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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

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1) The Church of Jesus Christ is made up of men and women who have the same faith as Peter's faith. Wherever there are people to whom God has personally revealed Jesus Christ as the Son of the living God and who integrate their lives around Him, there is the Church. Apart from this reality the Church has no foundation. Any superstructure not built on this foundation is a facade. We should not be afraid therefore if some of the current superstructures fall, nor should we waste our efforts seeking to prop them up—administrative programmes, forms of worship, properties, institutions and the like. What is of paramount importance is people who believe and confess Jesus the King. For the emergence and upbuilding of such a people our energies are to be directed.

2) The Church is a power structure against which the ultimate weapon of men and the devil has no power. In days when the Church is increasingly being told to prepare for persecution, she needs to learn *now* that because she is the Church of the risen deathless Lord, she has nothing to fear. She can stand up against all the powers of evil. She will suffer and pour out his (her) soul unto death, "yet will still stand up with boldness that will startle many nations, and kings shall shut their mouths because of him (her)" ([Isaiah 52:15](#)). There is talk today of a theology of persecution. Surely this is it. Because the Church is the community of the risen Lord, she is invincible before men's greatest power. We must preach more on these lines.

3) The Church so constituted and so emboldened has the keys of the Kingdom. With these she proclaims the Gospel of God's truth and admits into the Kingdom of God those who will believe and receive the message of the Kingdom. Not to be identified wholly with the Kingdom, the Church is nevertheless part of the Kingdom, the sign of its presence in the world and the instrument of its increase. The divine order is first the Kingdom, then the Church, then the world—not the kingdom-world-Church. The Kingdom comes with Christ, into the world. Those who enter the Kingdom constitute the Church. The Kingdom creates the Church and the Church preaches the Kingdom to the world.

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## Concrete Alternatives to the Historical-Critical Method

Gerhard Maier

*Translated from German by Leni Sommer and Carol Gregory and printed with permission. A version of this article appeared in Cornu, 1980.*

*Dr. D. A. Carson in an article "Hermeneutics: A Brief Assessment of Some Recent Trends" published in ERT April 1981 discusses the Maier/Stuhlmacher debate on the historical-critical method. Dr. Maier has outlined his position in The End of the Historical-Critical Method (ET St. Louis: Concordia 1977). In this article Dr. Maier takes the debate a stage further.*

(Editor)

## WHY “ALTERNATIVES”?

“However right it is for the historical method to continue as the best way to push through to historical realities ... we should nevertheless not now conceal the negative consequences of the radical protestant criticism of the Bible and cover it up or make it appear harmless by referring to its effect of doing away with illusion and building true faith”.<sup>1</sup> With this statement of Peter Stuhlmacher’s We find ourselves in the midst of the problem.

Alternatives to the present interpretation of Scripture can only be discussed if we postulate that

- a) the present Bible exegesis has proved to be deficient and therefore needs to be reconsidered, and
- b) that genuine alternatives are coming forth which promise improvement.

In this paper, I shall limit myself to point a).

In the book referred to, dealing with “Interpretation of Scripture on its Way to Biblical Theology”, Stuhlmacher mentions the erroneous development of the exegesis of the New Testament which left the canon of Holy Scriptures an expanse of ruins of hypothetical possibilities”.<sup>2</sup> And he ends by saying: “From a historical point of view, it is imperative to resist the hypothetical disintegration of the New Testament tradition into a multiplicity of individual branches p. 24 and communities and isolated theologies which can no longer be interrelated”.<sup>3</sup>

In my book on “The End of the Historical-Critical Method” I tried to explain why we are not making progress with the existing historical-critical method. The reasons may be summarized as follows:

- A canon within the canon, explicitly or tacitly taken for granted by all who are working according to the historical-critical method, cannot be deduced from the Bible.
- The Bible as a whole is not only the Word of God but also the word of man and refuses to be split into eternal truths and statements which are valid only for a period of time.
- It is a medium of divine communion, not to be separated from the personal relationship of God and man, and is, therefore, more than just an object.
- For its content criticism, historical-critical work needs a standpoint outside of the Bible and therefore its conclusions are already given.
- and finally, congregations cannot be built up by means of the profuse results of historical-critical work and a common creed becomes impossible.<sup>4</sup>

During a discussion with students at Tübingen in January 1978, Peter Stuhlmacher agreed in principle to this analysis. As “agreement” the report published in *Theologische Beiträge* (ThB) states the observation of “a grave deficiency in today’s exegesis”.<sup>5</sup>

If we merely consider the field of scientific results, we do indeed find intolerable differences with regard to subjects of central importance. Exegetically the protestant doctrine of justification cannot be separated from the atonement tradition of the N.T.

