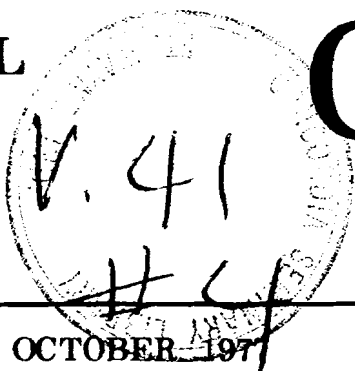


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# The Crisis on Biblical Authority: A Historical Analysis

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## I. Erosion of Confidence in Biblical Reliability

Michael Reu in his excellent monograph, *Luther and the Scriptures*, has impressively shown that Luther's understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture was similar to the Occamist theological tradition in which he was schooled. As William of Occam regarded Scripture from the standpoint of plenary inspiration holding that all of its teachings are divine and hence without error, so also did Luther.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Luther could assert, "The Scriptures have never erred."<sup>2</sup> "It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites."<sup>3</sup> Such a position Luther could and did assert from his earliest writings on, without raising the least bit of protest from Rome. This was only possible because his own views on the divine origin and authority of Scripture were the same as those of his Roman Catholic contemporaries. Even Paul Althaus, although critical of Luther on this point, is forced to admit that Luther

. . . followed the tradition of his time and basically accepted it [Scripture] as an essentially infallible book, inspired in its entire content by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore "the Word of God," not only when it speaks to us in Law and Gospel . . . but also—and this is a matter of principle—in everything else that it says.<sup>4</sup>

Althaus goes on to assert that "seen as a totality, its historical accounts, its world-view, and all the miracle stories are 'God's Word' given by the Holy Spirit; they are therefore all unquestionable truth, to be 'believed' precisely because they are contained in the book."<sup>5</sup>

The Reformation issue that Luther raised, and which has since divided Protestantism from Rome, was not the fully divine character and authority of Holy Scripture; it was the issue of the *sole* authority of Scripture. It was Luther's insistence that Scripture is to be "the *sole* rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it."<sup>6</sup> This meant, *contra* Rome, that even the doctrines of popes, councils, and revered church fathers must be judged and declared right or wrong on the sole basis of the teachings of Scripture. It was their stand on Scripture *alone*, not their stand

on Scripture as inspired and infallible that separated the reformers from Rome.

The current-day struggle in Lutheranism, then, concerning the nature and extent of Biblical authority does not stem from a lack of clarity on this issue from Luther and his fellow reformers. There can be no question but that they regarded the totality of Holy Scripture to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Therefore whatever Scripture teaches they regarded as what the Holy Spirit teaches and hence what faithful believers were to embrace. Such a position carried with it the dual recognition that Scripture is both God's authoritative revelation to us *and* a fully reliable historical witness to God's actions and words in human history. To acknowledge this fact is to acknowledge that our present controversy stems not from some vacuum in the Reformation, but rather from challenges to that position which have been raised since the sixteenth century.

It was the famous German theologian, Ernst Troeltsch, who, at the turn of the century, asserted that modern day Protestantism stemmed primarily from the Enlightenment instead of from the Reformation.<sup>7</sup> Although Troeltsch's observation was directed primarily at the European theological scene just prior to World War I, his judgment nevertheless has application to the present controversy in American Lutheranism concerning Biblical authority. It serves to emphasize that the crisis in Biblical authority, and the shift away from a Reformational understanding has its roots primarily in the eighteenth century, an age characterized in history as the Enlightenment. Prior to the Enlightenment, western Christendom had a fundamental consensus concerning the nature and extent of Biblical authority. The matter of *sola Scriptura* divided Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and doctrinal issues involving Biblical interpretation (as, for example, concerning the Sacraments) separated Lutheranism from Calvinist church bodies. All confessional grouping, however, agreed that the scriptures were inspired, the infallible Word of God, and were fully reliable on all matters which they taught. Despite this consensus which existed up to the end of the seventeenth century, the next hundred years were to deal a series of blows to the full authority of the Bible from which western Christendom has yet to recover.

