

HIGHER CRITICISM AND THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA (ELCA)

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In this age of "over-stimulated and undernourished minds" we are told that traditional doctrinal differences really do not and should not matter any longer. And we might ask, "Is it true?" Can we afford the "luxury" of theological fussiness in the face of global crisis? How can we not band together with all churches on a broad basis to combat the common foe? Is it anachronistic and irrelevant to hold out for the proper understanding of the real presence when vast masses question not the sacrament or even the Bible, but the very existence of God? Who can grasp and appreciate the doctrine of fellowship in an age when throngs clutch at the straws of the increasingly bizarre forms of "pop-religiosity" ranging all the way from TV evangelists to the superstitious search for answers and solutions in New Age movement religions?

Today when churches hurriedly abandon long-held dogmatic convictions and are ready and willing to jump onto secular bandwagons with vain hopes of achieving success and popularity, it may appear that the Wisconsin Synod fights in defense of scientific, spiritual formulas—perhaps sacred, but removed and remote from life. This main stream "accommodating" Protestant thinking is also certainly apparent in the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which in coming together boasts of doctrinal divergence and broadmindedness. And its invitation is appealing. Someone you know has certainly asked, "Why don't we go along with them? How come we aren't in the merger? Are the differences really that great?"

When confronted with such thinking, how have you answered? Sometimes, when asked such questions, I am tempted to throw up my hands in despair and say, "Where do I start?" What will this person comprehend? Where is he or she in his or her knowledge of Scripture and Lutheran doctrine? Words such as conservative and liberal all too often fail to convey the truth that the glory of our God is at stake in this matter; the praise that he deserves and expects for all he is and has done, including the fact that he is a God who does not lie. And their questions all too often show an ignorance of the truth that in this present age American Lutherans have never seen a wider divergence and disparity in their beliefs. Why is this the case?

The story is not easy or pleasant to relate. But central to this entire situation was and is the increased use of higher criticism. This approach to Holy Scripture has separated churches, synods, families, and friends and brought others together in radical thinking far distant from orthodox beliefs. It is important for us in a spirit of humility, realizing that the battle also involves us, that we:

- 1) define and understand higher criticism, also referred to as the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, and;
- 2) that we study the consequences of the employment of the same in the theology of the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as represented in *Christian Dogmatics* published by Fortress Press of Philadelphia in 1984.

The historical-critical method defined

To define the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation is a difficult task. The term has been used in various ways and with diverse meanings by scholars from a plethora of religious backgrounds. When

used as an umbrella term, the historical-critical method may mean any aspect of study or interpretation of the Scriptures. This definition would include some very basic and legitimate elements of conservative biblical scholarship.

The historical-critical method is narrowly defined, however, as the general scientific method applied to past events, namely, history. In this context the critic and his reason are made into judge and jury, with the Bible, along with all other ancient documents, on trial. "Whether as defendant or witness, its credibility depends entirely on the findings of the critical 'court.'"¹ Or, to say it another way:

(This method) assigns to the interpreter the capacity and the authority to distinguish between "the facts which matter and the facts which don't." According to the historical-critical method those facts which, in the interpreter's judgment, do not count, may be marked by him as non-factual embellishments upon the facts or as a merely symbolical-mythical enunciation of a theological truth.²

Thus the method denies or questions the authority and veracity of Scripture. This approach is employed in contradistinction to the historical-grammatical method, which in no way challenges the authority or veracity of the text. Basic to the historical-grammatical method is the acceptance of Holy Scripture as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God. The historical-critical method stands directly opposed because it

sets the learned scholar above the Scriptures in the position of judge. Whether this is admitted or not, it is always and invariably true. And this is no accidental part of the process, but rather it is built into the method as part, if not the whole, of its essence. Without the assumption that the human scholar is able and authorized to determine what is historical and factual in the Bible and what is not, there simply could not be a historical-critical method of Bible interpretation.³

Another accepted semantic approach in our circles is to refer to higher and lower critical methods, respectively. Lower criticism is legitimate, acceptable, and necessary in our scholarship. It does not undertake to pass a value judgment on the historical substance of the revelation.

Textual criticism, or "lower criticism" as it is also called, restricts itself to one objective, trying to establish the wording of the original text as it was penned by the inspired writers. Textual criticism does not include translation of the text, nor interpretation, nor application. That is the role of theology. Textual criticism certainly does not include that activity which is called "higher criticism" or "literary criticism." Higher criticism assumes that the text is established and now seeks to determine what underlies that text. Hence its preoccupation with sources and redactors and editors and such things so often fatal to simple trust in the doctrine of inspiration.⁴

Higher criticism then in opposition to lower criticism insists on treating the Bible not as an unquestioned authority, but as one ancient book among others. All biblical statements are therefore open to challenge before the court of sovereign human reason. In addition, to understand this method of interpretation better one needs to consider how the word "historical" is to be used and understood.

¹ Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), p 114.

² Martin H. Franzmann, "The Historical-Critical Method," *Concordia Journal*, Vol 6:3 (May 1980), p 101.

³ Siegbert W. Becker, "The Historical-Critical Method of Bible Interpretation," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 74:2 (April 1977), p 132.

⁴ Armin J. Panning, "Tischendorf and the History of the Greek New Testament Text," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 68:1 (January 1971), p 12.