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<sup>1</sup> *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie*, Göttingen, 1975, pp. 102ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.111.

<sup>3</sup> pp.126ff, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Wie legen wir die Schrift aus?*, Giessen/Basel, 1978, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> *ThB*, 9, 1978, p.224.

Bultmann considered the idea of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins to be immoral.<sup>6</sup> For Käsemann it was a “tradition of minor importance”; he was not interested in the atonement tradition of the N.T.<sup>7</sup> For Stuhlmacher it is “central”.<sup>8</sup> What are we to believe? The bridge between promise and fulfilment is one of the fundamental elements of the Bible. It cannot be separated from prophecy. For Conzelmann [p. 25](#) and Lindemann the predictions with regard to Jesus’ death are merely *vaticinia ex eventu*, originating from church teaching.<sup>9</sup> According to W. Wrede it was impossible for Jesus to have known in advance that he would be returning to life in three days. For John the evangelist, however, the fact that Jesus had the gift of prophecy is an indication of His messiahship ([John 2:24f; 13:1](#)). For Bengel, Beck, Delitzsch, Hartenstein, Hengetenberg and Hofmann the Revelation contains predictions of the future destinies of the church and the world. For Semler that was bizarre fantasy, for Gunkel “nothing but confused, wild phantasmagoria bordering on madness”, in relation to prophecy.<sup>10</sup> Now, who is right? One of the fundamental decisions for the interpreter of Scripture is his position with regard to the unity of Scripture. Schlatter held that “unity is a necessary characteristic of Scripture in order that it may be recognised as the Word of God and may serve as such ... If Scripture is to help us reach our goal it must not destroy its own testimony by contradictions”.<sup>11</sup> The unity of Scripture, however, is no longer a presupposition for most exegetes. Peter Stuhlmacher, for instance, said in *Theologische Beiträge* 1977 that for him “a final Yes” with regard to the unity of Scripture “could not be proved to be either genuinely protestant nor historically established”,<sup>12</sup> and then in January 1978 he said: “Faith can certainly not be based on the canon as such, because here testimony stands against testimony”.<sup>13</sup> Who is right here? Whom shall we believe?

Enough of these examples. There is only one other thing we should seriously consider: Content criticism of the Bible has for 200 years proved to be an intolerable burden to congregations and not only in Germany. It prevents us, the protestant church, from testifying to the world around us as we ought to. Now as before it breaks the neck of young theologians’ fresh missionary enthusiasm. It has indeed, as H. Strathmann says, become “the creeping disease of protestant theology, and thus of the protestant church”.<sup>14</sup> Neither the considerable number of respectable achievements, nor the acknowledgement of the fact that God has been acting in, *sub* and *cum* a theology sometimes gone awry, sometimes stimulating and yet frequently erring, frees theology from responsibility for the “creeping [p. 26](#) disease” which Strathmann speaks about. It should be an important and honourable task for us to contribute towards overcoming this illness. Our country has conveyed to the world the blessing of the Reformation. It has followed this blessing with the poison of radical biblical criticism. The present situation does, however, seem to be open to a

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<sup>6</sup> *Neues Testament und Mythologie, Kerygma und Mythos, 1*, Tübingen, 1961, p.20.

<sup>7</sup> *ThB*, *ibid.* p.227.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> H. Conzelmann/A. Lindemann, *Arbeitsbuch zum NT*, 3, ed., Tübingen, 1977, pp.88ff.

<sup>10</sup> H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, Göttingen, 1895, p.391.

