

## THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD: EGYPTIAN GOLD OR PAGAN PRECIPICE?

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After thirty-four years the Evangelical Theological Society has decided to address in a full annual meeting the question of historical and Biblical criticism. Some feel that the more direct attention is long overdue. Others are uneasy, fearing that an unhealthy compromise borne by the winds of modernity is in the offing.

Rather than present a new theory, I want to summarize and to offer an opinion and a challenge to evangelicals in this crucial and volatile area. I want to ask a simple question. This question is not mine alone, but one that I believe is raised by this hour in the history of the Evangelical Theological Society. The way the question is answered is very important for the future of the Society as well as for evangelical Biblical scholarship in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Before I state the question, permit me to refer to a well-known text from Augustine. In his work *On Christian Doctrine* he comments on the Christian use of certain ideas from pagan philosophies by drawing an analogy based on the exodus of Israel from Egypt:

If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use. Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use. They did not do this on their own authority, but at God's commandment, while the Egyptians unwittingly supplied them with things which they themselves did not use well. In the same way all the teachings of the pagans contain not only simulated and superstitious imaginings and grave burdens of unnecessary labor, which each one of us leaving the society of pagans under the leadership of Christ ought to abominate and avoid, but also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth, and some most useful precepts concerning morals. . . . These are, as it were, their gold and silver, which they did not institute themselves, but dug up from certain mines of divine Providence, which is everywhere infused, and perversely and injuriously abused in the worship of demons. When the Christian separates himself in spirit from their miserable society, he should take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Now for my question: Is the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture "Egyptian gold" that, though everywhere "perversely and injuriously abused," ultimately derives from the "mines of divine Providence"? Or is the method part of those "grave burdens" and "superstitious imaginings" of the pa-

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, 40.60.

gans, which "each one of us leaving the society of pagans under the leadership of Christ ought to abominate and avoid"? Is the historical-critical method Egyptian gold or a pagan precipice?

Within the evangelical community there are two opposite responses to this question. Some stress the adverse conclusions to the orthodox Christian faith that practitioners of the method abundantly evidence and advocate the strong repudiation of historical-critical methodology. Thus one prominent evangelical declares that "orthodoxy and the historical-critical method are deadly enemies that are antithetical and cannot be reconciled without the destruction of one or the other."<sup>2</sup>

Other evangelicals, however, emphasize that the method has been abused by radical critics who have imported unjustifiably into the approach presuppositions that are alien to the Christian faith. These evangelical critics believe in appropriating the tools of historical criticism within the commitment to Scripture as the fully trustworthy divine Word of God. Thus one who represents this point of view makes the following appeal:

Evangelicalism, in order to recapture the priority of Scripture, [ought to] embrace wholeheartedly the critical and historical approach to the study of the biblical texts—in short, employ critical method—as a first step toward a recovery of vital faith and a capacity to confront the modern world. . . . Our position is that, given a better understanding of the nature of historical-critical study and an adequate critique of certain modern manifestations, the method itself is ideally suited to enhancing our understanding of Scripture and, more important, our appropriation of its message.<sup>3</sup>

Are these two viewpoints mutually incompatible? This paper argues that they need not be. Given a more precise understanding of the origins of the historical-critical method together with a rejection of its negative features, it is possible for those who utilize historical-critical methods under the critique of an inerrant Scripture and those who do not to mutually, critically and tolerantly work together in the same scholarly fraternity for the edification of the Church.

## I. ORIGINS OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

A search into the origins of modern Biblical criticism reveals an interesting phenomenon. There appears to be a dual source traceable to Renaissance humanism on the one hand and the literal sense of Scripture emphasized by the sixteenth-century reformers on the other.<sup>4</sup> In the patristic era, with few exceptions

<sup>2</sup>H. Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 82; cf. also J. W. Montgomery, *Christianity Today* 21 (1977) 1140; "The Fuzzification of Biblical Inerrancy," *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville: Nelson, 1978) 220-222; "Why Has God Incarnate Suddenly Become Mythical?," *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (ed. K. S. Kantzer and S. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); R. D. Preus, "May the Lutheran Theologian Legitimately Use the Historical-Critical Method?," *Occasional Papers* (Milwaukee: Affirm, Spring 1973) 31-38.

