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The Historical Critical Method As Employed In The Study Of The New Testament

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IN THE FIELD of contemporary New Testament scholarship and modern theological literature, the designation "historical critical method" is a technical expression referring to a type of New Testament study which embraces, besides language learning, the investigative procedures of textual criticism, literary criticism, historical criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and what has very recently been termed *Sachkritik* or content criticism. (Among these, the discipline with which this paper proposes to deal at greater length is form criticism.) While the various disciplines may be considered separately, faithful practitioners of the historical critical method normally employ the aforementioned investigative techniques in conjunction.

Any scholarly, exegetical study of the New Testament must obviously begin with a mastery of the Greek language in which it was written. A next requisite is a Bible student's capacity, by following the scientific canons of textual or lower criticism to establish as carefully as possible the correct text of the New Testament Scripture; that is, the text which conforms most closely to the original autographs of these Scriptures. The techniques involved in this process are well known. Their use implies an acquaintance not only with the accepted text critical rules but also with the several kinds of variation signs in the text, the corresponding symbols appearing in the critical apparatus, and the general scheme of notation followed by the compilers of this apparatus in a scientific edition of the New Testament like that of Eberhard and Erwin Nestle.

Then comes the application of the rest of the criticisms aforementioned. At this point it will be useful to draw a distinction. On the one hand, it may be stated that every New Testament scholar—every conservative included—is interested in many of the questions with which these criticisms concern themselves. Every conservative necessarily makes use in his exegetical work, for example, of a kind of literary and form criticism. On the other hand, we should recognize that when the disciplines of literary, form, redaction, and content criticism are referred to in contemporary theological literature, they designate investigative procedures as employed by scholars of varying degrees of liberal orientation, who operate with certain rationalistic, anti-Scriptural presuppositions and various arbitrary, unwarranted assumptions in their study of the Biblical text—as will be shown presently. Such critics practice what may from the conservative point of view be called "radical" historical criticism, and as a

result do violence to Biblical texts in their interpretation of the New Testament Scriptures.

Literary and Historical Criticism

Dan O. Via points to the main investigative interests of traditional literary criticism in the summary statement:

Literary criticism has traditionally concerned itself with such matters as the authorship of the various New Testament books, the possible composite nature of a given work, and the identity and extent of sources which may lie behind a certain document.¹

Closely associated with literary criticism is historical criticism, which further pursues the question of the authorship of a given Biblical document, investigating in particular the possibility of historically identifying the writer; considers the accuracy of the historical data presented within a Bible book; studies agreements and disagreements between a Scriptural document and the works of secular writers, where such are available; and refers to findings in the fields of comparative religion and archaeology, when these can illuminate historical material in the Scriptural text.²

In the area of literary criticism, many critics, influenced by considerations like changes in vocabulary or style or author's point of view, repetitions in the Scriptural text, supposed logical hiatuses and logical digressions, and other phenomena, are led to deny the authorship which the Scriptures plainly assign to various books of the Bible. Certain critical scholarship, for example, rejects the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles; the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter; the integrity of Romans and 2 Corinthians; and so on. Much scholarly attention is given the so-called Synoptic Problem, which is posed by the fact that the Synoptic Gospels display both a basic and substantial similarity, on the one hand, and also many differences in detail, on the other. The questions arise: how are the three Gospels to be related historically? How are the marked similarities and differences to be explained?

Among the solutions which scholars offered, two predominate in that they achieved wide acceptance among New Testament students. The first solution advanced was the contribution of two men by the name of Bernard Weiss and H. J. Holtzmann shortly after the turn of this century (1901). It is the so-called Two-Source Hypothesis (or, Two-Document Theory), which suggests that Mark is the oldest Gospel and Matthew and Luke used his work as a source in constructing their Gospels; that in addition to Mark, Matthew and Luke draw on another source, labeled Q (from the German word *Quelle*, "source"), now lost, which was a collection of the sayings of Jesus; and that the apostle Matthew may have been the author of this document Q. The other and later solution is the Four-Source Hypothesis, originated by B. H. Streeter in 1924, and developed as an advance upon the Two-Source, so as to account for facts not explained by the latter. This Four-Source Hypothesis

provides two additional sources for Matthew, one labeled M, for material peculiar to Matthew, and the second described simply as material preserved by oral tradition, probably at Antioch. The theory similarly provides additional sources for Luke, another document labeled L, for material peculiar to Luke, plus an oral tradition which furnished the materials for the first two chapters of the Gospel.