<sup>11</sup> A. Schlatter, *Das christliche Dogma*, 2, ed., Stuttgart, 1923, p.369.

<sup>12</sup> *ThB*, 8, 1977, p.90.

<sup>13</sup> *ThB*, 9, 1978, p.226.

<sup>14</sup> In E. Käsemann, *Das NT als Kanon*, Göttingen, 1970, p.41.

hermeneutical change of mind. I should now like to indicate a few steps that have been taken towards that change of mind.

## THE PRE-CRITICAL PHILOLOGICAL METHOD

Generally it is hardly known that before Semler differentiated between Scripture and the Word of God a careful scientific method of exegesis was practised. This method, of which Christoph Reuchlin and Johann Albrecht Bengel gave an example, I should like to call the “pre-critical philological method”. Compared to the historical method used today one is surprised to learn that the individual procedures have largely remained the same. In fact, the historical-critical method has merely added literacy-critical analysis and form-criticism. But we can perceive signs of these even in Bengel’s method.

Bengel starts with the “crisis sacra”, which is what he calls his identification of the Scripture text truest to the original manuscripts. Obviously the meaning of the term “criticism” has had a chequered history. There are vast difference between Bengel’s “holy critique”, Schlatter’s critique of “pure observation” and the content criticism of the Bible. It does not exactly contribute to clarity to have so many “critique” terms used interchangeably or incorrectly. After establishing the text, Bengel continues by elucidating the meaning of words. He aims to point out from the original meaning of the words “the simplicity, depth, harmony and wholesomeness of the divine thought”.<sup>15</sup> Then he turns his attention to the context. The “emphatic” examination (*Sermo emphaticus*), weighs the position and importance of words. The emotions of the authors are also considered in order to determine the range of meaning later. After this Bengel compares the text with other statements from Scripture. Bengel firmly adheres to the rule *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.<sup>16</sup> But Bengel also goes beyond Scripture in order to throw as much light on the text as possible. He makes use of patristics. Like Spener, he holds Eusebius and Irenaeus in high regard.<sup>17</sup> He also takes into consideration p. 27 country and custom, and non-biblical authors, amongst whom are Philo, Josephus, the Talmud and in general the history of the Church and the world. Now after taking these methodological steps the range of meaning can be arrived at. Finally he comes to the “homiletic” i.e. the edifying application; A concise preface to the Gnomon summarizes the procedure of proper exegesis. It should be done “critica, polyglotta, antiquaria, homiletica”<sup>18</sup> which means, in a way that is discerning, philologically profound, appropriate to the age of the documents, and relevant for those who hear it today. Thus exegesis is based on the conviction that the complete Holy Scripture is inspired: “Every last word issued from the Holy Spirit”.<sup>19</sup> For Bengel the Bible is “truly reliable, one can absolutely depend on it”.<sup>20</sup> Yes, even the style of the Bible corresponds with the way God speaks: “Deus, non et homo, sed ut Deus verba facit, se ipso digna”.<sup>21</sup> And yet, Bengel’s concept of inspiration, with his fundamental conviction of the unity of Scripture, is not rigid, not separated from the world and

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<sup>15</sup> E. Ludwig, *Schriftverständnis und Schriftauslegung bei Joh. Albr. Bengel*, Stuttgart, 1952, p.27.

<sup>16</sup> C. Wächter, *Johann Albrecht Bengel*, Stuttgart, 1895, p.151.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, pp.142ff.

<sup>18</sup> Preface No. 5, Cf. Ludwig pp.22, 27, 31, 52ff, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig p.24.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. K. Hermann, *Johann Albrecht Bengel*, 1, Teil, Stuttgart, 1937, p.369.