<sup>3</sup>R. W. Lyon, "Evangelicals and Critical Historical Method," *Interpreting God's Word for Today: An Inquiry into Hermeneutics from a Biblical Theological Perspective* (ed. W. McCown and J. E. Massey; Warner, 1982) 136-137.

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted here to E. Krentz, *Historical Critical Method*, chap. 2 ("The Rise of Historical Criticism"). Krentz is dependent on A. Richardson and K. Scholder. Cf. also R. Lyon, "Evangelicals" 137-138.

the historical investigation of Scripture was all but eclipsed by a form of dogmatic criticism. This magisterium of dogma over the Bible's literal-historical sense was classically expressed by Vincent of Lerins as *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ob omnibus creditum est* ("what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all").<sup>5</sup>

The Renaissance brought a new sense of freedom to read and explore the sources of traditions and thought. Printing made texts available to all for study. The story is well-known. In its wake a new spirit of free inquiry based on the right of private conscience was set loose. As historian Ronald Wells points out, "[The Renaissance] offered a methodology by which persons could challenge 'authority' in any realm of life. First artists, then literary critics, then historians, then theologians, and finally political thinkers used a method whereby they could rebel against the authority of the 'medieval synthesis'."<sup>6</sup> Thus ecclesiastical authority over thought and education was broken.

The reformers also imbibed this new spirit. They desired to use the philological tools of Greek and Hebrew supplied by the humanists to aid them in their search for the literal sense of Scripture, which they could use to counter the errant traditions of the Church. Luther, for example, "used all the means that the humanists had developed to discover this literal sense: Hebrew and Greek philology, the Erasmus Greek Testament, and the historical background of a book."<sup>7</sup> The literal sense was clear and open to all, and it was this literal-historical sense where the Holy Spirit worked, not in the ecclesiastical traditions or the immediate inner experience of the enthusiasts.

But what happens when two persons with different interpretations both claim they have the plain meaning of the Bible?

Luther and Melanchthon appealed to the principle of Christ and the gospel, while Erasmus argued for the superior sense by reason. Calvin, Zwingli and especially Matthias Flacius Illyricus sought the historical sense—i.e., the sense that it conveyed to its original readers—as the literal sense. "Apparent contradiction," Flacius argued, "can be resolved if one observes carefully the Bible's purpose (*scopus*) and uses the *analogia fidei* as a guide."<sup>8</sup> Many of the reformers seem to have practiced a truly historical interpretation. "One decides between variant interpretations by looking at the intention of the texts, understood either as the Gospel (Luther) or the *analogia fidei* (the analogy of faith, Flacius)."<sup>9</sup> The reformers gave expression to this new freedom from traditions while at the same time providing checks to a freedom that threatened to be uncontrollable.

It was only a matter of time, however, until this freedom of inquiry unrestricted by Church traditions would turn not only to the fields of philosophy and the sciences but also to Scripture itself. Edgar Krentz points out that at the beginning of the seventeenth century the Bible was the universal authority in all fields of knowledge but that by the end of the century that authority was deeply eroded.

<sup>5</sup>Cited by Krentz, *Historical* 7.

<sup>6</sup>R. A. Wells, "Francis Schaeffer's Jeremiad," *Reformed Journal* 32 (1982) 17.