It should be noted that both these theories rest heavily upon conjecture, despite their wide acceptance and approval by notable critics. There are scholars, for example, who hold with the ancient tradition that names Matthew as the first of the Gospels chronologically and who on good grounds question that a document like Q ever existed. The traditional view in our Lutheran Church and in the Christian Church generally has been that the details of the origin and historical interrelationship of the Synoptic Gospels simply cannot be definitely determined.

Form Criticism

Students of the New Testament—conservative scholars included—may be said to practice a certain type of form criticism, when, as a preliminary procedure in the interpretation of a Biblical text, they legitimately seek to identify and classify its literary type—as poetry, legal material, parable, apocalyptic, historical narrative, and so forth—and to apply to the respective literary types appropriate rules of interpretation. As the designation “form criticism” is generally employed in current literature on the New Testament, however, it signifies radical form critical procedure.

Radical form criticism, or *Formgeschichte*, has concerned itself largely with investigating the Synoptic Gospels. It has been classified as a literary-historical method, since it is associated with the investigative methods of literary and historical criticism. Yet it proceeds beyond these. Radical New Testament form criticism accepts in general the main results of literary criticism, the solutions the latter applies to the literary problem of the sources of the Gospels, and moves from these backward in time in an endeavor to determine the pre-literary oral traditions and the influences which moulded them. Its purpose has been to get behind the sources which literary criticism identifies and “to describe,” as Via puts it, “what was happening as the tradition about Jesus was handed on orally from person to person and from community to community.” In a word,

Form criticism has been especially concerned with the modifications which the life and thought of the church—both Jewish-Christian and gentile-Christian—have introduced into the tradition, and form critics have worked out criteria for distinguishing those strata in the Gospels which reflect the concerns of the church from the stratum that might be thought to go back to the historical Jesus.”

To aid them in their analytic work these critics have joined in the historical critical consideration of the narratives and sayings of other literatures, such as those of the Jewish rabbis, of Greece, Persia, India

and China, to discover common laws in the transmission of oral tradition or folklore which are assumed to be operative also in the development of the Gospel tradition. As for the evangelists, they are to be considered, according to the view of form critics, not as authors, but as collectors and editors. In the words of E. Basil Redlich's explanation:

Their work consisted in collecting, choosing, grouping, re-shaping and handing down the traditions. They had nothing to do with the original moulding, for they took over material which had a form and which existed in independent, self-contained units.⁵

An important goal of form critical study of the Gospels is to provide Bible students with what form critic Frederick C. Grant calls "a better understanding of Jesus' own authentic words, as well as a clearer test for distinguishing his own veritable utterances from later accretions and interpretations, added in the course of handing down the tradition."⁶

Founding fathers of the form critical school of New Testament study are Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, whose first books on the subject of form criticism appeared in 1919 and 1921, respectively, the years immediately after the close of World War I. The two major works of these leaders, Dibelius' *From Tradition to Gospel* and Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, still offer basic information on the form critical method as applied to the study of the New Testament Gospels. Norman Perrin points out that

With regard to their [Dibelius' and Bultmann's] impact upon the English-speaking world of biblical scholarship, it should be noted that it was Dibelius who made the major impact in the nineteen thirties and forties, but that Bultmann is the more important figure today. . . . It is Bultmann's meticulous analysis of the tradition text by text that has better stood the test of time.⁷

Because of this we shall now focus our attention on an analysis of Bultmann's form critical procedure.⁷

A factor that set the stage for form criticism was a growing skepticism in scholarly circles after the Two-Source Theory was advanced that Mark, while its priority among the Gospels was still assumed, was genuinely historical throughout. Wrede and Wellhausen and others argued that Mark's Gospel consisted of a number of narratives and sayings of Christ which Mark had bound together in a single framework. The narratives and sayings, it was said, could for the most part be trusted for their accuracy but not their contexts and the general framework of the Gospel which, it was presumed, the evangelist had artificially supplied. Just as Matthew and Luke were regarded as having adapted and altered the Marcan narrative for their respective purposes in penning their Gospels, so it was thought that Mark had done the same with his sources. No valid

information on the life and activity of Christ, accordingly, was set forth in the Marcan account. The charge was further made that Mark's Gospel reflected not only primitive tradition (with greater or lesser accuracy) but that the writer had also inserted into it elements of later tradition, beliefs about Christ, for example, which were originated by the Church after Jesus had been taken from them and which the Lord Himself had never taught.