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

The historical-critical method, while it does not always deny the existence of these people or the facticity of all the events recorded, uses the word "historical" not so much in regard to the content of the Bible as in regard to the way the Bible was produced. This view holds that the writers of the Bible, because they were human beings who lived at a certain time in history, reflect the views and the opinions of their own historical period.⁵

In the opinion of these scholars, "historical" refers to history as a science; history is conceived of, investigated, and interpreted within a secular frame of reference. Within this framework the upper limit is man—exceptional man, creative man, perhaps epoch-making and history-shaping man, but nevertheless man. Peter Brunner defines this as follows:

In a scientific, historical statement no sentence can occur in which God is the subject. The subject matter of such a statement can only be human concepts and thinking about God. The eschatological horizon of salvation and [mankind's] lost state remains barred to a scientific, historical statement. It is, therefore, of necessity non-eschatological.⁶

Thus *historical* by definition on principle stands against an almighty God who proclaims salvation to mankind and who speaks authoritatively regarding eschatology.

It is also important in this context to understand the word *critical* in the term *historical-critical*. To one extent or another everyone who employs this method believes that since the Bible was written by men in a specific historical situation (something which no one of us would deny), it must be studied very carefully and in great detail in order to determine whether what was said was truly factual.

It is important to see that the uncompromising supremacy of "scientific" human reason in the historical-critical method is not an excess or an abuse which can somehow be tempered. On the contrary, it is of the essence of the method; indeed it is its basic point. Science has neither use nor room for privileged authorities or sacrosanct texts. It recognizes only observations, experiments, logical inferences based on them, and, reluctantly, whatever axioms or assumptions are necessary to sustain these operations. That is why, in Krentz' understatement, "The method tends to freedom from authority." Historical criticism cannot successfully ape scientific objectivity if it is caught flirting with authority-principles or making special allowances for some writings in preference to others. Here lies the historical-critical method's "innermost impulse of scientific questing and questioning," which it cannot give up without thereby surrendering its scientific pretensions, in short, its very reason for being.⁷

⁵ Siegbert W. Becker, "The Historical-Critical Method of Bible Interpretation," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 74:17 (January 1977), p 17.

⁶ P. Brunner, "Die grossen Taten Gottes and die historisch-kritische Vernunft," *Pro Ecclesia* (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1962), p 73: *In einer geschichtswissenschaftlichen Aussage kann kein Satz vorkommen, dessen Subjekt Gott ist. Gegenstand ihrer Aussage koennen nur menschliche Vorstellungen and Gedanken ueber Gott sein. Einer geschichtswissenschaftlichen Aussage bleibt der endzeitliche Horizont von Rettung und Verlorenheit vor Gott notwendig verschlossen. Sie ist darum grundsatzlich uneschatologisch.*

⁷ Marquart, *op. cit.*, p 114.

The historical-critical method cannot be considered merely a theologically neutral tool or technique of interpretation; rather, to be true to itself, it must keep itself unfettered by any authority save that of human reason. There is to be no way of controlling or limiting the process between the facts which count and those which don't. Rudolf Bultmann employed the historical-critical method in probably the most classical way. He took the ground that in the final analysis none of the facts counted ("*Ich lasz es ruhig brennen*"). He realized that the whole inner logic and dynamic of criticism is to be free of all traditional-authoritarian-supernatural restraints. The more radical, unbridled, and sweeping the criticism, the more consistent it really is with its own genius. That is why it has been remarked regarding Bultmann that in him we find the completion and perfection of the historical-critical method.⁸ We will devote more time to Bultmann when we consider techniques of higher criticism.

Many in our day reject this radicalism of Bultmann and take the so-called mediating view. Peter Stuhlmacher and the "*Neu Hermeneutik*" school in Germany steer away from the radical view of Bultmann. Stuhlmacher would have us view the Scriptures through the eyes of the historical critic in the context of the Third Article. The new ELCA, as we will later point out, would take this view and expand it to the context of the Ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions. This position, however, is untenable when one understands the free wheeling use of reason in the method and the eventual result.

The whole history of historical-critical research has been one of progressive "emancipation" from that very framework of the Third Article. To accept direction or limitation from any "theological framework" resting on authority would "contradict the very starting point" of historical criticism and would sacrifice its very essence. The choice is between an unfettered secularly-oriented criticism on the one hand, and a theological, authority-based—and hence by definition no longer scientifically critical—approach on the other.⁹

Martin Franzmann speaks of the place of the Lutheran Confessions in this matter and the ultimate consequence of attempting to find some middle ground:

The Confessions cannot be involved as a controlling force, for the Confessions have their strength in the Scripture which they interpret and summarize. In the measure that Scripture is made subject to the autonomous judgment of the interpreter, the Confessions too will lose their controlling force and their normative authority. Once the basic premise of the critical approach is conceded, one can no longer talk of pure doctrine. One can only talk of more or less sane or successful application of the method; for example, if a Lutheran theologian comes to the conviction that the virgin birth is one of the facts that doesn't count, who is going to convince him (and convict him), on the premises of this method, that it is a fact that does count? And it should be obvious that, on the premises of the historical-critical method, the most vulnerable fact in the New Testament is the fact of the resurrection.¹⁰

Carl Braaten, a prominent theologian in the new ELCA, in a recent article pleads for law and gospel preaching according to the stipulations of the confessional writings and gives us an example of this ELCA moderate approach.

The counsel to preach the Word of God, properly distinguishing the law and gospel, revolves around the second and third states in which we all find ourselves under the conditions of existence. Homiletical theories that ignore

⁸ W. Kuenneth, "*Die Grundlagenkrisis der Theologie Heute*," essay read before the Council of the European Evangelical Alliance, London, 1968, p 9.