<sup>21</sup> Gnomon Preface No. 4.

experience. On the contrary, it is by itself a historical procedure, leading apostles and prophets in different ways. With regard to Mark and Luke, Bengel says: "With them there is a lesser degree of theopneusty, they are not as precise and as accurate as Matthew and John".<sup>22</sup> but contrary to growing rationalism, he denies that reason the final word with regard to divine matters.<sup>23</sup>

What does this consideration of church history contribute? We perceive that "historical-critical" and "scientific" are by no means to be equated. The term "scientific" can be exclusively applied to the historical-critical method only as a result of modern dogma or ignorance of church history. And if we are told that the historical-critical method is "the" scientific method for our time<sup>23a</sup> then it must be pointed out that neither J. T. Beck nor his pupils, neither Kähler nor Heim, neither Anglo-Saxon scholarship on the whole, nor the impetuously emerging theology of the so-called Third World, have bowed to this dictatorial claim. p. 28

We can of course, not continue where Bengel left off. His definition is outdated, the front lines have changed, the historical aspect is vehemently demanding to be considered.

In searching for concrete alternatives to the historical-critical method, it is important to get acquainted with present models, but without dispensing with the valuable knowledge of the past—including that of the pre-critical era.

If I am right, there are at present *three different alternative models*: "Pneumatic exegesis", represented especially by Hellmuth Frey, the "hermeneutics of acceptance" which Peter Stuhlmacher proposes and a third which for the time being I want to call "historical-biblical".

## PNEUMATIC EXEGESIS ACCORDING TO HELLMUTH FREY

Hellmuth Frey has turned our attention to the exegete himself. Only when we keep this in mind can we comprehend his call for repentance directed at the present historical-critical theology. He wants to draw attention to the fact that "church and theology in their blindness" are guilty. It is "hybris" because it gave up "humble dependence on the Holy Spirit",<sup>24</sup> and instead stayed closely bound to "Enlightenment" and "humanism".<sup>25</sup> It is an expression of their "sin", "violation of the Holy God" when with their "anthropological approach they attempt to seize control of God's revelation from their position as human beings."<sup>26</sup> A short time ago A. Sierszyn took up Frey's position and tried to expand it.<sup>27</sup>

Where does the call to repentance lead us? For H. Frey it is not enough to exchange one method for another: "It is not methods that are important, but a fundamentally new approach".<sup>28</sup> Yes, in fact we ought not to have a new method, because every method is a "degradation of knowledge from the Spirit", it is man's attempt to control the Spirit of God,

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<sup>22</sup> Ludwig *ibid*, pp.88, 126; H. Reiss, *Das Verständnis der Bibel* bei J. A. Bengel, Münster, 1952, p.58.

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig, *ibid*, pp.77.

<sup>23a</sup> E.g. Stuhlmacher Cf. paragraph 4 following.

<sup>24</sup> H. Frey, *Die Krise der Theologie*, Wuppertal, 1971, p.86.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.87.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>27</sup> *Die Bibel im Griff?* Wuppertal, 1978.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.88.



doomed to fail right from the start.<sup>29</sup> Instead of this we should “rely in a childlike way on the presence of the Great Interpreter (i.e. the Holy Spirit), and claim it by praying and listening”.<sup>30</sup> With the new penitent pneumatic attitude of the exegete, p. 29 healing has started from the roots. Thus the term “pneumatic exegesis” is not quite correct.<sup>31</sup> It would be more accurately called “exegesis of the pneumatician”. Frey, however, is aware of the approaching dangers of subjectivism. He stresses that he “does not want to ban historical work and escape into some kind of fundamentalism”. Indeed, from his point of view he “feels obliged to be very thorough” in asking what the text says. And he asks questions with regard to “form of text, translation, history of concepts, figures of speech and historical setting, immediate and general biblical context”.<sup>32</sup> The attentive reader will, of course, not fail to notice that in guarding against “fundamentalism” and a serious consideration of imagery and the historical setting, it can indeed develop into “critical” work, critical in a sense different from the one indicated by the combined term “historical-critical”. That is why one might actually call Frey’s model “pneumatic-philological”.

From Frey we can learn that in considering what adequate exegesis should be and may be, we cannot ignore the exegete himself. The problem of a *theologia regeneritorum*, frequently treated lightly, is by no means obsolete. Furthermore, we can learn from Frey that the rejection of the historical-critical method does not mean rejection of the *science* of exegesis. Even the radical position of the rejection of every method contains an acknowledgement, a serious will, and a step towards science. Finally we learn here that a “method” as a sequence of steps is not the end, that it must always remain open to correction even with regard to its basic principles, which we have to review hermeneutically time and again.