A first step in Bultmann's form critical investigation was to distinguish in a systematic way between the traditional material which the evangelists used and their editorial additions. In his essay entitled "The Study of the Synoptic Gospels" he states:

It may be seen quite clearly that the original tradition was made up almost entirely of brief single units (sayings or short narratives), and . . . all references to time and place which serve to connect up the single sections into a large context are the editorial work of the evangelists.

According to the Marburg scholar, practically all references to time and place in the Gospels are to be regarded as unauthentic.

But even the original tradition itself was not, in Bultmann's estimation, in all its parts equally reliable. It was necessary next, he felt, to concentrate attention on the traditional material and ascertain its historicity. Bultmann suggested that this could be undertaken, if the New Testament student would recognize that "especially in primitive literature, literary expression . . . makes use of more or less fixed forms, which have their own laws of style." He reasoned that, "since," in his words, "the form would naturally oppose itself to any serious alterations," the conclusion could be drawn that "it will be possible to determine in the individual sections whether the appropriate form was purely expressed or somewhat revised, and so one should be able to determine the age of the section."

The next principle of Bultmann's form critical study, is given by this scholar as follows:

A third procedure of form critical study is to familiarize oneself not only with "the appropriate laws of style of a specified literary form" but also with the laws by which the further development of material takes place, *i.e.*, a certain orderliness in change by which a body of tradition is always controlled in its growth.

Laws of Popular Narrative Formulation

The laws governing the formulation of popular narrative and tradition are indicated by Bultmann and illustrated in the Synoptic material. The first is that

the narrators do not give us long unified accounts but rather small single pictures, individual scenes narrated with the utmost simplicity. These always occupy but a brief space of time; apart from the Passion Narrative no event or proceeding is narrated which covered more than two days. As a rule only two speaking

characters appear in these scenes, or at most three; involved proceedings are beyond the powers of the simple story teller. Where groups or crowds are present, they are treated as a unit.

The next law is stated as follows:

As such narratives pass from mouth to mouth, or when one writer takes them over from another, their fundamental character remains the same, but the details are subject to the control of fancy and are usually made more explicit and definite.

Examples cited are Mark 9:17, which reports that a father brought his demoniac son to Jesus, whereas in Luke's parallel account (9:35) it is additionally stated that he was an only son. Similarly, the palsied hand healed, according to Mark 3:1, is designated as the right hand in Luke 6:6; so also the severed ear of the high priest's servant which is mentioned in Mark 14:47 is referred to as the right ear in Luke 22:50. With regard to the attack on this servant in Gethsemane Bultmann adds:

One may observe in the account of this scene which appears in the Gospel of John another important law at work: though the Synoptists do not name either the servant or the disciple who struck him, John gives the names, Malchus and Peter.

Another tendency to characterize more definitely may be seen in a Gospel narrator's preference "to give in direct discourse what his source gave indirectly." Thus, a mere reference to the fact that Peter upbraided Christ in Mark 8:32 is expanded in Matthew's account (16:22), where Peter is reported as saying, "Be it far from Thee, Lord!"

The third law, as Bultmann sees it, is "the inclination to impose a schematic idea of the course of Jesus' activity." He calls attention to the fact, for example, that "the opponents with whom Jesus engages in disputation are almost invariably scribes and Pharisees, who interrogate Him with malicious intent," and claims that this is unhistorical.