⁹ Kurt E. Marquart, "The Historical-Critical Method and Lutheran Presuppositions," pastoral conference paper presented January 13, 1975, at Queensland District of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

¹⁰ Franzmann, *op. cit.*, p 101.

the proper distinction between law and gospel are not to be trusted when they ignore the anthropological stipulations of the confessional writings, particularly those bearing on original sin and free will.¹¹

Braaten's intent may be valid and his emphasis needed, but in the final analysis his approach is illogical. Marquart is therefore right when he says:

In summary, the historical-critical method cannot, without committing suicide, accept any restrictions except those imposed by the rules of scientific inquiry itself. Any method therefore which submits in principle to the divine authority (inerrancy!) of sacred texts is simply not the historical-critical method. On the other hand, any method which in principle waives the inerrancy of Holy Scripture cannot claim to be operating with Lutheran presuppositions. The loose, status symbol usage of the term "historical-critical method" to mean simple "competent, scholarly procedure" should be combated as semantic humbug.¹²

Techniques of higher criticism

Source criticism, form criticism or *Formgeschichte*, Redaction Criticism, etc. are techniques which are commonly employed by historical-critical scholars. These techniques are used up to a particular point; some come and others go. They are discovered, have their heyday, and may be abandoned—but higher criticism goes on. For that reason, we will deal with the major techniques in cursory fashion.

Over 200 years ago, Old Testament scholars began to deny the Mosaic authority of the Pentateuch. Their approach to their world was termed "source criticism." Through the employment of various criteria such as the name which the author used for God, they claimed that they could distinguish and separate various sources; which were used in the composition of the first five books of Scripture. Through time and scholarly argumentation four sources were presented on which there is some, but, to be sure, not total, agreement. The first source was J (because the author preferred the use of the name Yahweh for God, *Jahweh* in the German), E (because the author preferred the word Elohim for God), P (because the author was concerned with priestly matters), and D (because the author is credited with the bulk of the book of Deuteronomy). The oldest source, is supposedly J, written about 850 B.C. in the southern kingdom of Judah. E was written by an unknown living in the northern kingdom of Israel around 750 B.C. The theology of P is "more developed" and thus it is said to come from the time of the Babylonian captivity. D with its message of centralized worship was allegedly written or received in its accepted form in 621 B.C. to give authority to the religious reforms of King Josiah of Judah.

It is then theorized that editors or redactors combined the sources. Around 650 B.C. JE was supposedly formed through the combining of J and E. Then during the time of Ezra around 500 to 450 B.C., shortly after the exile a priestly redactor(s) added his material. At the same time the entire body of material was brought together with the book of Deuteronomy, which was then supposedly accepted as authoritative from the time of Josiah. Thus we have the Pentateuch in its present form.

In the New Testament source criticism has been especially concerned with the four Gospels.

In a general way it may be said that, according to the most widely accepted form of New Testament source criticism, Mark, or a book very similar to Mark, copied and revised by the author of our present Mark, was written first. Since both Matthew and Luke have much material also found in Mark, they must have copied Mark or Mark's predecessor. Since they have much material in common which is not found in Mark, they must both have used a common source, called *Q*. *Q* is the first letter of the German word "*Quelle*," which means source, and when the scholars say that the source of the common material in Matthew and Luke is *Q*, this is simply a

¹¹ Carl E. Braaten, "Whatever Happened to Law and Gospel?" *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Vol 14:2 (April 1987), p 118.

¹² Marquart, *op. cit.*, p 117.

scholarly way of saying that the source of the material that is found in Matthew and Luke is the source. Finally, since Matthew has some material that is found in neither Mark nor Luke there must have been a third source, and since no one knows what that source was, it is simply called M. And since Luke has material that is found in neither Mark nor Matthew, there must be a fourth source, which is called L.¹³

As in Old Testament source criticism the alleged sources of the New Testament are pitted against each other and made to appear contradictory rather than complementary. Thus the source critic normally speaks of Petrine, Pauline, and Johannine theologies as though they were opposing points of view competing for a place in the early church.

Since the early 1900s form criticism has been added to source criticism in the historical-critical approach to the Bible. Form criticism theorizes that before any sources preserved any parts of the Old or New Testaments in writing, many of these parts, especially in the narrative portions of the Bible, existed in an oral form spread by word of mouth. These oral accounts passed through many stages, as did their written counterparts later on. Often they contained a kernel of truth about the historical events they reported. But in time they were revised, enlarged (especially with miracles and great deeds said to have been performed by the central, heroic figure such as Abraham, Moses or Jesus) or reinterpreted by the community that was using them.¹⁴

Bultmann brought New Testament form criticism or *Formgeschichte* to its highest point, and his work in the area of the Gospel needs to be understood or at least acknowledged to comprehend the thinking of the form critic. Much of the modern skeptical attitude in Christian theology flows from his theology, which contains three principal elements: form criticism, demythologizing, and existentialism. His use of form criticism attempts to explain through analysis the origin of the Gospels by establishing the New Testament as a reflection of the faith of the primitive church, rather than as an account of the genuine deeds and teachings of Jesus. Demythologizing assumes that whatever is other worldly is the product of religious imagination and must be removed to uncover the intended message. And in the view of the existentialist, the New Testament should be understood in the light of present experience, not alone by itself as a basis for the Christian faith.

The following summary statements regarding Bultmann's thoughts on the Gospels prove enlightening.