But Frey leaves his readers with many problems. How can we deem methodical individual steps necessary, and at the same time call a combination of them “sin”? Does the *pneuma* demanded do justice to the missionary dimension of biblical testimony for everybody concerned with practising exegesis? Does this demand, on the contrary, not make dialogue more difficult because we are now no longer willing to be corrected? Above all: how are we to teach and to communicate without being able to take others along with us, since there is no “method”? Perhaps P. Stuhlmacher can help us here.

## **THE “HERMENEUTICS OF ACCEPTANCE” ACCORDING TO PETER STUHLMACHER**

Whilst Frey concentrates on the exegete, Stuhlmacher concentrates p. 30 on the weaknesses of existing exegesis. Again and again he struggles for an adequate exegesis, starting with “Trying to Take Stock” and going on to “New Testament and Hermeneutics” in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (ZThK) 68, 1971 (page 121 ff); his latest publication is entitled “Understanding the New Testament” subtitle “Hermeneutics”, Göttingen, 1979.

If we look at the result of this struggle from the point of view of what Stuhlmacher calls “radical criticism”, we find that a surprising change has taken place in him. He not only severely condemns the “arbitrary way in which critical biblical science sets up itself and

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p.80ff.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p.81.

<sup>31</sup> But Frey himself uses this definition.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*.

its assumptions as absolute”,<sup>33</sup> not only does he firmly oppose the proposition that “Scripture in itself remains obscure and has no recognisable centre”,<sup>34</sup> not only does he expect the exegete to have a “positive attitude to the subject matter announced by Scripture”,<sup>35</sup> and to accept the “doctrine of inspiration of Scripture” as a “view inherent in the Bible and in accordance with it”, and therefore to be prepared to accept inspiration as an event of election and enablement” in the sense of the inspiration of the writer,<sup>36</sup> but rather, he proceeds to a new approach, enlarging Troeltsch’s principles of criticism, analogy and correlation by means of the “principle of perception” proceeding from a fundamental “acceptance of the transmitted text of the Bible”.<sup>37</sup> He calls this new approach “the hermeneutics of acceptance of the biblical texts”.<sup>38</sup> In his dispute with catholic exegesis he points out two procedures by means of which protestant exegesis can avoid every suspicion of “Agorie”. The first is a consideration of “range and limit” of the “critical means which may be used with regard to the original manuscripts of the Bible” and the second, “adherence to the dogmatics of the Church”.<sup>39</sup>

What do these hermeneutical fundamental decisions really signify in terms of the method of exegesis?

First of all, Stuhlmacher wants to continue using the historical-critical method of exegesis in a conscious and considered way.<sup>40</sup> He still believes it to be the only method which can be “scientifically justified and which makes it possible for the Church to proclaim the p. 31 biblical message in a historically flexible, contemporary way.”<sup>41</sup> No other method can be called “scientific”. Stuhlmacher is aware of the fact that the historical-critical method, to quote his own words, “concerns ... the methodology of historical science developed in the course of the Enlightenment ... by means of which historical tradition, which was determined in the form of manuscripts, is analysed in a methodical way and submitted to modern rational judgement”.<sup>42</sup> In consequence his thesis which at first looks so fascinating, acquires an unrelieved and in this way probably unrelievable tension. This tension is a result basically of the fact that the exegete has to justify himself before a two-fold tribunal. On the one hand it is his task “to serve the Bible in ... its superiority of truth”; on the other hand he is just as much irrevocably obliged to do justice to the “scientific consciousness of truth of modern times”.<sup>43</sup> That means he is simultaneously subject to modern judgement and to biblical authority. Does it not follow that in the end he will not have done justice to either of the two? The central question, it seems to me, is: How can we hold the Bible to be God’s truth and at the same time criticize

