texts and thus uncritically screens out many claims to truth and reality in the text. Stuhlmacher suggests the following: "To avoid such narrowings the . . . basic principles of Ernst Troeltsch should be broadened. Today we have to do no longer only with the principles of criticism, analogy, [and] historical correlation . . . , but in addition, in the interest of new observation in history, these . . . principles of understanding must be opened and broadened. I suggest, therefore, that we expressly take up into the principles of historical criticism the *Prinzip des Vernehmens*" [principle of perception, with explicit debt to Schlatter who said: "Science is first

²²Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 84.

²³Stuhlmacher, "Hauptprobleme," 60.

²⁴Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 84-85.

²⁵Stuhlmacher, "Hauptprobleme," 61.

to see, second to see, and third to see and again and again to see"²⁶—the principle, that is, of perceiving "phenomena and statements which seem to oppose or really impose the classical . . . [principles of criticism, analogy and correlation]. This principle of perception has long been employed in good, advancing historical work. By virtue of this principle of perception we will regain the possibility of discovering what is new and without analogy in history, and . . . the possibility of correcting and opening our customary scheme of correlation through new insights. The basic impulse behind this methodological suggestion is the desire to make an end of the scholarly attitude of prematurely presuming to know better than the (Biblical) text and the desire to promote a new search for the really life giving and life preserving powers in the tradition" (VNT, 219-220).

Note that Stuhlmacher's principle of perception does not replace but "broadens and opens" the critical principles of Troeltsch. A chief weakness of Stuhlmacher's hermeneutic, it seems to me, is that it does not explain the relationship of this principle of perception to the others. He notes that by this principle we may perceive realities that contradict what the other principles of criticism, analogy and correlation allow. But he does not explain how, in such a situation, we decide what is true. On what grounds should one opt for the reality allowed by the principle of perception rather than the reality allowed by the principle of analogy? Stuhlmacher's critique of historical criticism is powerful, but his failure to offer a precise alternative by which to determine what is true in historical documents leaves the reader with very little direction for doing history. On this count Daniel Fuller's book *Easter Faith and History* (1965) and his article "The Fundamental Presupposition of the Historical Method" (TZ 24 [1968] 93-101) are far more penetrating and methodologically helpful than Stuhlmacher's present position.

But to give Stuhlmacher the benefit of the doubt it may well be consistent with his epistemology and his view of faith that he does not try to supply a method by which what is true in the tradition can be demonstrated but instead tries to eliminate every methodological barrier that keeps a viable claim to truth from being heard. Therefore the picture Stuhlmacher uses to illustrate the process of interpreting Scripture is not that of a detective tracking down clues or a lawyer cross-examining a witness but rather a dialog or conversation. He says: "A Biblical hermeneutic cannot be emancipation from Scripture, but must be the opening of a conversation with the Bible, a conversation in which there is an effort to perceive and responsibly weigh what the texts say" (VNT, 30). In describing the dynamics of this dialog Stuhlmacher does not give criteria for knowing when truth is being spoken but only gives the kind of setting in which a genuine "yes" to the Biblical message might (by the grace of God) happen. He says:

In this dialog the . . . texts and the interpreter . . . stand before each other in a freedom from which authoritarian dictates are excluded. The . . . text offers its witness to truth for consideration and the interpreter probes this witness to truth with a sharpened truth-bound conscience; he can only and must only accept it when it persuades him. In this dialog . . . there is freedom with respect to the texts to say yes or no. . . . The issue is the basic question of the rights of truth, and this question, in accord with Biblical insight, can only be decided in a freedom of thought and conscience which allows room for agreement [*Zustimmung*] and rejection [*Ablehnung*] (VNT, 220-221).

²⁶A. Schlatter, "Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie," in *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik* (München, 1969 [orig. 1905]) 142.

Because one must preserve the freedom to say “no” to the text where its claim to truth does not persuade, Stuhlmacher, contrary to Gerhard Maier, cannot surrender the word “critical” in the phrase “historical-critical method.” To be sure he “opens and broadens” the scope of reality to which criticism can say “yes,” but he does not give a blanket “yes” to Scripture. He says, “Since the Biblical witness is historically many-layered, in part contradictory and, since the days of the NT, controversial, it is little help when contemporary pietists and Catholics assert that we must take the totality of Scripture seriously and not seek out a normative middle” (*VNT*, 217). The theological contradictions he has cited are the epistle of James and the sixth chapter of Hebrews over against Paul.²⁷ Erich Dinkler has written that “the presupposition of Biblical criticism is that Bible and Word of God or Holy Scripture and kerygma are not identical” (*RGG* 1, 1188). I think Stuhlmacher would rather say that criticism (in Dinkler’s sense of separating Word of God and Scripture) is the necessary corollary of the historical observation that there is some theological disunity in the Scriptures.²⁸ Thus Stuhlmacher must seek the essential message of the NT from which to determine the truth of the less essential claims. But Stuhlmacher’s center is not as narrow as Bultmann’s or Käsemann’s. He says, “By no means does the NT crumble into a hopeless plurality of diverging and mutually contradictory traditional statements. But neither does it present itself as a totality with no profile or tensions, in which every word and every writing possess the same worth. . . .” The NT writings “attain their inner unity in that they proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the messianic reconciler, whose work of reconciliation points forward to the dawn of the new creation. The Gospel of the reconciliation of God with his creation through the sending of the Messiah Jesus Christ is the heart of the NT” (*VNT*, 243).