1. The Gospels are not factual reports given by eye and ear witnesses, but they are folk literature, sagas, legends, or haggada (stories used in the Talmud to illustrate a point of doctrine). Some are true and some not; they are only there to make a point.
2. As folk literature, the four Gospels are not a primary or reliable source for Christ in our contemporary world, but they are a primary source for the early church, i.e., in the Gospels we cannot discern Christ, but we can see what the early church believed.
3. The faith of the early church did not exist in a vacuum but in a social and cultural context, and this context must be kept in mind when the story is read because it helps to explain how the story originated. This is called the *Sitz im Leben* (cultural context).
4. The stories in the Gospels can be analyzed and classified according to form or type of story. These forms reflect various *Sitze im Leben* and also various stages of Christian development.
5. Instead of emphasizing the historicity (factuality) of the stories, the greatest emphasis should be put on kerygmatic content (preaching and moral values). The Jesus of history, however, often gets in the way of the Christ of faith. In this historical-critical context, faith means everything will come out all right, and truth is more important than the facts.

¹³ Backer, *op. cit.*, p 28.

¹⁴ James J. Westendorf, "God's Word—A Heritage to Guard," convention essay presented to WELS convention in August 1985, in *Synod Proceedings*, 1985, p 174.

Martin Dibelius (*Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 1919) was also an early leader in form criticism, along with Bultmann. He broke down the Gospels into six forms or types of stories which are also relevant to our understanding the form critic's realm of thought. These types are listed below:

1. **Passion History**—stories about the suffering and death of Christ, historical accounts but nothing miraculous.
2. **Paradigm**—example stories, the kernel is sayings of Jesus which are placed in a historical context. Much historical truth is to be learned from the Hebrew and Jewish additions.
3. **Tales**—miracle stories, a later development with some element of truth but much embellishment and influence by Greek thought.
4. **Legends**—stories about apostles, written, however, by third generation Christians.
5. **Logia**—collections of sayings by Jesus. Perhaps not all are from Jesus, but they are ascribed to him nonetheless.
6. **Myths**—stories with a definite Greek background, e.g., virgin birth, transfiguration, resurrection, ascension. They could not have happened, but they put Christ on a high pedestal. They truly reflect the uniqueness of Christ, and in this respect they are true.

These techniques employed by the historical-critical scholar make the Bible a book of doubts and uncertainties filled at best with likelihoods and probabilities. There is no room in this line of thinking for inerrancy. That would be ridiculously out of place among what are believed to be oral accounts reinterpreted and revised at numerous times and preserved in written sources which were periodically transformed by redactors. Miracles, eyewitness accounts, specific prophecy, scientific data, and the history recorded in Scripture are radically revised or denied. Higher criticism leaves us with the question whether there is anything at all that we can know with any certainty, including facts about the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

On January 1, 1988, the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed through the merger of the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America.

The American Lutheran Church (ALC) as it was then constituted came into existence in 1960 as a result of a merger of the old American Lutheran Church (formed in 1930 out of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Ohio, the Iowa Synod, and the Buffalo Synod), the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Norwegian), and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (Danish). Three years later, in 1963, the Lutheran Free Church also joined the ALC. The third largest Lutheran church in the United States in 1987, the membership of the ALC was heavily concentrated in the upper Midwest; 45 percent of its 2.3 million members lived in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

The leaders who formed the ALC during the early 1960s insisted on the position their predecessors had taken in 1930, when in the constitution of their new church they described the Bible as "the divinely inspired, revealed and inerrant Word of God." However, "in spite of the provisions of its constitution—and because of them....a document was incorporated into the Articles for Action for the ALC, namely, the United Testimony on Faith and Life, etc., a lengthy statement (which)...left the door open to the use of historical criticism....That made it easy for those uneasy with the notion of inerrancy to use the new method in good conscience."¹⁵ With the publication of *The Bible: Book of Faith*, written by ALC theologians, the historical-critical approach was introduced and accepted widely, though not universally, in the ALC in the 1960s.

¹⁵ Todd Nichol, "How Will the ELCA Speak of the Bible?" *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol 26, No 17 (Oct. 24, 1986) pp 4-8. The article was also published in *The Lutheran*, Vol 24, No 18 (Oct. 15, 1986).

The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) was organized in 1976, largely by pastors and congregations who left the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a result of doctrinal quarrels over inspiration, inerrancy, and historical criticism. Controversy swirled around the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. In 1974 the majority of faculty members were charged with false doctrine, the chief complaint being that the teachers had embraced the historical-critical approach to the Bible. The AELC in 1987 numbered 111,000 members.

The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) came into being in 1962 as the result of the merger of the Augustana Lutheran Church, the United Lutheran Church in America, the Finnish Ev. Lutheran Church (Suomi Synod), and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (Danish). The largest Lutheran church body in the United States, in 1987 (2.9 million), 25 percent of its members were concentrated in the state of Pennsylvania.

By 1930 historical criticism was finding its way into some Lutheran churches in the United States and received wide acceptance in the United Lutheran Church in America. In 1930, new faculty members brought the approach to the seminary of the Augustana Synod in Rock Island, Illinois. It is not surprising that the LCA constitution, drafted in the early 1960s, shows the influence of the historical-critical approach: "The Holy Scriptures are the divinely inspired record of God's redemptive act in Christ, for which the Old Testament prepared the way and which the New Testament proclaims."