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<sup>33</sup> ὅμ ἔρσπετην etc., p.209, Cf. p.28.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p.200.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p.81.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, pp.47, 49ff, 217, 112.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, pp.220, 218.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, pp.205ff.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, p.210.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p.206.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.22.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, pp.206, 146. To the “Wahrheitsgewissen der Neuzeit” cf. pp.32, 66, 86, 92, 98, 172f, 217.



it as such? What about its “superiority of truth” if at the same time it permits of critique? And which weighs heaviest, the consciousness of truth, directed by autonomous reason, or biblical statement, when they express different views? Stuhlmacher is caught in a dilemma. Actually he is inclined to favour autonomous criticism; this is apparent when he says that biblical testimony is “in itself historically diverse and partly contradictory”,<sup>44</sup> or when the New Testament is evaluated, indeed not for the first time, by means of the Pauline message of reconciliation. It is not surprising then when theologians find fault with the so-called Jewish-Christian writings and Stuhlmacher says: “Neither in the Epistle of James nor in the Epistle to the Hebrews, nor in the Gospel according in St. Matthew, have the Christian Jews managed before God to trust exclusively in the reconciliation through Christ in the way Paul does, or as in the First Epistle of Peter”.<sup>45</sup> Regrettably, he continues to profess that “a final Yes” with regard to unity and authority of the Bible is impossible for him.<sup>46</sup> Here we are confronted with the hermeneutical thesis of a theology p. 32 of mediation which is not yet convincing. But still it seems to hint that the historical-critical method in current use may not be the only method of scientific exegesis.

## THE HISTORICAL-BIBLICAL METHOD

In the following we make three assumptions: That a scientific method of exegesis is required, that a historical approach to Scripture is necessary and that the incomparable special character of this Scripture calls for special biblical hermeneutics. I shall try to give a short description of these presuppositions.

A scientific method of exegesis is necessary for mutual understanding. I must be in a position to make both those who agree and those who disagree with my interpretations understand how and why I arrived at just these conclusions. Otherwise *pneuma* would be opposed to *pneuma* and God himself would all too easily be claimed to be a party. Contrary to H. Frey I hold that spirit and method need not be opposed to one another. Quite a number of activities in a congregation are based on methods as for instance administration, management, giving lessons, without excluding the Spirit. For the incarnation of the Spirit it is necessary for us to employ provisional correctable methods—in obedience to God, of course. A scientific method is also required for teaching. Theological theory can only be arrived at and transmitted in methodical ways. Without method, arbitrariness would result, the very thing Frey wants to overcome. Moreover, apologetics and mission in the field of thinking require a somewhat rationally comprehensible method. How shall I try to convince by means of argument without employing the logic of human thinking? Only making an idol of method, setting it up as absolute, is wrong.

The second presupposition we are considering is the necessity of having a historical approach to Scripture. This is an area in which the Enlightenment and even historians have rendered theology a service by asking persistently and precisely what really happened. But now we must persist just as much in pointing out that the historical treatment of the Bible is not the only possible nor the only fruitful one. It seems to have dawned on us during the last few years that we have in certain respects very much overestimated the significance of historical methods. By considering the historical aspect as absolute we inevitably arrived at the schizophrenic state where we separated

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, p.239.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*, p.239.

<sup>46</sup> *ThB*, 8, 1977, p.90.