<sup>7</sup>Krentz, *Historical* 9.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

In science as well as in history, knowledge was now derived by induction from the actual evidence without reference to the Bible. The new data obtained by this empirical inductive method was often at variance with the traditional interpretation of Scripture. Even Luther complained about Copernicus' heliocentric view of the solar system and branded the scientist as "an old fool," because, Luther argued, anyone could plainly see that the Bible taught that the sun rose and set.<sup>10</sup>

In Robert Lyon's analysis, two further more precise antecedents to the historical-critical method may be identified. They are rooted in the methodical and thoroughgoing skepticism of Descartes (d. 1650) and the enlightenment of the eighteenth century. For Descartes nothing is true simply because it is in the tradition. One must doubt everything except what is so evident to reason that it cannot be doubted. Reason becomes for Descartes the sole criterion of truth. For the radical Cartesians even religion and Scripture itself are subject to reason. In the latter half of the seventeenth century Descartes's methods of thoroughgoing critical principles and systematic skepticism developed into what R. G. Collingwood dubbed "Cartesian historiography." Paul Hazard adds that this approach, because it builds on reason, proceeded from within, from the subjective. Thus the two factors of skepticism and subjectivity emerge from Descartes. All subsequent historical investigation is Cartesian in character. So the word "critical" in the expression "historical-critical method" is basically tautological.<sup>11</sup>

The second more precise antecedent to the modern historical method is the eighteenth-century enlightenment. Throughout its many varieties of expression the enlightenment influence is seen in its insistence on separating investigation and thought from any reference to God and supernatural revelation. In historical research all causation was to be found within history and the historical process, apart from resorting to talk of divine activity. Krentz summarizes the period in these words:

The rationalist Enlightenment radicalized the claim of reason. In this division Orthodox theology lost its foundations in history. The cleft between reason and history triumphed among the learned—including the theologians—and removed the basis of orthodoxy's epistemology. Few orthodox scholars learned historical method without taking over rationalist antisupernaturalism.<sup>12</sup>

The nineteenth century saw the full application to Biblical studies of the Cartesian historical skepticism, the inner subjectivity of reason's authority, and the strict separation of historical concerns from transcendence. This is the point at which Biblical studies shifted to the universities. Again Krentz captures the essence of the period:

It is difficult to overestimate the significance the nineteenth century has for biblical interpretation. It made historical criticism the approved method of interpretation. The result was a revolution of viewpoint in evaluating the Bible. The Scriptures were, so to speak, secularized. The biblical books became historical documents to be studied and questioned like any other ancient sources. The Bible was no longer the criterion for the writing of history; rather history had become the criterion for under-

<sup>10</sup>Cited by S. L. Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University Press, 1978) 46.

<sup>11</sup>Lyon, "Evangelicals" 139.

<sup>12</sup>Krentz, *Historical* 21-22.

standing the Bible. The variety in the Bible was highlighted; its unity had to be discovered and could no longer be presumed. The history it reported was no longer assumed to be everywhere correct. The Bible stood before criticism as defendant before judge. This criticism was largely positivist in orientation, imminentist in its explanations, and incapable of appreciating the category of revelation.<sup>13</sup>

Here and there a voice was raised against this "critical" enlightenment mentality such as that of Martin Kähler or Adolf Schlatter. But until recently the post-enlightenment exclusion of the supernatural in critical examination has reigned supreme.

Permit me to sum up this brief and superficial survey of the roots of modern Biblical criticism and to suggest how it may be possible from this background to understand both the growing polarization in the evangelical community as well as the current crisis in the larger Christian community.

In the first place, one root of modern criticism goes back to the reformers. Their emphasis on literal interpretation led them to search for the author's intention, which was for them located in the historical, philological and grammatical sense. Admittedly this method was borrowed from the Renaissance humanists. In this sense it was secular. It was used, however, under the control of the Biblical doctrine of the plenary divine inspiration of Scripture and subordinated to the ancient principle that Scripture is its own best interpreter. The method brought into being a wealth of Biblical theologies that (unlike the theologies of today) had an essential unity and reinforced the early Church's rules of faith and creedal formulations.

Thus there is a sense, I believe, in which the historical-critical method has attempted to explore the literal meaning of Biblical texts—i.e., the meaning it conveyed to its original readers. In this sense critical scholarship stands in the Reformation tradition. Likewise it is possible to view the tools that have come to the fore as helpful means that may be utilized to elucidate the Biblical author's intended sense. It is at this point, in my opinion, that many evangelicals are quite zealous to affirm with adequate qualification some form of critical-historical interpretation. Thus the recent *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* forged by a hundred evangelical scholars from North America and England and representing many Church traditions states in Article XVI: "We affirm that legitimate critical techniques should be used in determining the canonical text and its meaning." And again in Article XIII it declares: "We affirm that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis, and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study."<sup>14</sup>

Significant numbers of evangelical scholars find historical-critical approaches to the interpretation of Scripture, when adequately qualified, to be fully compatible with the Reformation emphasis on the literal-historical sense of the Bible.