Literary Forms in the Synoptics

We may now proceed to a consideration of the various literary forms (distinct literary types) which Bultmann discerns in the evangelic material and his remarks about each. The first literary type Bultmann calls *miracle stories*. He feels that these did not actually occur; that they possess a close resemblance to the Hellenistic miracle narratives, after which they may in his estimate have been patterned. The following characteristics of this literary form may be noted. Usually the narrative is given in three parts. In the first the condition of the patient is described, frequently with an emphasis upon the gravity of the illness or its long duration. In the second the account of the healing itself is provided. The peculiar manipulations of the healer are often mentioned, as in Mark 7:33; 8:23. Typical is that the healing words pronounced are given in an

unknown foreign tongue (compare "Talitha kumi" in Mark 7:34). Another characteristic is that not infrequently the story states that no one was present at the performance of the miracle proper, as, for example, in Mark 7:33 and 8:23. In the third part of the narrative unmistakable evidence of the healing is given: witnesses often exclaim in wonder and the person healed gives some clear demonstration of the fact that he has indeed been helped.

To the second literary type which Bultmann discovers he applies the designation *apothegms*. (An apothegm by definition is a terse, instructive saying; a maxim). Bultmann classifies as apothegms the sayings of Jesus "which have been handed down in association with a little scene, in which according to the tradition they were originally spoken." To this grouping belong the controversies recorded in the Synoptics (for example, Mark 2:1-12, 23-28), conversations with eager inquirers (Mark 10: 17-22); and scenes of a biographical character (Mark 6: 1-6).

Bultmann traces the presence of apothegms (both the sayings of Christ and the scenes mentioned as occasioning them) to the creative activity of either the Jewish or the Hellenistic church. For example: the Marcan accounts of the disciples' refusal to fast, their rubbing out kernels of grain on the Sabbath, and their non-observance of ritual washing before meals, and Jesus' response to the resultant controversy with Jewish critics of these actions of the twelve as recorded in 2: 18-19, 23-26; 7: 1-8, are explained in this way. Says Bultmann:

Apparently the situation is to be understood only as follows: these traditions first arose in the Christian community and are to be explained by its situation. The 'disciples,' *i.e.*, the primitive Christian church, have broken with the old customs in this matter, and they are defending themselves against criticism by means of the stories, through which they make their appeal to a saying of Jesus.

He continues:

Those apothegms which are of a biographical character are likewise for the most part creations of the community, since they give expression to what Christians had experienced of their Master or what he had experienced at the hands of his people. It is accordingly clear that the calling of the disciples in Mark i. 16-20 reflects no historical situation; the story completely lacks motivation and psychological probability. The scene sets forth symbolically and picturesquely the common experience of the disciples as they were raised by Jesus' wonderful power out of their previous spheres of life. It is in this way that we must also explain Mark iii. 31-35 (Jesus' true relatives); xii. 41-44 (the widow's mite); Luke ix. 57-62 (various followers); x. 38-42 (Mary and Martha). Even the scene in Nazareth (Mark vi. 1-6) may perhaps not reflect a particular historical

event, but is rather a symbolical picture, setting forth the attitude of the people as a whole to the preaching of Jesus.

Bultmann singles out as a third literary type in Synoptic literature the *Words of Jesus*. He introduces his discussion of this category of material with statements expressing his skepticism as to the historicity of many of the sayings of Christ. As far as he is concerned, where the traditional words receive their meaning from their context (compare Luke 12:57-59), there they are old and authentic. On the other hand, where "the original occasion and the historical connection of the words are unknown, and the context in which the evangelist has placed them rests upon a very uncertain interpretation," there it is likely that the words were a later formulation of the evangelists or of the Christian community. They may be added, Bultmann feels, as the evangelists experienced interpretations of other sayings or teachings of Jesus.