individual piety and critical thinking, the “pagan head and the pious [p. 33](#) heart”.<sup>47</sup> We ought to realise instead that apart from the historical method of biblical interpretation, the Church may legitimately use other methods, for instance the dynamic-direct method in which I allow myself to be touched by Scripture directly; the spiritual one in which I can also legitimately work in a typological and to a certain degree even in an allegorical way, or the dogmatic method in which I work in accordance with the point of view of the early church fathers and teachers of the Church. Communication between the different methods is essential; they must all be integrated into the Church of Christ. Theology itself is service for and in the Church, and needs to be integrated into its activities.<sup>48</sup> It certainly does not stand above the Church, either as all-knowing or as a prophet. But why should we take a historical approach to the Bible? We reject a deduction from the “understanding of truth and reality of modern times”. The Bible exegete will have to go on using a historical method even when the historical interest of the world surrounding him has vanished altogether. Nor is it sufficient reason that the historical approach is one which can most easily be ‘converted’ into a method. We study the historical background of the Bible because it is—although not exclusively—a historical document. It tells us about the acts of God, which we can also experience in our space-time world. Yes, Christian faith cannot be separated from history; in simple terms: it depends on the fact that here something really has happened.<sup>49</sup> Or, as C. H. Dodd said: “it belongs to the specific character of Christianity that it is a historical religion ... it remains, therefore, a question of acute interest to the Christian theologian, whether their testimony is in fact true”.<sup>50</sup> That is why historical research can, without doubt, enlarge and deepen our understanding. And there is a second reason. Historical research can help to correct sentimental or purely traditional views. A striking example is the way in which liberal research into the life of Jesus has in many instances been able to correct itself. Albrecht Ritschl regarded “the Kingdom of God” as the centre of his theology. His son-in-law, Johannes Weiss, who helped to put forward “consistent eschatology”, realised that Ritschl had interpreted the term “the Kingdom of God” in the wrong way. Whilst [p. 34](#) Ritschl was of the opinion that “the Kingdom of God” consisted of a community of human beings associated for moral purposes with the supremacy of the Spirit over nature, Joh. Weiss proved that for Jesus the Kingdom of God had an eschatological dimension, and was expected to be given by God in a supernatural way. Weiss arrived at this justifiable correction by means of historical research. Of course, we should not overemphasize the necessity of historical research of Scripture lest it appear indispensable for salvation. But what about the third assumption, the specific “biblical hermeneutics”? Is Stuhlmacher not right in speaking about a “permanent failing” of a hermeneutica sacra and especially in accusing biblical hermeneutics of being scientifically impracticable “unless the community of believers gives up all claim to scientific communicability of method and result with regard to biblical interpretation?”<sup>51</sup> Why then does he later emphasize that belief is “no threat to scientific character and communicability” of interpretation?<sup>52</sup> And

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<sup>47</sup> A. Schlatter, *Atheistische Methoden in der Theologie*, *BFchTh* 9,4, 1905, p.235.

<sup>48</sup> But see E. Lohmeyer, *ThLZ*, 1926, Sp. 471, Cf. Stuhlmacher *ibid*, p.221: Der Exeget der Bibel ist “auf das korrigierende Urteil ... auch der glaubenden Gemeinde angewiesen”.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. [Luke 1:1](#) “things that have taken place amongst us”.

<sup>50</sup> *History and the Gospel*, 2. ed., London, 1964, pp.11ff.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, pp.148, 186, 205.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p.204.

does it not, indeed, go beyond the usual “teaching of the art of interpretation of scriptural monuments”—thus the definition of hermeneutics by Wilh. Dilthey<sup>53</sup>—when he wants to “serve” the “superior truth” of the Bible?<sup>54</sup> It gives food for thought to look through the list of theologians who held on to a specific biblical hermeneutic, Have Paul, Augustine, Luther, Coccejus, Spener, Bengel, Francke, Rambach, Crusius, Stäudlin, Lücke, Hofmann, Auberlen, Beck and Hartenstein failed in this respect? Were they unscientific? Or were they not in fact just as able to communicate and just as “successful” as critical exegetes? It is essential to bear in mind that the Bible is not just a book like any other book, but revelation of divine truth put into writing,—which is what it claims to be. A revelation of the only God, even if provisionally considered hypothetical, cannot be interpreted according to exactly the same rules as Hesiod or Curzio Malaparte. We must at least give it the room it claims in order to speak to us. And that means—as distinct from world literature—to “trust in advance”, which includes trust in the “superiority of truth” mentioned.