In order to understand the nature and severity of this challenge, we will focus our attention especially on four prominent thinkers in this period. The first of these four is the famous English scientist, Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), whose *Principia Mathematica*, published in 1687, betokened the dawn of a new age. A new cosmology was set forth by Newton that simply could not be reconciled with the Bible's understanding of

the ongoing relationship between God and His creation. Working from the data of human experience, Newton set forth by way of mathematical formulas, the notion that the universe was controlled by certain "Laws of Nature" or principles which are built right into the fabric of the universe and by which almost all activity in the universe could be explained in terms of cause and effect. Newton's cosmology viewed the universe as a closed-system: something like a perfect clockwork mechanism which, once created by God, was then able to exist on its own quite independently from God's direct involvement. God was still viewed as Creator, but the Biblical view that God is the causal agent who sustains the orderly functioning of the world was ruled out. For Newton, God was still present to see all and know all, but it was considered quite impossible to say that He shaped any particular event.

Said Newton, "We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances."<sup>8</sup> And for Newton, only natural causes were the "true and sufficient" ones. Such an understanding is in absolute contradiction to the Biblical picture of God as an ongoing causal agent whose continual involvement in His creation is necessary to preserve the created order. Listen to the Psalmist:

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving,  
make melody to our God upon the lyre!  
He covers the heavens with clouds,  
He prepares rain for the earth,  
He makes grass grow upon the hills.  
He gives to the beasts their food, . . .<sup>9</sup>

Who is right? The Biblical writers or Newton? Most of the intellectual world up until the 1920's went along with Newton. The Biblical world-view rested on the authority of an inspired book which promised a subjective certainty concerning its claims worked in the heart by the Holy Spirit. Newton offered objective mathematical certitude for his views, and for that reason Newton won and the Bible lost.

Now, to be sure, Newton himself understood that there were gaps in his closed-system view. There were phenomena which his laws of nature could not explain. To these areas, he was more than eager to attribute to God certain housekeeping functions which were necessary to keep the universe in good order. Nevertheless, his findings had a profound effect upon philosophers, theologians, and scientists who were optimistic that these gaps would soon be closed by the discovery of yet unknown, but very real, laws of nature. To his followers, Newton had uncovered the mechanistic inner workings of the universe, and all that was left was to work out some of the finer details.

One of the results of Newton's findings was a general attitude of great awe and admiration for God the Creator who had made such a magnificent creation. If Biblical writers held God in awe for a creation with which they believed He must be continually involved to preserve it, how much greater awe and wonder must be directed to a Creator God whose creation is so perfect that it can sustain itself without God's constant involvement! Yet, if God the Creator was magnified, so also was His creature man, who, now coming of age, had developed his reasoning capacities to such a degree that he had discovered the very mysteries which God built into the created order to keep it functioning. How great is God and His creative wisdom! But also how great is man and his reasoning potential! Armed with natural law (and science to back it up), together with a new-found optimism concerning man's powers of critical reasoning, theologians and philosophers began to exert pressure on the notion of a divinely inerrant Holy Scripture. The Biblical writers had quite erroneously understood God as a constant causal agent in the world. This was only natural, however, because they lived in a pre-scientific age where things like laws of nature were unknown. Their errors were understandable, but nevertheless they *were* errors and ones which modern man had now been able to perceive clearly. One simply could not be intellectual and hold to an inerrantly inspired Bible. The enlightened theologian must use his God-given reason to reinterpret the Scriptures for modern man, minus the pre-scientific supernatural world-view of its human authors.

Orthodoxy's reaction to this serious challenge to the Bible's authority was one of retreat to a position that it hoped would be an adequate defense. Apologists for orthodoxy asserted that science had *not proven* that God was no longer a causal agent in the world. As Newton admitted, they argued, there are gaps where God continuously works in His ongoing activity of preservation, areas which really are more crucial than science suspects. The Bible was not in error. Moreover, they asserted, the Biblical accounts of God's miraculous interventions into the affairs of His creation were proof positive that God continues to be active in the affairs of the world.<sup>10</sup> And natural law had not ruled out the miraculous—not yet anyway.