This is not the whole story, however. And this is my second point in summarizing the roots of modern criticism. Scholarly Biblical investigation along the lines practiced by the majority of critical scholars is in some sort of crisis. While

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>14</sup>"The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," issued November 13, 1982. Published in *JETS* 25 (December 1982) 397-401.

Walter Wink and Gerhard Maier probably have prematurely written the obituary notice for the historical-critical method, certain currents in the modern scholarly guild betray a serious problem.<sup>15</sup> Just what that problem is finds a variety of analyses whether we turn to Brevard Childs, Peter Stuhlmacher, Roland Frye, James Smart, Hans Frei or Gerhard Hasel.

In his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature two years ago, Bernhard Anderson has correctly, I believe, put his finger on one aspect of the current crisis by locating it in the context of Biblical theology. He comments: "If I am not mistaken . . . , disagreement is over the question as to whether primary theological emphasis should be placed on the tradition *process* or on the final *result* of the process, scripture." Perhaps Anderson is even closer to the heart of the issue in these remarks:

It is precisely the historical character of the biblical texts which is still the issue, and inescapably related to this is the problem of faith and history or, in the terms of Emil Fackenheim, God's presence and activity in the historical realm. Historical methodology has built-in limitations which make it inadequate for dealing with the biblical witness to transcendence or to divine activity in the historical sphere; but it is a necessary tool for those in the community of faith who take the historical character of the biblical texts seriously.<sup>16</sup>

Anderson perceives the inadequacy of the enlightenment view of history, which excluded the supernatural, to handle the nature of Biblical documents that are so evidently filled with references to transcendence. This is the problem of antisupernaturalism, which is rooted in the arbitrary exclusion of God from history.

But there seems to be a deeper level to the problem to which Anderson does not allude. Carl F. H. Henry is closer to the root of the crisis when he observes that "the contemporary crisis of the historical-critical method is the crisis of biblical authority."<sup>17</sup> Likewise James Olthius concludes that "the current crisis in biblical scholarship revolves around the suspicion that no amount of scientific-historical critique can decide the basic question of scriptural authority."<sup>18</sup>

The whole issue of Biblical authority is quite important. The subject has surfaced in scholarly critical circles after a considerable hiatus.<sup>19</sup> For the immediate purpose of these remarks I want to ask simply how this crisis in Biblical authority arose. If I have understood something of the flow of the history of Biblical criticism, the following perceptions emerge.

<sup>15</sup>W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973); G. Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977).

<sup>16</sup>B. W. Anderson, "Tradition and Scripture in the Community of Faith," *JBL* 100 (1981) 7, 20.

<sup>17</sup>C. F. H. Henry, presentation in a seminar on the "Authority of the Bible" held in conjunction with the San Diego Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, March 1982; cf. also D. Bloesch, "Challenge Facing the Churches," *Christianity Confronts Modernity* (ed. P. Williamson and K. Perrotta; Ann Arbor: Servant, 1981) 208-209.

<sup>18</sup>J. Olthius, "On Interpreting an Authoritative Scripture: A Proposal for a Certitudinal Hermeneutic" (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, May 1981).

<sup>19</sup>See P. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

1. *The demise of Biblical theology.* The historical-critical approach to Scripture has tended to drive a wedge between the historical and theological. Historical concerns dominated Biblical studies and left theology in the wings until the early twentieth century.

2. *Cognitive divine truth abandoned.* When theological concerns about Biblical authority emerged once again in Barth, scientific criticism had devastated any confidence in the inerrancy of the literal-historical sense of the text. Allegedly numerous errors in the historical as well as the theological teaching of Scripture forced Barth and subsequent scholars to shift the focus of authority away from the cognitive truth content of the Biblical teaching and to locate God's authority somewhere else than in the literal-historical text of Scripture.