The last literary type which Bultmann claims to discover in the Synoptic Gospels he refers to as *legends and myths*. (We may note parenthetically that a legend, by dictionary definition, is "an unauthenticated story from earlier times, preserved by tradition and popularly thought to be historical"; a myth, "A traditional story, usually focusing on the deeds of gods or heroes. . . . It purports to be historical. . . ." Thus, a myth may be regarded as a special type of legend.) The legends and myths in the Gospels are fabrications which have been given their form "in the interests of the cultus" and "for purposes of edification," says Bultmann. For example: the original Passion Narrative, the focal point of the early Church's proclamation, possibly consisted in a relatively brief report of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane, his condemnation by the Jewish court and by Pilate, the trek to Calvary, and his crucifixion and death. But in a short time other episodes were added to this account, such as, suggests Bultmann, the picture of Jesus and the weeping women of Jerusalem on the Via Dolorosa (Luke 23:27-31), the suicide of Judas (Matthew 27:3-10), and the setting of a watch at the grave (Matthew 27:62-66). Comments Bultmann:

It is not only pious fancy which is at work here, but also the apologetic interest. This is especially noticeable in the effort of the evangelists to shift the blame from the Roman authorities to the Jews, as e.g., in the account of Pilate washing his hands (Matt. xxvii. 24-25).

Bultmann classifies as one of the major New Testament myths the synoptic resurrection narrative. He writes:

It is equally clear that the Resurrection Narrative has been composed in the interest of faith and under the influence of devout imagination. The Easter story of Mark is unfortunately only a fragment; for the episode of the women at the grave (xvi. 1-8) must originally have been followed by an account of some appearance to Peter of Jesus (and to the other disciples)

in Galilee. This ending has been lost, and much later a substitute was supplied (xvi. 9-20) in some of the manuscripts. Matthew and Luke have a series of Resurrection Narratives, and if one adds those given in John, it will be clear how active the Christian imagination has been.

Categorized as "cult-legends" are also the following Scripture accounts: the narration of the Last Supper in the Synoptics; the baptismal narrative; the transfiguration narrative; the narrative of Jesus' temptation; the narrative of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem; the narrative of the birth of Christ.

Results of Bultmannian Form Criticism

With these remarks on the alleged legends contained in the Synoptic Gospels we come to the conclusion of our brief consideration of the basic principles of form criticism and the procedures of one of its most notable practitioners, Rudolf Bultmann. What, in Bultmann's estimation, are the results of the application of the form critical method to the study of these Gospels? He writes:

It is through the medium of the community . . . that the figure of the historical Jesus appears. Though we cannot now define with certainty the extent of the authentic words of Jesus, we are nevertheless able to distinguish the various levels of tradition; and when, by a process of careful historical investigation, we distinguish the secondary layers in the tradition, what results is not, like the peeling of an onion, a reduction to nothingness—since the farther one goes the nearer one comes to the center, which holds the secret of its historical power. . . . On one point one must rest content: the character of Jesus, the vivid picture of his personality and his life, cannot now be clearly made out; but, what is more important, the content of his message is or will be ever more clearly recognizable. Though one may admit the fact that for no single word of Jesus is it possible to produce positive evidence of its authenticity, still one may point to a whole series of words found in the oldest stratum of tradition which do give us a consistent representation of the historical message of Jesus. These are the prophetic words, echoing the call to repentance [such as]:

'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it;

But whosoever shall lose his life [for my sake and the gospel's], the same shall save it' (Mark viii. 35).

'Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God' (Luke ix. 60).

'No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God' (Luke ix. 62).

Criticism of Bultmannian Form Criticism

Now to a brief evaluation of the principles, procedures, and results of form criticism. The radical, Bultmannian form critical

method of Synoptic study is open to a number of serious objections. The first is its underlying rationalistic anti-supernaturalism, according to which all divine intervention and operation in human affairs are out-of-hand rejected. Rankly blasphemous, for example, is its relegation of all statements pertaining to the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ to the realm of the mythological. This anti-supernaturalism, as Robert Gundry says, "prejudices historical enquiry and is theologically and scientifically out-of-date, for it rests on the rationalistic concept of a closed universe and a rigid concept of natural law."⁸ A second fundamental objection to form criticism is its refusal to judge fairly the written Synoptic records and give them the honest hearing accorded other historical literature. The approach to these records is marked rather by an unreasonable bias against their reliability and an extreme subjectivism in the establishment of standards for the recognition of what is supposedly unauthentic in the Biblical accounts. We may regard these as the basic underlying fallacies of the form critical method.