These defenses, although somewhat persuasive for a time, were soon overrun as gaps began to be closed through the discovery and formulation of new laws of nature. Following the lead of philosophers like Spinoza, theologians in the eighteenth century began to equate God's will with the laws of nature. Biblical accounts describing miraculous interventions by God into the affairs of nature were soon suspected of the same kind of pre-scientific distortion as were biblical accounts which gave

God a primary role in directing the ordinary affairs of the world. Such a skeptical attitude about the accuracy of Biblical reports of miracles was given tremendous impetus by the British philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776).

In his work, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume launched a devastating attack against orthodoxy's belief in Biblical miracles. He argued that proper historical reasoning must proceed on the basis of two rules: "conformity with the observed course of nature and determination of the reliability of witnesses."<sup>11</sup> Since miracles are a violation of the laws of nature, they certainly are not in conformity with the observed course of nature which operates on the basis of natural law. Hence, Hume concluded, because the laws of nature have been established on the basis of "firm and unalterable experience," uniform experience weighs against any alleged violation. Thus, miracles are intrinsically the least probable of all possible events. Historically speaking, the evidence is always against them, and thus testimony to their occurrence is either a deception or the product of naive delusion. Whereas Newton theoretically removed God from the role of ultimate causal agent in the ordinary affairs of the world, Hume removed Him in a practical way from the role of supernatural intervener in the created order. Enlightened reason marched on toward further conquests, and the amount of sheer "faith" needed to sustain an enlightened conviction in a fully authoritative inspired Bible produced a rising level of tension.

Another thinker of the eighteenth century who was to add to this tension was Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781). "Lessing argued that an historical truth was not capable of logical demonstration and, since miracles are historical truths, the truth of Christianity could not be demonstrated by them."<sup>12</sup> All historical knowledge, reasoned Lessing, is based upon evidence about which there is never certainty of its reliability. It is always possible that more reliable evidence might turn up in the future, thus altering our historical judgments. Christian truth demands certitude, which, although reason may supply, history cannot. "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of a necessary truth of reason." Hence to argue, for example, from the historical event of the resurrection (an accidental truth of history), to the deity of Christ (a necessary truth) was to shift categories *and* to attempt to render a kind of result from history that history is incapable of rendering. If Hume had shown that it was pointless to hold historically to miraculous events as reported in the Bible, Lessing took the matter one step further by arguing that all alleged historical events, by their very nature, are insufficient vehicles for mediating divine truth which demands certitude. Not only was

it now considered impossible historically to regard such events (for example, Christ's resurrection) as factual historical events, but it was considered equally impossible to make *any* alleged historical events the basis for certain knowledge of God and matters of religious truth.

Perhaps in the light of this background it is easier for us to understand why the former faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, could assert in 1972 that we "ought to focus on the central meaning of the miracle accounts for us rather than dwell on the authenticity of isolated miraculous details."<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps more to the point is the further observation by the faculty that "if we keep asking 'Did Jesus really rise,' we will never hear the promise."<sup>1</sup> Let us understand clearly at this point that, like the moderate theologians in our Synod, not one of the influential thinkers we have discussed thus far intimated that God cannot work miracles or that miracles are theoretically impossible. They were simply skeptical about the Biblical reports to their occurrence and our intellectual ability to defend their occurrence and relevance to the Christian faith. Miracles could occur; but they could not be known objectively or serve as the basis of an authoritative knowledge of God.

The last major eighteenth century thinker whom we will consider is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his *Critique on Pure Reason*, Kant attacked the use of reason as a legitimate avenue for gaining certain knowledge of God and His divine wisdom. He argued with great effectiveness that all thinking must be checked by the data of experience for its validity to be established. With great expertise he launched a convincing attack upon both the classical arguments for the existence of God and the metaphysical rationalism of his day. The existence or the non-existence of something (even God) cannot be determined by thought alone; it depends entirely upon experience. Reason is competent to unify or systematize the phenomena of human experience but cannot reach beyond to the unseen part of reality. What is important about Kant for our discussion is his division of reality into two separate realms or "stories." The lower story consisted of the realm of the phenomenal or natural world of human experience. On this level lay all observable experience, such as historical facts and the laws of nature. In the upper story, which Kant called the noumenal realm, there existed God, ultimate purposes, values, and all absolutes. All divine or religious truths were placed in this unverifiable, objectively unknowable "upper story." The effect of this dualistic view of reality was to remove God from that realm of human history and experience by which He could objectively reveal Himself—a realm in which the Bible had God operating (in a seemingly objective fashion) all the time.