After much debate the final wording in the constitution of the new 5.4 million ELCA regarding the Word of God and Scripture as adopted September 24, 1985, reads as follows:

The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. This Church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

This refined statement brought an "improvement" to earlier, weaker drafts, but the words "inerrant" or "infallible" were not included. The Task Force on Theology for the new church explains why:

We share the concern of those who use such terms as inerrant and infallible to underscore the Scriptures as God's sufficient and reliable message to us. We affirm that God's Holy Spirit is speaking to us through the Scriptures, that the Scriptures are sufficient and reliable for bringing us the truth of our salvation, and that they present the standard for Christian faith and life. Nevertheless, the words inerrant and infallible can be understood in ways that lead to interpretations of the Scriptures that are contrary to what the Scriptures are and what they teach. These terms can be used in a way that implies a precision alien to the minds of the authors of the Scriptures and their own use of the Scriptures. These terms can be used to divert attention from the message of salvation and instruction of righteousness, which are key themes of the Scriptures. They may encourage artificial harmonizations rather than serious wrestling with the implication of scriptural statements which may seem to disagree. They may lead people to think that if there is one proven error in the Bible, however, minor, its whole teaching is subject to doubt. Therefore, we recommend that the words inerrant and infallible not be included.¹⁶

Professor Kurt Marquart of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod concedes that there has been some improvement in the constitutional wording, but those pushing for a more conservative approach should be realistic.

¹⁶ "Report on the Task Force of the New Lutheran Church," p 4.

Since all the participating seminaries are thoroughly addicted to historical criticism, a change here would require a collective Damascus Road experience of unprecedented proportions. What the efforts of the conservatives will really amount to, therefore, as so often in church history, is simply improved public relations for the liberal establishment. The conservatives get their constitutional language, and the liberals get to interpret it in the seminaries and publications of the church, while continuing to teach just as they please.¹⁷

Alongside this weak stand on Holy Scripture the new ELCA in its Confession of Faith claims acceptance of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as "true declarations of the faith of this church," the Unaltered Augsburg Confession "as a true witness to the Gospel," and "the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord as further valid interpretations of the faith of the church."

It has been correctly stated that the problem with the confession of faith of the new ELCA is not with what is said, but rather with what is not said.

Christian Dogmatics

Christian Dogmatics was compiled by six authors who are representative of the theological position of the new ELCA. It is apparently the hope of these theologians that their collective work will become a standard dogmatics textbook in the seminaries of the new church.

The two-volume book, edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, is a labyrinth of doctrinal pluralism, the sad result of the authority of Scripture being eroded through the historical-critical approach. This pluralism is conceded and acknowledged in the preface and prolegomena.

Although all of us stand within the Lutheran tradition, the differences among us, and the consequent inconsistencies in the book are considerable. At some points the authors simply disagree, and this disagreement occasionally reaches the point of contradiction.¹⁸

It is sad but true that the use of higher criticism will bring doctrinal divergence, but the bold claim that "all of us stand within the Lutheran tradition" is something which one can judge for oneself after a few quotations. Dogmatics in the Lutheran tradition is the systematic presentation and study of the truths of Holy Scripture. For these authors, however, dogmatics has been "reduced to a stimulating exchange of criticisms of the doctrinal traditions of the various churches in an effort to restate the basic principles of the faith in formulations which will be acceptable to our time."¹⁹

The Bible

It is finally for the sake of Christ alone that the church continues to regard the Bible as a book without equal in the history of human literature. For this reason the churches that claim the heritage of Luther and the Reformation still affirm the Bible as the Word of God. This is not meant in the fundamentalistic sense that everything in the Bible stands directly as the Word of God....This valuation of the Bible as the Word of God is asserted with greater awareness of the historical problems involved in biblical interpretation....The role of the Bible in constructive theology is radically qualified today by historical consciousness. Luther believed that the literal meaning of Scripture is identical with its historical content; things happened exactly as they were written down. Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded. What

¹⁷ Kurt E. Marquart, as quoted in "The Theological Basis of the New Lutheran Church (ELCA)," *The Lutheran Synod Quarterly* (March, 1987).

¹⁸ *Christian Dogmatics*, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), I, xvii.

¹⁹ John F. Brug, "Christian Dogmatics, A Review," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, (Spring 1986), Vol 83:2, p 128.

the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place. Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus....Biblical theology and dogmatic theology are not reducible to each other.²⁰

The point is made that through analysis and criticism we must come to doctrinal formulations which are most appropriate for today. The stage is set for Karl Barth's idea of "the vulnerability of the Bible." Barth's view of epistemology (study of how we know), simply stated, is that anything which involves man, who is finite and limited, must of necessity be limited and hence relative. Therefore, the Bible must be subject to error and it is not possible to assume the literal historicity of its recorded events.²¹ As a result "the authors of this book reduce the Bible to a source book for the imaginative construction of church doctrines."²²

Words of Jesus

Jesus himself, though he might have and quite possibly did reckon with a violent death at the hands of his adversaries, seems not to have understood or interpreted his own death as a sacrifice for others or ransom for sin. Such interpretation apparently came as the result of later reflection. Even in their final redaction the synoptic Gospels contain little direct or explicit interpretation of Jesus' work. Mark 10:45 has Jesus say that the Son of Man came to give his life "as a ransom for many," and the accounts of the Last Supper speak of Jesus' blood as his "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24) and "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Such passages, in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretative traditions. The same is true of the instances where Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection, such as Mark 8:31ff and 9:31, and parallels in the other Synoptics. They are interpretations attributed to Jesus after the fact. But aside from such scanty references, the Synoptics even in their final form afford little explicit interpretation of Jesus' work.²³

We must agree with Albert Schweitzer that it is impossible to write a biography of Jesus in the strict sense.²⁴

...the Gospels present the history of Jesus as the Christ in forms of tradition that were written and transmitted under the impact of the resurrection faith. It has proved impossible to disengage naked facts of history from the interpretations in which they were imbedded.²⁵

What did Jesus really say? Can or dare one trust any word ascribed to him in the Gospels? These scholars believe that to establish any facts relative to Jesus is a difficult process which in the final analysis will leave no certainty; the search for the historical Jesus must go on, however, lest faith become only faith in the early church.