This modern consensus leads James Barr to confidently affirm that "scripture is errant and fallible, or more correctly, that historical accuracy or infallibility is not a concern of scripture itself at all, but is rather something imported from Protestant tradition and imposed upon scripture." Thus Barr wants to locate authority not in the truth affirmations of the texts but in the inspiration of the community.<sup>20</sup> Raymond E. Brown, though more chastened in his views by his allegiance to the Roman magisterium, nevertheless states that "the twentieth century has produced indisputable evidence of historical inaccuracies in the Bible." These inaccuracies are not limited to historical matters but "critical investigation points to religious limitations and even religious errors." Brown, then, seeks to locate the authority of the Bible in its "salvific purpose" and argues that "everything in Scripture is inerrant to the extent to which it conforms to the salvific purpose of God"<sup>21</sup>—a view not unlike G. C. Berkouwer's and that proposed by Rogers and McKim.<sup>22</sup> The problem with this solution for religious authority is the impossibility of determining which teaching of Scripture is "salvific" and which is not.

3. *Fragmentation.* John Culp has pointed out that as a result of the way historical-critical studies have proceeded a fragmentation of the materials has resulted. One attempt to overcome that fragmentation has been the various excursions into the prehistory of the text. Culp points out that "in the first instance, an awareness developed that textual units often had a history even before they were written. On the other hand, the presence of a written text in different historical settings brought the awareness that the meaning of a text changes when its context changes. The conclusion was that the attempt to determine a single meaning for a passage in a positivistic manner was impossible. Instead, a history of meanings was necessary."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Barr, *Scope* 88, 125.

<sup>21</sup>R. E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 15, 16, 19.

<sup>22</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper, 1979).

<sup>23</sup>J. Culp, "The Impact of Modern Thought upon Biblical Interpretation," in McCown and Massey, eds., *Interpreting* 119.

The author's intention even when it can be determined is no longer accepted as the only way to resolve the question about the meaning of a passage and hence its authority. In this pluralism of meanings who or what can decide which meaning is authoritative? Thus Anderson denies that we should put the final authority in the canonical form of the text. The later form of the tradition could possibly "blur, obscure, or reverse the theological perception of an earlier stage." This leaves the final text with "only a relative claim to authority, especially in the community of faith which reads scripture in the expectation of hearing the Word of God."<sup>24</sup>

A more salutary solution, on the other hand, is Brevard Childs' proposal to affirm the canonical unity of the final text of Scripture and to do exegesis within the context of the believing Church tradition. It has much to commend it.<sup>25</sup> It is still unclear, however, as to just where Childs stands on the matter of historical exegesis.<sup>26</sup>

In any event, the current use of the historical-critical method even in the hands of its most responsible practitioners has led to historical-theological schizophrenia, while the articulation of an adequate basis for religious authority flounders. It is this uncertain side of the historical-critical enterprise that has damaged its credibility for many evangelicals.

Let me conclude this section by listing five objectionable features of radical criticism:

1. *Historical skepticism.* The unjustified assumption is that the Biblical text is errant until proved right rather than the opposite.

2. *Antisupernaturalism.* The exclusion on principle of supernatural causation in history is arbitrary.

3. *Separation of history and theology.* Sundering theological affirmation from historical event in the Biblical records denies the reality of divine revelation in history and in the writings.

4. *Denial of the unity of Scripture.* There is no need for an emphasis on diversity to the point of affirming self-contradiction within the canon without any affirmation of an overarching unity of truth.

5. *Noncognitivism of divine revelation.* An unwarranted rejection of cognitive divine truth content in Scripture as the essential basis of Biblical religion is unnecessary.

Evangelicals are pointing out and calling for a correction of these assumptions and of the abuses of the historical method. Also, a number of scholars who stand

<sup>24</sup>Anderson, "Tradition" 18, 20.