Epistemologically, Kant's dualism forced theologians to conclude that God revealed Himself in such a way that the Biblical writers merely perceived His working and action in a subjective manner, not in such a way that He was objectively manifest.

We recall from the beginning of our discussion that, for Luther and the post-Reformation fathers, the Bible was regarded as God's fully authoritative revelation to us, mediating a fully reliable history of God's dealings with man. This course of events culminated in the entry into human history of God's Son, whose miracles, fulfilment of prophecy, and bodily resurrection offered mankind powerful signs that God had visited His people and died on a cross to redeem them from their sins. The reformers, as numerous church fathers before them, tied together the accuracy of Biblical history and an inspired and infallible Word of God. Hence Luther can, on the one hand, say: "My neighbor and I—in short, all men—may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err."<sup>15</sup> (And here Luther is upholding both the divine authorship *and* the inerrancy of Holy Writ.) And on the other hand, with consistency he can argue in the following manner:

Christ says, "If my preaching does not make you willing to believe that God dwells and is in me and that I dwell and am in Him, then believe this because of the works you see before your eyes. These works as no one can deny, are not human; they are divine. They prove and attest powerfully enough that he speaks and works in me and through me." These are the works and miracles which he performed publicly before all the world—giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf—solely by the Word. These are not only divine works, but they are also witnesses of God the Father. Therefore he who sees and hears these, sees and hears the Father in them.<sup>16</sup>

Listen again to Luther's reasoning:

Therefore when Christ says: "In three days I will raise it up," He proclaims that the death of His body lies within His power, that He can lay down His life and take it again at will (John 10:18). Therefore He cannot be only man but must also be God. The fact that He is to be destroyed and die is proof of His humanity. But that He will rise again, that He will raise Himself from death, bears witness to His divinity and to His divine power to quicken the dead, for this is not the work of a human being. In this way Christ reveals His true divinity and humanity to the Jews.<sup>17</sup>

Because the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God, they are also, argues Luther, a fully reliable account of God's super-



natural intervention into human history. Their witness to Christ's miracles and resurrection provides a solid basis to assert Christ's divinity, oneness with the Father, and power over life and death. These signs provide powerful and convincing reasons for the Jews to accept Christ as the Messiah and the Son of God who has come to redeem the world from its sin.

Now, if you take away the reliable historical witness, you take away *both* objective access to Christ and a fully inspired and authoritative Bible. And this, as we have seen, is exactly what much of the intellectual world in Christendom believed men such as Newton, Hume, Lessing, and Kant had done. The issue was not problems with parallel Biblical accounts of the same events. The issue was not problems with genealogies, numbers, or chronology. These problems had been known and faced since the time of the early church fathers. The key issue which the Enlightenment raised was the validity of viewing God as a causal agent in the affairs of nature and human history. The issue was whether or not a modern enlightened Christianity could continue to accept the Biblical picture of God's direct, objective, and immanent involvement in His created order. Orthodoxy tried to maintain a yes, others tried to work out a compromise, and liberalism said no.

It was not until the close of the nineteenth century that the overall impact of the Enlightenment became firmly embedded in the new science of history. Probably no one came to grips more effectively with what historical criticism had done to challenge Biblical authority than the famous German theologian, Ernst Troeltsch. In his work *Historismus und Seine Probleme*, Troeltsch expounds with great clarity the objectives of historical criticism and the central principles which undergird its endeavor. The critical scholar must attempt to recover the past through an objective scientific analysis of the evidence. Events must be analyzed, evaluated, and understood in terms of the origins or antecedent causes with the objective of getting behind the evidence so as to reconstruct what truly happened, what caused it, and what was its effect. To carry out this task, the critical scholar must observe three principles which undergird the critical task. The first principle Troeltsch calls the *Principle of Criticism*. This principle states that the Scriptures (or any alleged historical writing for that matter) must be subjected to a critical analysis whereby "our judgements about the past cannot simply be classified as true or false but must be seen as claiming only a greater or lesser degree of probability."<sup>18</sup> Here in Troeltsch's Principle of Criticism we see the shadow of Gotthold Lessing, who maintained that historical truth cannot provide objective certitude.