²⁰ *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 76f.

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, 61, 66f, 74-77.

²² Brug, *op. cit.*, p 129.

²³ *Christian Dogmatics*, II, 12f.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 491.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 476.

Miracles

According to the biblical witnesses, miracles are intrinsically related to the work of salvation. At the high points of God's salvation-history, we are confronted with miracles: the parting of the Red Sea, the virginal conception of Jesus, his resurrection as the Christ. Of course, one could object that miracles are literary devices to underscore the reality of God's salvational activity. Thus there might be no historical reality that pertains to them. Yet today even the severest critics of the New Testament sources admit that Jesus did indeed perform acts that we still consider highly unusual.... We must concede the possibility that miracles may have been attributed to people simply to enhance their status, that is, their special relationship to the gods. Each claim to truth must be carefully analyzed, and it should not be excluded that some of the miracles attributed to Jesus may have no historical basis and serve only to emphasize his exceptional status.²⁶

Rudolf Bultmann believed that people living at Jesus' time thought that their world and personal lives were influenced by gods, angels, and devils. In our modern scientific world, he said, we know that we live in a closed world with a roof over us, through which no gods or angels can influence our lives, and a floor under us, through which no devils can reach up to influence our lives. From the aforesaid thoughts on miracles, it appears that this author and those likeminded in the ELCA want a nice modern house with a few holes left open just in case.

Deity of Christ

The history of the development and refinement of the historical-critical method covers the last two centuries and is very complex, so we can only highlight several of its main features. The first premise is that the orthodox doctrine of inspiration has no heuristic validity at all in the scholarly study of the Bible. The investigation must proceed without prejudice concerning the special authority of this book. The biblical writings are products of two thousand years of history and must be examined as are all other literary remains from antiquity. The startling discovery was that the ecclesiastical dogmas are not to be found in the Bible, but are products of a later time. In the age of Christendom, the dogmas of the Trinity and of Christ, as formulated in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, were necessary to believe for salvation. Now the biblical critics could apply the Scripture-principle of Protestantism to show that these dogmas cannot be required for faith, since they lack solid biblical support.²⁷

When it comes to the historical-critical approach it must be realized that attacks are not simply made on peripheral issues ("the credibility of Job and the edibility of Jonah"), but also on the very heart of the gospel, namely, the person and work of Jesus Christ. The results are not just an erosion of biblical authority but the total devastation of Christology. If we do not have the words of Christ, if we cannot ascertain facts from historical kerygmatic strata, then what is left? It is little wonder that Robert Jenson, when recently bemoaning the ELCA's becoming "fully Protestant," stated, "The God proclaimed in American Protestantism is inoffensive—a God who makes no difference." Hence, in his opinion, mainline Protestantism is to a great extent atheistic. At this point, he said, "It is not clear whether the ELCA, as a part of American Protestantism, will worship God or not."²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 282f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 71.

²⁸ Robert Jenson, as quoted in "News Around the World," *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Sept. 1, 1987, p 294.

The virgin birth

The primary interest of dogmatics is to interpret the virgin birth as a symbol and not as a freakish intervention in the course of nature. It is possible to hold to the virgin birth as a biological fact and miss its point. It is also possible to make the same point without reference to the virgin birth, as the writings of Paul and John prove by not mentioning it. It is important, then, not to let the story get bogged down in biology, but to read it as a symbol witnessing to the truth of the kerygma....

Why then should human fatherhood be eliminated in the work of salvation? If we grasp the original intention of the story to witness to the real humanity of Jesus, we must not allow a shift in the situation from ancient times to the present to play a trick on us, which it would do if we were to use the story apologetically to prove the divinity of Christ or to explain the sinlessness of Jesus. The story has become increasingly ambiguous because our natural tendency is to take it to mean the opposite of what it originally intended.²⁹

The mediating position never knows where to draw the line—subjectivity and individual scholarship will supposedly divide the New Testament into a human and a divine side. In the end it is personal choice. This subjective reduction leads not only to a beclouding of the true understanding of the gospel but to its total erosion. The one thing which is supposed to be the divine part of the Bible, namely, the gospel, becomes the victim of the very method which was to sustain it.

Atonement

The meaning of the historical cross was transmitted in the suprahistorical language of mythological symbolism. The cross is not a fact of history that interprets itself. The New Testament writers used a rich variety of symbols taken from the world of ancient Jewish and gnostic mythology to interpret the meaning of the cross. When the cross is viewed alongside others, it receives redemptive significance of cosmic proportions....