<sup>25</sup>B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

<sup>26</sup>J. Piper, "The Authority and Meaning of the Christian Canon: A Response to Gerald Sheppard on Canon Criticism," *JETS* 19 (1976) 87-96.

squarely within the radical critical guild are offering various critiques of at least the first three of these objectionable features.<sup>27</sup> This welcome turn may show that the method is capable of self-correction and offer some hope that the use of the tools may be more compatible with the historic Church's understanding of Christian faith.

## II. THE EVANGELICAL AND THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Where are evangelicals in all this? It would be difficult to sketch a full spectrum of views on this issue among those who call themselves evangelicals since there is always a question as to just who is an evangelical. Perhaps it is less confusing to limit our discussion at this point to members of ETS since we share a common basis for doing our exegesis and theology—namely, the inerrancy of Scripture. I alluded earlier to the polarity among evangelicals over the issue. Within the Society are those who repudiate the historical-critical enterprise as hopelessly intertwined with rationalistic and anti-Christian presuppositions. On the other hand, there are many members who zealously utilize certain tools of modern scholarship as fully compatible with Reformation principles and their commitment to Biblical inerrancy. How can we explain this sharp difference?

In this presentation I have argued that the modern historical-critical method has dual roots. One track leads back to the reformers' search for the literal sense as the meaning that yields the Word of God. Another path connects with Cartesian skepticism and enlightenment historicism and antisupernaturalism. Some members see only the negative path and have advocated the repudiation of the whole modern historical-critical enterprise. Others within the Society focus on the positive features of philological, cultural, historical, literary and archaeological studies and on the tools of historical criticism. They welcome these as aids either to understand the meaning of the canonical text itself or to appreciate the nature of the documents through a more precise understanding of the history of their formation. Such scholars critically rework the method and repudiate the radical criticism of certain other scholars. They seek to enhance the reformers' concerns through their studies.

Why should there be a polarization if each side recognizes the concerns of the other? Grant Osborne, a member of ETS, uncovers the main issue when he says:

Both sides of the . . . dialogue are in agreement on one basic issue: that critical tools are meant to elucidate the meaning of the text rather than to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic pericopae. The skepticism and negative historiography of the radical critics are unwarranted and invalid. The debate centers on the tools themselves: Are they part and parcel with the negative presuppositions? Those who argue "yes" say that the tools were developed by the negative critics and cannot be used apart from the a priori of their creators. This, however, can be challenged.<sup>28</sup>

The "tools" to which Osborne refers would be the methodologies of source, form, redaction, tradition and audience criticism among others. The question is not

<sup>27</sup>See Krentz, *Historical* 68-69; Anderson, "Tradition" 19, 20; P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 127-136.

<sup>28</sup>G. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism," *JETS* 22 (1979) 309.

whether the tools are neutral in themselves but whether they can be transformed under the influence of different presuppositions that reflect the reformers' concern for the literal sense. Believing this is possible, a number of scholars within the Society are currently devoting their energies to this task.<sup>29</sup> But are we heading in the right direction?

At this point I commend to you two highly respected pacesetters within the evangelical scholarly movement of our generation. Both were previous presidents of ETS.

The first is the late Ned B. Stonehouse of Westminster Theological Seminary. Stonehouse was a giant of a scholar. Furthermore, he was fully committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. In his various works on the synoptic gospels he attempted to carefully analyze the nature of the gospel accounts.<sup>30</sup> In many respects he genuinely anticipated the later critical research known as redaction criticism. Yet Stonehouse did his analyses under a disciplined framework that reinforced his goal of strengthening confidence in the historical reliability of the gospels. A careful study of Stonehouse's method and contributions has been made by Moises Silva,<sup>31</sup> who concludes his study by summarizing Stonehouse's principles: (1) careful scholarship, (2) unabashed reaffirmation of the objective, historical basis of Christian faith while at the same time allowing the Biblical documents themselves to teach us their views of history, and (3) the reminder that responsible exegesis takes place only when we submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture and thereby become responsive to the divine counsel. Silva adds:

Stonehouse is not completely invulnerable to criticism, and his memory would not be honored by an uncritical acceptance of his formulations. In effect, his brilliant work calls us to stand on his shoulders and thus make further advances in our understanding of this critical issue. As we proceed, however, let us pay heed to the principles Stonehouse has taught us.<sup>32</sup>

The second model I would commend to you is Carl F. H. Henry's penetrating analysis of "The Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism." I recommend it to every scholar in our Society. In my opinion Henry's position represents a centrist view that the Society can fruitfully and safely follow into a new era of its work. Henry analyzes the position of some dozen or so conservative and evangelical

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.; cf. also G. Osborne, "Redaction Criticism and the Great Commission: A Case Study Toward a Biblical Understanding of Inerrancy," *JETS* 19 (1976) 73-85; "The Evangelical and *Traditionsgeschichte*," 21 (1978) 117-130; "John 12: Test Case for History and Redaction in Resurrection Narratives," *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, JSOT; R. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); R. Morosco, "Redaction Criticism and the Evangelical: Matthew 10 a Test Case," *JETS* 22 (1979) 323-332; R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); G. V. Smith, "Structure and Purpose in Genesis 1-11," *JETS* 20 (1977); G. L. Carr, "The Old Testament Love Songs and Their Use in the New Testament," *JETS* 24 (1981).

<sup>30</sup>N. B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (Presbyterian Guardian, 1944); *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (Tyndale, 1951); *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Eerdmans, 1962).

<sup>31</sup>M. Silva, "Ned B. Stonehouse and Redaction Criticism: Part I: The Witness of the Synoptic Evangelists to Christ"; "Part II: The Historicity of the Synoptic Tradition," *WTJ* 40 (1978) 77-88; 281-303.

<sup>32</sup>Silva, "Stonehouse" 302.

scholars on this issue. He points out strengths and weaknesses of each. Significantly, he faults Harold Lindsell's cavalier dismissal of historical criticism and his simultaneous embrace of the results of textual criticism because it gives us an errorless text as exaggerated on both counts. Henry asks, "Does Lindsell really intend to align biblical investigation with an unhistorical, uncritical approach that in the final analysis could only discredit evangelical scholarship?"<sup>33</sup> With regard to historical criticism itself, Henry states:

What is objectionable is not the historical-critical method, but rather the alien pre-suppositions to which neo-protestant scholars subject it. [The] combination of the method with an antisupernaturalistic bias reflects not a requirement of the method but a prejudice of the historian. . . . There is no reason to allow scholars absolutely to redefine the term *critical* so that it coincides with historical and hermeneutical skepticism.<sup>34</sup>

Among evangelicals he feels that Robert Lyon is too far to the left and Robert Preus too far to the right on this issue: "The former defines historical criticism's serviceability in a way that needlessly compromises evangelical concerns, while the latter excludes its use in a manner that needlessly forfeits the indirect supports it can give to biblical history." Nevertheless Henry argues that "freed from the arbitrary assumptions of critics who manipulate it in a partisan way, the method is neither destructive of biblical truth nor useless to Christian faith; even though its proper role is a limited one, it is highly serviceable as a disciplined investigative approach to past historical events. . . . The task of historical criticism is to hear the claims of the Bible and to weigh them on merit."<sup>35</sup>

Henry, like Stonehouse, wants to keep historical-critical investigation under the magisterial authority of an inerrant Scripture. His ten guidelines for a correct use of historical criticism are particularly significant:

1. Historical criticism is not inappropriate to, but bears relevantly on, Christian concerns.
2. Historical criticism is never philosophically or theologically neutral.
3. Historical criticism is unable to deal with questions concerning the supernatural and miraculous.
4. Historical criticism is as relevant to miracles, insofar as they are historical, as to nonmiraculous historical events.
5. Historical criticism cannot demonstrably prove or disprove the factuality of either a biblical or a nonbiblical historical event.
6. To assume the unreliability of biblical historical testimony—or of Xenophon's *Anabasis* or Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*—in order to believe only what is independently or externally confirmed, unjustifiably discounts the primary sources.
7. Discrimination of biblical events as either historically probable or improbable is not unrelated to the metaphysical assumptions with which a historian approaches the data.
8. A historian's subjective reversal of judgment concerning the probability or im-

<sup>33</sup>C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1979), 4. 393.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 393, 392.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 401.

probability of an event's occurrence does not alter the objective factuality or nonfactuality of the event.