Troeltsch's second principle, known as the *Principle of Analogy*, asserts that in making historical judgments of probability, the critical scholar must presuppose that our own present experience of reality is not radically different from the experience of past ages. Troeltsch elaborates:

The analogy of what we actually see happen before our eyes and what goes on within ourselves is the key to criticism. The deceptions, shifts, creation of myths, frauds and factions which we see before us are the means whereby we recognize the same things in the material that has come down to us. Agreement with the normal, usual or at least frequently attested manner of events or conditions which are familiar to us is the hallmark of probability for events which criticism can accept or allow really to have happened.<sup>19</sup>

Here we see enunciated as a formal historical principle both Newton's closed-system world-view and David Hume's dictum that current uniform experience is to be the basis for judging the plausibility of alleged unique miraculous events in the past. Since supernatural interruptions of the course of nature are not observed to occur in the present, the historian is incapable of dealing seriously with alleged claims to their occurrence in the past.

Troeltsch's third principle he calls the *Principle of Correlation*. This principle asserts that the phenomena of man's historical life are so related (in terms of cause and effect) and interdependent, that no radical change can take place at any one point in the historical nexus without effecting a change in all that immediately surrounds it. What Troeltsch is saying here is that the causes and effects of historical events must be sought within the immediate context of historically conditioned space and time. Explanations, therefore, which would attempt to explain causes or effect of historical events in terms of ultimate divine causality or eternal effects are not admissible because they would force the scholar to leave his proper domain, which is space-time history, not the unseen realm of eternity. Here, of course, we see the influence of Immanuel Kant, who maintained that reason may properly analyze and understand the data of human experience in the phenomenal realm, but in providing understanding may not cross over into the noumenal "upper story" realm for final causes or ultimate meaning.

With these underlying principles, the task of the critical scholar is to carry out an objective, independent investigation of the Biblical text using all available resources and evidence for the purpose of determining the credibility of the Biblical writers in terms of reconstructing as well as possible what

really happened. A concomitant task is to seek to understand why the Biblical writer composed his document and arranged his materials in the fashion we have received them in the resultant text. Appropriate to this task are the following presuppositions:

1. Rather than revealed truths from God, the Biblical documents represent first and foremost the personal faith and beliefs of their human authors and secondarily the faith and beliefs of part or all of the writer's contemporary religious community. Hence as Norman Perrin has written in *What is Redaction Criticism*,

We must take as our starting point the assumption that the Gospels offer us directly information about the theology of the early church and not about the teaching of the historical Jesus, and that any information we may derive from them about Jesus can only come as a result of the stringent application of very carefully contrived criteria for authenticity.<sup>20</sup>

2. Due to the human origin of the Biblical documents, the exegete is not surprised to find contradictions, inaccuracies, and errors within them. However the Spirit's activity is understood in relation to the writing of Scripture, it does not preclude the possibility of such contradictions, errors, and inaccuracies. The competent twentieth-century Biblical scholar is in a position to point many of them out. To this effect Walter E. Rast in his *Tradition History and the Old Testament* has asserted that the historicity of the Bible, that is, the conditioned character of its contents, a conditionedness which makes them dependent upon all kinds of human limitations and situations in precisely the same way as the legacies of all sorts of historical traditions, is an assumption of modern criticism throughout. That assumption makes it modern.<sup>21</sup>

This is the same assumption that the former faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, maintained in *Faithful to Our Calling*. That document asserts that, because the Biblical writers operated with dissimilar standards of history and accuracy together with limitations imposed by their culture and language, the reliability of Scriptures cannot be determined by twentieth-century standards of factuality.<sup>22</sup>

3. Because of these built-in limitations of language and cultural conditionedness, the *verba* of the text never in themselves constitute God's revelation in the sense that the thoughts expressed by the words and God's thoughts are one and the same.