...a death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, a death whose universal redemptive significance has been interpreted according to Jewish ideas of atonement (sacrifice and satisfaction) and the gnostic myth of redemption (death and resurrection).³⁰

There seems to be no concept of a death having vicarious significance in Jewish circles in the sense given it by later Christian interpretation.³¹

The basic conclusion is that what the Bible says about the death of Christ is not from God but merely a collection of Jewish "ideas" about what it means. The most basic difference between a Christian church and a cult is their belief relative to Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Way, and others speak about Jesus but disclaim the clear teaching of Scripture. The ELCA may use the same words as traditional orthodoxy, but quite often that is where the similarity ends.

Resurrection

It is the task of the doctrine of the atonement to explicate the dogmatic meaning of the cross. Here we need only include it as one further stage in the kenotic self-abasing movement of the Son of God from the heights of glory to the depths of humiliation in a death by crucifixion under

²⁹ *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 546f.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 547f.

³¹ *Ibid.*, II, 14f.

Pontius Pilate, a death whose universal redemptive significance has been interpreted according to Jewish ideas of atonement (sacrifice and satisfaction) and the gnostic myth of redemption (death and resurrection).³²

Mythological symbolism contributed to the interpretation of the event of the resurrection. The question has become acute in modern theology whether in the resurrection we are dealing only with a myth or with a truly historical event.³³

Since we are endowed neither with divine qualities nor with an immortal soul in the Platonic or gnostic sense, meaningful existence beyond death must be a resurrection of the dead. This hope is expressed in the Apostles' Creed, where we say that we believe "in the resurrection of the body." This does not mean a biological revivification, such as found in the case of the young man in the village of Nain (Luke 7:15) or of Lazarus (John 11:44).³⁴

Contrary to other "resurrection" stories in the Bible, Jesus is not perceived as having returned to this life. His resurrection was not a resuscitation indicating that in certain exceptional instances people can be returned to their former state of life.³⁵

The authors misuse the word resuscitation. The dictionary definition of both resurrection and resuscitation is "bringing that which is dead back to life." How are the authors' beliefs contained within the "Lutheran tradition"? If the atonement, death, and resurrection are based on "Jewish ideas" and "gnostic myths," then the belief that Jesus rose in a physical way is now to be considered pagan.

Immortality of the soul

It is still official Roman Catholic doctrine that each person is endowed with an immortal soul, and most Protestants also share belief in immortality, expressed in many of our favorite hymns. Even the reformers, such as Zwingli, Calvin, and to some extent, Luther, taught the immortality of the soul. In recent years, especially under the impact of a renewed listening to the biblical documents, the idea of an immortal soul has become increasingly suspect. A human being is again seen as a unity. Karl Barth perhaps overstated the case when he claimed that the notion of immortality is a typical thought engendered by fear. Karl Rahner puts the issue more correctly when he states that there is no rectilinear continuation of our empirical reality beyond death. "In this regard death puts an end to the *whole* man."

Death is the end of our life, but it is not the end of our being. Paul expresses this in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 in contradistinction to gnostic thought: When we die, our earthly tent (i.e., our body) will be destroyed. But we do not look forward, as in gnosticism, to our soul's survival.³⁶

What are they saying? In general, they believe in a spiritual body that has emerged from a physical body—not an immortal soul but some kind of "spiritual" body. The distinction is made between a fleshly body and a "spiritual" body, and it is stated that the fleshly body will not be resurrected. Nevertheless, they stop short of a complete rejection of any kind of resurrection. They cling to some shred of hope for something beyond this earthly life.

³² *Ibid.*, I, 548.

³³ *Ibid.*, I, 549.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 566f.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 558.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 565f.

Rudolf Augstein, in his bitterly anti-Christian book, *Jesus, Son of Man*, is able to taunt the church by citing a leading New Testament scholar, Hans Conzelmann, to the effect that "the church lives in practice on the fact that the conclusions of scientific research into the life of Jesus are not made public!"³⁷ How right he is! "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor 15:14). If the resurrection did not happen, then of all people in this world the Christian is to be pitied the most.

The doctrine of justification

At some point in the history of Lutheranism, a full reception of the catholic dogmatic tradition has been hindered by an attempt of Lutheran confessionalism to deduce the whole of the church's life and teaching from the special principle of Lutheran theology—the article of justification by faith alone. Whenever this reductionist error has been committed, it has produced a particularly inhumane form of Lutheran sectarianism. We trust that all the participants in this project of dogmatics are free of it.³⁸

This statement taken from the prolegomena tells us that justification now needs a new place in the authors' "modern" view of Lutheran theology. That point is reinforced by the fact that no locus entitled "justification" is to be found in the new dogmatics text.

These protestantized American scholars have rejected Luther's clear words spoken at the graduation debate between Palladius and Tilemann on June 1, 1537, in Wittenberg:

The article of justification is master and prince, the lord, the ruler and one judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness.³⁹

In a sermon about law and gospel, Luther expressed again the centrality of justification to all Christians:

Christ wishes this doctrine to be observed by the Christians so that they may know what they have been, what they are still lacking and what they should again become, that they do not continue in the misery and filth in which they find themselves now, for if they do, they must be lost.⁴⁰

The doctrine of justification is not only the greatest treasure of the Lutheran Church and the central and fundamental article of Christian doctrine, but also the central and fundamental fact and comfort in the life of every Christian in his relationship to God. If one does not care to believe this, then the least that should be done is to drop the name of Luther out of respect for this courageous man's love for God and his Word.

Consequences and conclusion

Christianity bases its beliefs on the premise of a God who has said and done decisive things in the past. The historical-critical method is predicated on the impossibility of isolating and identifying concrete acts and words of God among past events. The result of this approach has been portrayed by the examples cited from *Christian Dogmatics*—an endless wobbling and waffling about "de-historicized" meanings and significances which in the final analysis lack even intellectual integrity.