In conclusion, the hermeneutical position of Peter Stuhlmacher places before evangelicals who espouse the infallibility of Scripture two alternatives. With Gerhard Maier one can make one’s starting point the unity and infallibility of Scripture and thus, on the basis of this presupposition, rule out the use of criticism, which is unnecessary and inappropriate when one is obviously sure that one is dealing only with infallible revelation. Or one can renounce this sort of epistemological fiat, which we deny to every other religion and to ourselves in every other area of life, and instead let our espousal of the total trustworthiness of the Bible stand or fall with the critical demonstration of its unity and truth. For myself the

²⁷P. Stuhlmacher, “Zum Thema: Biblische Hermeneutik,” *Theol. Beit.* 9/5 (1978) 226.

²⁸Stuhlmacher wants to make it plain that we speak of “God’s Word” in at least three different senses, so that it is not simply identical with or only distinct from Scripture: “Dieses Wort hat schon neutestamentlich eine mehrfache Gestalt. Zu unterscheiden sind (im Anschluss an A. Schlatters und O. Webers Überlegungen zu unserem Thema) wenigstens: ‘Das geschehene Wort,’ das aller menschlichen Bezeugung zuvor- und zugrundeliegt; im unserem Fall das Wort Gottes in Gestalt der Person Jesu Christi selbst. Dieses ‘geschehene Wort’ wird zum ‘bezeugten Wort,’ wenn die Jesusjünger oder Paulus Jesus Christus als Herrn und Versöhner bezeugen. Das Neue Testament ist die zum kirchlichen Kanon erhobene Niederschrift und Dokumentation dies ‘bezeugten Wortes’; in ihm ist ‘das geschehene Wort’ irdisch zugänglich und geschichtlich tradierbar geworden. ‘Das bezeugte Wort’ aber zielt darauf ab, dass es gehört und in der Verkündigung neuer Zeugen aufgenommen wird. ‘Das bezeugte Wort’ führt zum ‘verkündigten Wort,’ sei es im Form gezielter Missions- und Gemeinderverkündigung oder in Form des missionarischen Tatzeugnisses der Gemeinde insgesamt. ‘Das verkündigte Wort’ findet sein Legitimationsgrund im ‘bezeugten Wort’ der neutestamentlichen Autoren und gewinnt am ‘geschehene Wort,’ das Jesus Christus selber ist, in dem Masse Anteil, als Jesus Christus der Herr und Versöhner ist, der durch seine Zeugen ständig neu zu Wort und so zu seiner Herrschaft kommen will” (*VNT*, 46).

latter alternative offers the only way that accords with the revelation of God in and through real history and, therefore, against Maier²⁹ and with Stuhlmacher I vote "yes" for a humble and open criticism, without which I have no way of knowing whether any historical claims are true or not.

²⁹For an excellent critique of Maier along the same lines see Karl-Heiz Michel, "Die Bibel im Spannungsfeld der Wissenschaften," *Theol. Beit.* 10/5 (1979) 214-216. Maier, he says, proposes "a method which is stamped with very definite dogmatic presuppositions (*Vorentscheidungen*)" (215). Thus Maier argues methodologically: "It would be hard to understand if scholarly research and argument which dealt with divine revelation were subject to the same methodological laws as those to which the research which deals with nature or human history is subject" (*Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode* [Wuppertal, 1975] 50). Michel responds: "Thus the one reality, in which God has revealed himself—and it is the reality of nature and human history!—is rent asunder into a profane reality and a sacred supra-reality which are grasped in qualitatively different ways. Something very crucial is at stake here! I can't escape the idea that Maier here is trapped in the old bifurcation of reality into a scientifically closed world and a special, distinct world of the divine. Here tribute is still being paid to Kant, who ruled out a recognizable intervention of God into this world and assigned such realities to a different province. That an act of God in this world cannot be recognized with its means and methods is not a biblical but a Kantian doctrine!" (216).

"In today's theological situation we get help neither from an atheistic, a-theological method . . . nor from a method which is stamped by dogmatic presuppositions and which is very limited in its scholarly communicability. Both possibilities, seen historically, have an agnostic background, which a method appropriate to the Bible simply does not need. There is a pressing necessity to get beyond these two false alternatives if there is to be any advance in biblical scholarship and theology" (216).