4. It can never be stated *for certain* that the events recorded in Scripture occurred as reported, but probabilities can be

assessed on the basis of several factors, among which are the alleged event's uniqueness and the amount of time that exists between the event's occurrence and the written record. (A.) As a general rule, the greater the time span between an event's alleged occurrence and its recording, the greater the likelihood that the recorded details of the event are inaccurate, conflated and distorted, usually by heightening the degree of supernatural involvement. (B.) Moreover, the more numerous the parallels that exist between a given supernatural event recorded in Scripture and supernatural events recorded in contemporary pagan literature of the same area, the greater the probability that the Biblical event did not actually occur but rather was probably a common legend or myth that numerous religions used for didactic purposes.

Gene Tucker reflects these general presuppositions in his *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* where he observes:

Sagas usually tell us more about the life and time of the period in which they were circulated and written down than they do about the events they mean to describe. A careful form critical and traditio-historical analysis, however, can help the historian to distinguish between the old and the new and the historically reliable and the unreliable in those sagas. It also helps us to separate older traditions from newer interpretations.<sup>23</sup>

Or as William A. Beardslee has put it in his *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*:

The recognition that the New Testament does belong extensively to folk literature has gradually opened the possibility of a new understanding of formal analysis of the New Testament. The first major application of this new approach has been "form criticism" . . . The new turn has shown that the most useful data for comparison come not from familiar literature of the West, but from folk materials, myths, legends, cultic materials and from phenomenological studies of religion generally.<sup>24</sup>

5. Prophetic discourse has a direct application to the immediate situation in which the utterance was made, regardless of whether or not Scripture at some point interprets the passage as applying to a later time and circumstance. In harmony with this assumption, the former faculty in St. Louis maintained that "The Old Testament—on its own terms—does not explicitly bear witness to Jesus Christ, but it proclaims the words and deeds of God for Israel."<sup>25</sup> Hence, the faculty asserts in the *Faithful* document that "many 'Messiahs' like David ruled over Israel," "Solomon was the first fulfilment of the messianic

promise to David," and "a young woman in Isaiah's day gave birth to a child named Immanuel."<sup>26</sup>

It is evident, then, that historical criticism is not a neutral method of Biblical interpretation. Its presuppositions come right out of the Enlightenment and are antithetical to a Reformational understanding of the intrinsically divine character of Holy Scripture. As Gerhard Ebeling has so clearly argued,

It leads only to obscuring the nature of the problem when the critical historical method is held to be a purely formal scientific technique, entirely free of presuppositions, whose application to the historical objects in the theological realm provokes no conflicts and does no hurt to the dogmatic structure . . . . For historical criticism is more than lively historical interest.<sup>27</sup>

Such is the case because, as Robert Funk summarizes,

Historical criticism exposes the word of God as a fully human word by exposing the human situation into which it is received as radically human. This procedure may be termed "unmasking" . . . and involves calling in question all human claims to access to the divine. It is important to grasp the connection of this formulation with Bultmann's repeated emphasis on history as a closed causal continuum *as the presupposition of the historical method* (italics supplied) . . . . The historian cannot presuppose supernatural intervention in the casual nexus as the basis for his work . . . .<sup>28</sup>

## II. Erosion in the Objective Foundation for Faith

Despite these principles which lie behind the historical-critical method and rejection of full Biblical authority, it is apparent that many historical critics do not base the content of their faith upon the results of a consistent application of this method. Few apply these presuppositions with the rigor of a Rudolph Bultmann or Heinrich Ott. To understand why and how this is so, it is necessary to look at some of the changes which have taken place since the Reformation in the understanding of the nature and role of faith.