9. Although the historian properly stresses historical method, he is not as a person exempt from claims concerning supernatural revelation and miraculous redemptive history, for the historical method is not man's only source of truth.

10. Biblical events acquire their meaning from the divinely inspired Scriptures; since there could be no meaning of events without the events, an inspired record carries its own intrinsic testimony to the factuality of those events.<sup>36</sup>

With the example and the guiding principles forged out by these two pacesetters—Stonehouse the exegete and Henry the theologian—this Society of evangelical scholars may light the way out of the contemporary crisis in historical-critical studies by pointing to a more adequate basis for Biblical authority on which truly Christian theologies may be constructed.

### III. CONCLUSION: A PLEA FOR EVANGELICAL UNITY AND DIALOGUE

In conclusion let me return to the earlier reference to Augustine. In this presentation I have argued that the historical-critical method is neither Egyptian gold nor pagan precipice. Rather, it is both. Historical criticism is a secular enterprise. It is not thereby condemned, for as Augustine rightly perceived, "wherever truth is found, it is the Lord's."<sup>37</sup> The reformers saw its extreme value and eagerly appropriated it as a servant to ascertain the meaning of the inspired Word. In the course of history, however, historical criticism has also suffered abuse in the hands of many. A serious question may be raised as to whether the conclusions that have thus been generated flow consistently from the method. Instead, at times these conclusions become a spurious appeal adduced to legitimize specious generalizations at the whim of certain interpreters. This abusive practice of historical criticism is a pagan precipice and ought to be rejected as alien to the nature of Holy Scripture.

The challenge of the hour calls Christian scholars to careful discrimination, scrupulous criticism of our personal presuppositions and methodologies, humility in the face of our limited knowledge, and a patient, loving, yet penetrating analysis of the attempts of our colleagues to bring historical criticism to the aid of a believing interpretation of the Biblical materials. We must not, by opposing a believing use of historical-critical techniques, make the position of rationalism and atheism more attractive than it really is. Nor ought we to enshrine tradition instead of Scripture by a noncritical approach.

Donald Hagner, in a well-balanced article on the gospels, presents evangelicals with a painfully provocative question and a serious challenge:

Evangelicalism, as I see it, is the attempt to hold to authentic and Biblical (that is, orthodox) Christianity while being open to and entering into the world of scholarship and its methodologies. The evangelical of course cannot accept the vitiating and unsubstantiated presuppositions of modern scholarship. But there is also much truth in modern scholarship, as any reasonable person can see. And if the evangelical does not reach out and affirm the truth that is there, thus showing that the truth of schol-

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>37</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, 18.28.

arship is not necessarily inimical to the faith of orthodox Christianity, who will? This is the challenge that faces evangelicalism.<sup>38</sup>

This is the challenge that can most appropriately be taken up by ETS at the close of the twentieth century. We are an organization where the current use and assumptions of the historical-critical method are not a foregone conclusion that everyone accepts uncritically as the "orthodox" method. In our Society are those who would rightly warn us against the danger of unbelief expressed in our methods and against the altogether too easy capitulation to the undesirable aspects of modernity. Yet we are also a Society where those who are involved in the refinement of critical methodologies under the magisterium of an inerrant scriptural authority can move us gently into a deeper appreciation of sacred Scripture and its full appropriation to our lives and to the mission of the Church in our age.

I see this healthy, tolerant tension as the hope of our scholarly Society and as the dynamic that will enable us to serve Jesus Christ our Lord and his whole Church in the most fruitful way in the years to come. My plea is for unity (not uniformity) and true evangelical ecumenicity in this important area of our work.

<sup>38</sup>D. A. Hagner, "Interpreting the Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest," *JETS* 24 (1981) 38.