³⁷ Rudolf Augstein, *Jesus, Son of Man*, Hugh Young, tr. (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), p 14.

³⁸ *Christian Dogmatics*, I, xvii.

³⁹ Weimar Ausgabe 39 I, 205, 2-5, translated.

⁴⁰ Weimar Ausgabe 45, 157, 17-20, J. H. Lenker, *Luther's Works: Sermons*, Vol 14 (Gospels: Vol V), p 186.

The result, as previously stated, is not merely a loss of biblical authority, but also the devastation of Christology and of all Christian substance. The new ELCA is wrapped up in a theology of rhetoric rather than truth. The Christology on which the Ecumenical Creeds base their confessions rests on and finds total confidence in the fact that everything written about Jesus in the Holy Scriptures is true. If this confidence collapses, the doctrine of Christ decays into a quagmire of doubtful speculations and opinions.

But where is the new Lutheran church in the spectrum of Lutherans throughout the world? Many in the ELCA would rightly consider themselves "moderates." These theologians obviously accept both the method and many of the results of the historical-critical approach to Holy Scripture. To do anything but that in their opinion would be a sacrifice of the gift of intelligence and would make it impossible to witness to modern human beings in this scientific age. Within their ranks, however, are also voices which warn of the excesses in the use of this methodology and the limits of its usefulness. Having studied for a year of my life in West Germany and being personally acquainted with a goodly number of German pastors, it is obvious that the extremism of German and European theology is not rampant among these American Lutherans. Somewhere they must have realized that when you destroy the thing you are attempting to dissect, you may be putting yourself out of business. The sad impotence of the European church is an all too obvious and glaring example for all to see in this regard.

The new church clings to Karl Barth's and Emil Brunner's "neo-orthodoxy," or at least it attempts to put itself somewhere in the middle between the radicalism of Bultmann and traditional conservative orthodoxy. The main point of Barth's theology can be summarized with the statement: Because the Bible must be subject to error, only Christ can properly be called the Word of God. How this maxim is employed in the ELCA theology is demonstrated by Philip Quanbeck:

While biblical statements cannot be casually disregarded, we have the responsibility and opportunity to distinguish, as Luther did, between what is more important and what is less important in the Bible. How do we do this? As Christians, we realize that the prism through which we understand and respond to the Bible is Jesus. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the central feature and primary content of the scripture.⁴¹

At first glance these words appear to be true, for Christ is the "central figure and primary content of the scripture." But Quanbeck's point is that anything which does not refer to Christ is in the final analysis unimportant and unreliable. He states further:

When we try to apply the claim of "inerrancy" to the Bible, we discover difficulties. The Bible, for example, is not an authority in matters of science or world geography. It ought not to be regarded as the norm for information on the age of the earth or the location of the continents. So the authority of the Bible in our life and in the church does not depend on its being without error in terms of science or geography.⁴²

Here we have an excellent example of the "Gospel-reductionism" of the new church. But the question needs to be raised whether the gospel can, in fact, be reduced. Is this line of thinking theologically viable?

To take away or to render theologically irrelevant or dubious the whole factual-historical dimension of Scripture, as historical criticism does, is not to strip Scripture down to the bare Gospel—rather it is to strip down the Gospel itself to some sort of subevangelical abstraction. Without the full matrix of its factual, historical, geographical, etc. particulars, there was no incarnation; and without the incarnation there is no Gospel. The Gospel is a theology of facts—not of rhetoric. To eliminate facts and history as such, therefore, is indeed a reduction—not, however, a reduction to the Gospel, but a reduction of the Gospel, even a radical abrogation of it.

⁴¹ Philip Quanbeck, "Lutherans and the Bible," *The Lutheran Standard*, Vol 24, No 17, Oct. 19, 1984, p 15.

⁴² *Ibid.*

This systematic violation of the Biblical mystery is the real evil of historical-critical theologizing.⁴³

It is both ironic and ignorant that Luther should be ever portrayed as the patron of this historical-critical dissolution of biblical substance. For Luther and the Reformation it was axiomatic that God acted decisively in history, that this decisive action culminated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and that in the divinely inspired prophetic-apostolic Scriptures we have God's own authoritative account of what he has said and done. Historical criticism is a child of Enlightenment and not of Luther nor the Lutheran Confessions. Luther meant in all sincerity his often repeated axiom, "Gottes Wort kann nicht lügen oder betrügen."

At the beginning of this paper we raised, among others, the following questions: Should traditional doctrinal differences really matter any longer? Can we afford the "luxury" of theological fussiness in the face of global crisis? We know the answers of millions to these questions. But the truth is not that it does not make any difference any longer but rather that, doctrinally speaking, Lutherans in this country are farther apart than at any time in this century. Our churches are on divergent courses. At stake is not the survival of old traditions or ecclesiastical systems and separations but rather the proclamation of the full and free gospel of Jesus Christ as God himself has testified to it in Holy Scripture.

There is no way to reconcile higher criticism with the orthodox historical-grammatical method of biblical hermeneutics. The opposite approaches clash at every point, and the ultimate results are two different religions. Higher criticism must be rejected as the great heresy of our day.

⁴³ Kurt E. Marquart, "Central Lutheran Thrusts for Today," *Concordia Journal*, Vol 8:3, (May 1982), p 89.