Following Melancthon's lead, classical Lutheranism understood saving faith to be composed of three elements: *knowledge* of the key events by which our Lord effected our redemption, *assent* to the facticity of these events, and *trust* or *confidence* that the Redeemer, the Risen Christ will be gracious to forgive *my* sins and grant *me* eternal life. Orthodox Lutheranism was convinced that, since the Scriptures were fully authoritative and therefore mediated a reliable history of God's redemptive work which culminated in Christ's death and

resurrection, even the unbeliever could be brought to an intellectual knowledge of and assent to these truths apart from the subjective inner working of the Holy Spirit in conversion. This kind of faith they called historical faith (*fides historica*) or human faith (*fides humana*), as distinguished from saving faith (*fides divina*), which included a Spirit-wrought trust in the promise of forgiveness. Saving faith rested on an objective *extra nos* incarnation, redemptive death, and resurrection in space-time history. Therefore, for Orthodoxy, history was an objective point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever. The Christian faith was anything but an irrational leap of faith into a free-floating religious commitment.

This understanding of faith and its relationship to the events recorded in Scripture was to change, however, under the influence of Martin Kahler. In his own day Kahler was an obscure Lutheran theologian. He was a contemporary of Ernst Troeltsch and in 1892 published a small monograph entitled *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*. In this work Kahler struggled with the nature of faith, the Christ of the church's historic profession, and the effects of higher criticism upon the Bible. Kahler was caught in the middle. On the one hand, he agreed with Lutheran Orthodoxy in its understanding of Christ and the substance of the Gospel as the Biblical writers witnessed to it. But, on the other hand, he sided with liberalism—in its pessimistic appraisal of the reliability of the Scriptures as historical documents. Kahler brought these two seemingly antithetical viewpoints together in one unified theological position. The product was neither "orthodoxy" nor "liberalism" in the traditional sense of these words. From one standpoint, there is the Jesus of history (*Historie*) who emerges from a scientific, historical-critical examination of the New Testament. This is the Jesus who can be objectively known through critical scholarship as it carries out its task of attempting to reconstruct what really happened back there on the basis of a critical examination and evaluation of the evidence. From another standpoint, however, there is the Christ of faith whom we meet in the proclamation of the text of the Biblical witness. For Kahler, this portrait was the *real* historic Christ who lived on earth, died, and rose again for our sins. The important point, however, is that for Kahler, this real historic (*geschichtlich*) Christ can be known only subjectively, through the preaching of the Gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit. The true historic Risen Christ can be known and encountered only in the believer's contemporary experience of faith. He cannot be known objectively through some inspired Bible which guarantees in advance our knowledge of Christ, nor can He be known from an objective historical inquiry.

True Christian faith, for Kahler, is rooted in a personal encounter with the living, historic Christ in the contemporary situation. Faith must be content with the *viva vox* of Christ which we confront today in the ongoing preaching of the church. It is Christ Himself who will validate the truthfulness of the biblical proclamation in the heart of the believer "without the midwifery of historical research" and without some prior guarantees by an inspired text.<sup>29</sup> The authority of Scripture, for Kahler, is not grounded in its juridical or divine nature but rather in its *creative* authority that is instrumental in authoring faith in the historic Christ. Key salvation-events, such as the resurrection of Christ, were affirmed by Kahler to be *historic* (*geschichtlich*) events which, though true, could not be seen as such on the basis of an objective historical examination of the Biblical records. It was Karl Barth and the later twentieth-century school of neo-orthodoxy which was to appropriate Kahler's understanding of the solely dynamic authority of the Biblical proclamation together with the distinction between objective *Historie* and the faith realm of *Geschichte*.

Both Luther and the later Lutheran dogmaticians were convinced that the Scriptures were God's inspired Word and that their history was reliable beyond question. Because these men regarded the Scriptures as historically reliable, they appealed to them as primary historical sources for the life and work of Christ. For them, the historical Jesus (Jesus of *Historie*) was the historic Biblical Christ (Christ of faith, *Geschichtliche* Christ), and the historic Biblical Christ was the historical Jesus. These men made no dichotomies between historic events and historical events, nor between faith and history.

Now, Kahler's chief concern was to defend the Biblical picture and witness of Christ from the destructive and anti-supernatural hands of nineteenth-century historical methodology. There were two avenues that he could have taken to achieve this end. The first would have been to demonstrate the errors in the methodology employed by the historian. The second was to remove the Biblical witness from the historian's domain of work. Kahler, as we have seen, took this latter road. By setting up a distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, Kahler divorced the "Biblical Christ" from the "Historical Jesus" and, in doing so, removed the Church's proclamation of Christ from its objective foundation.