With its claim of inspiration it points beyond human messengers to God as the final author of its message. The N.T. gives evidence of this inspiration for the Scriptures of that time, for the O.T.<sup>55</sup> Most writings p.35 of the N.T. testify to these inspirations with regard to themselves; Matthew and John, for example, by the careful wording of the introductions to their Gospels (compare [Matt. 1:1](#) with [Gen. 5:1](#); [John 1:1](#) with [Gen. 1:1](#)), Paul for his “Gospel” in [Gal. 1:1ff](#); [1 Cor. 7:40](#) or the Revelation in [22:18f](#). Finally the Early Church, moved by the internal testimony of the Spirit, took certain writings of the apostles and their pupils for its own normative standard. None of the current terms used for inspiration, neither verbal—nor personal—nor scientific inspiration, could be called satisfactory. Following Scripture I therefore suggest we should speak of “entire inspiration”.<sup>56</sup> Thus we can avoid the misunderstanding that inspiration is contrary to the task of historical research or ought always to be understood mechanically. According to [Heb. 1, 1](#) God spoke “polytropos”. The term “entire inspiration” makes us understand the connections between history and salvation, the bridges from prophecy to fulfilment, the recognizable aim of what the Bible communicates. In a similar way the Lausanne declaration in article 2 says that God’s word “is without error in everything it proclaims”—let us be precise: in what it wants to proclaim. It is indeed yet to be ascertained what sort of historical information Holy Scripture intends to communicate. And in using the term “entire inspiration” we do not surrender what—in spite of the unfortunate term “verbal inspiration”—we must not give up: that the entire Scripture is intended to be accepted as a divine gift. To use Bengel’s beautiful words, it is and remains “a letter which my God caused to be written to me, which I shall be guided by and by which my God will judge me.”<sup>57</sup> From this let me point out a final conclusion. If it is true that indeed all Scripture is inspired, i.e. the authoritative word of God which will be fulfilled,<sup>58</sup> it means that we are obliged to look for its unity. For the basic element of its unity is that all Biblical texts either claim to speak about the only God or to Him. The Father of Jesus

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<sup>53</sup> *Ges. Schriften*, V, 1924, p.320.

<sup>54</sup> Stuhlmacher *ibid*, p.206.

<sup>55</sup> [2 Tim. 3, 16](#); [2 Pet. 1, 19ff](#).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Wie legen wir die Schrift aus?* Basel/Giessen, 1978, pp.33ff.

<sup>57</sup> K. Hermann, *Johann Albrecht Bengel, 1. Teil*, Stuttgart, 1937, p.369.

<sup>58</sup> *Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode*, 4. ed., Wuppertal, 1978, p.71.

Christ is at issue, who allows each witness to speak at his own place with his own means. It is impossible for a canon within a canon to be proved historically; it destroys this unity and completeness. "Torn fragments",<sup>59</sup> theological contradications, presuppose what as yet could not be proved, that God set biblical witnesses against each other. By rejecting the content criticism of the Bible we separate ourselves from the system of moderate criticism. p. 36

I believe it can be shown even historically that biblical statements fit harmoniously into a final union of their messages and aims. Belief and thought, understanding and experience, equally support the following statement in Karl Heim's memoirs: "I cannot think of any book more homogenous than the Bible".<sup>60</sup>

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# The Asian Way of Thinking in Theology

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*Lorenzo Bautista, Hidalgo Garcia and Sze-Kar Wan completed an MTh. at Asian Theological Seminary, Manila in June 1981. This thought-provoking paper was prepared in response to a course I taught on "Theological Issues in Asian Theology". It reflects a serious search for a hermeneutic which is true to Scripture and yet addressed to the concrete problems of Asia today. Reflection and response from ERT readers is welcomed.*

(Editor)

## INTRODUCTION

Since the time of the New Testament, theology has emerged from the inter-action between Scripture and representatives of various cultures. In recent years this dialogical character of theological reflection ought to have been underlined by the virtual explosion of modern techniques of communication and transportation. Unfortunately, however, the dominant voices have until recently still come from Europe and North America. The result has not only been an occasional miscarriage in communicating the gospel, but more seriously the failure to appropriate the insights of the whole body of Christ in enriching our understanding of Scripture and our faith. The day is surely past when we simply allow

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<sup>59</sup> J. T. Beck: see B. Riggenbach, *Joh. Tobias Beck*, Basel, 1888, p.154.

<sup>60</sup> Ιχνη γεδενκε δερ'οριγεν Ζειτεν 3. ed., Wuppertal, 1960, p.207.