By making this distinction between historically verifiable *Historie* and non-historically verifiable *Geschichte*, Kahler has indeed accomplished his objective of removing the Biblical Christ from historical criticism. His victory, however, comes at a great price. Because Kahler's Biblical Christ lies in the supra-

historical realm of unverifiable *Geschichte*, the Church's proclamation of the Gospel loses its objective, historical ground. Both believer and unbeliever are cut off from any objective contact with Christ. He can be encountered only by faith through the dynamic of the New Testament proclamation, in contemporary experience. The post-Reformation Lutheran fathers grounded the *fiducia* of faith in a *notitia* of fact. Kahler has inverted the order, so that the trust-relationship is first established by a divine encounter with the present living Christ in the contemporary situation. This encounter then serves to ground the content of the Biblical proclamation. The veracity of the Christian truth-claim can be seen only from within the circle of subjective faith.

We see these very same kind of efforts being made among many American Lutheran theologians who are trying to protect the central aspects of the Biblical Gospel from the destructive effects of higher criticism. This is accomplished, first of all, by doing what Kahler has done, by shifting all aspects of the Bible's unique authority into a dynamic power which operates subjectively on the hearts of those who are called through the proclamation of the Gospel. This we see in the former St. Louis faculty's assertion that "inspiration of the written word pertains to the effective power of the Scriptures to being men and women to salvation through the Gospel."<sup>30</sup> Inerrancy is likewise given the same dynamically subjective kind of reinterpretation. In this regard the faculty asserted that in *discussing* the whole truth about what God was doing in Jesus Christ, God does not err.<sup>31</sup> Here, as with Kahler and the later school of neo-orthodoxy, Biblical authority is described only in terms of what the proclamation of the Gospel accomplishes dynamically in terms of a Spirit-wrought subjective faith. No divine authority or influence is attributed to Scripture itself. It is one's subjective encounter with the Spirit in the proclamation of the Gospel that grounds all true knowledge of Christ and the content of saving faith. In reacting against any objective grounding of the Gospel, the former faculty declared that "any approach to the Scriptures which focuses on the need for historical factuality rather than on the primary need for Christ leads us away from Christ rather than to him."<sup>32</sup>

The authoritative thing here is God's dynamic proclamation of Law and Gospel. Events such as the resurrection are affirmed "for the sake of the Gospel," not because reports to such a resurrection are mediated to us objectively through a historically accurate, inspired New Testament witness. The former faculty stated: "Any tendency to make the doctrine of the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture a prior truth of the



Gospel or give support to our faith is sectarian.”<sup>33</sup> “The Gospel gives the Scriptures their normative character, not *visa versa*.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, we see an understanding of faith and the Biblical witness which pulls together facets of an Enlightenment-inspired historical-critical methodology and an inverted interpretation of a Reformational understanding of faith. The proclamation of the Gospel becomes a medium of a subjective appropriation of Christ which validates by theological necessity certain key facets of salvation-history which have been placed out of the reach of the potentially destructive critical method. The trick is to try to hold on to two antitheses, without either one invalidating the other.

There can be no cooperation, however, between authentic Lutheranism and historical criticism. Instead, we must recapture a truly Reformational and Confessional understanding of Scripture and faith in order to make a strong Gospel proclamation to our contemporary world, which needs a clear voice. It needs a clear voice concerning the real Son of God who truly entered human history, manifesting His identity by many signs and wonders; a clear voice concerning a historical resurrection—occurring in real space and time—which validates a truly redeeming death on Calvary’s cross; a clear voice concerning a fully reliable and divine testimony concerning all that our gracious God has done for us.

#### FOOTNOTES

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3. WA 9, 356.
4. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 50-51.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
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7. See especially Benjamin A. Reist’s comments in his survey of Troeltsch’s thought in his *Toward a Theology of Involvement* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 20-25.
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32. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
34. *Ibid.*