Next it should be noted that many of the stated assumptions of form criticism are arbitrarily established and altogether unwarranted. Basil Redlich calls attention to a number of these. A few are indicated below. One is that during the pre-literary, formative period of oral tradition "the narratives and sayings, with the exception of the Passion Narrative, circulated mainly as single and self-contained detached units, each complete in itself"—to cite Redlich's summary of this form critical principle." Together with this ought to be mentioned a second unwarranted assumption, namely that the contexts in which the units of tradition are set in the Gospels are editorial additions and therefore unauthentic. On the contrary, as regards the Gospel narratives Redlich points out, for example:

There are sections in the Gospel [of Mark] which bear evidence in themselves that they each formed a complete series before they reached the evangelist. The first section which is a complete unit of stories is that which covers i. 21-39. It is intrinsically impossible to discard the editorial matter or to refuse to see in this section the personal reminiscences of an eyewitness, who was undoubtedly Simon Peter. The connecting links make a complete story of a day's work.

The notes of time are too definite to be artificial or literary. They read like a consecutive narrative, honestly reported and repeated. The narrator gives the impression of having been there when the things happened.

A third unjustifiable assumption of form criticism is that all the material of the Gospels can be classified according to various "forms." Certainly this subject matter can be divided into narratives and sayings. But all of it cannot be classified according to form, because form is not present in all the material. It may be admitted that Bultmann's apothegms and miracle accounts contain forms, but

beyond these there are many narratives without any distinctive form. "These," says Redlich, "have been variously classified according to their contents or according to the subjective judgment of each form critic," but not according to their forms. Prominent in this grouping are the legends and myths. Once again, Redlich:

The terms legend and myth are objectionable to English students for they are judgments of the historic value of the narratives and are of a disparaging character. They also imply that the events included in them serve no soteriological purpose. If form criticism deals with forms and attempts to classify forms and to trace the history of forms and to discover the processes of their growth, their method is regular. But to use terms which pass an initial judgment on the historical value of the stories and to classify them not according to form but according to the critic's own view of their veracity, is very irregular and unjustifiable. Form criticism then becomes a judgment of truth or falsity, and not a scientific method of research.

A fourth unwarranted form critical assumption is that, in the words of Redlich, "The vital factors (these may also be termed the "*Sitz im Leben*," that is, the life situation) which gave rise to and preserved these forms are to be found in the practical interests of the Christian community." Redlich's criticism of this assumption is as follows. He speaks with regard to the sayings:

. . . the life situation might just as readily be found in Jesus Himself . . . the community preserved the sayings because they were vital and authoritative pronouncements of Jesus. Paul gives definite evidence that this was the case, and he is careful to distinguish between the words of Jesus and his own dicta. 'But to the rest say I, not the Lord.' 'Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give my judgment' (I Cor. vii. 10, 13, 25).

Again:

Form criticism in stressing the influence of the primitive community is blind to the influence of Jesus as a Rabbi and a prophet. On the one hand, it makes the community a creative body, of which there is little or no trace in the New Testament. The primitive Christians were not all Rabbis nor all Solomons. On the other hand, it is not recognized that Jesus was not a teacher who perpetually repeated the same maxims or memorized addresses which He delivered without variation. He is likely to have repeated the same saying in different form and constantly varied His discourses.

Martin Franzmann's words are also pertinent at this point:

Form critics attribute to the "community" a creative power which is really incredible; while the Gospels themselves and the

Book of Acts with one voice proclaim that Jesus the Christ created the church, the form critics seem to conclude that the church somehow created the Christ. The net result of their study is the conclusion that the Gospels, which incorporate the tradition of the Christian community, tell us a great deal about the faith of the early Christian community, but very little about Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰

A fifth unjustifiable assumption of form criticism may be phrased as Redlich puts it: "The original form of the tradition may be recovered and its history traced, before being written down, by discovering the laws of the tradition." Franzmann speaks to this view in this way:

In practice the emphasis of form criticism is all on the Christian community as the creator and bearer of the Gospel tradition; the fact of the apostolate, the fact that Jesus Himself prepared men to be witnesses to Him with divinely given authority and equipped them for their task by His gift of the illumining and empowering Spirit, this fact is largely, if not entirely, ignored. The teaching tradition of the church is treated as if it were completely parallel to the folklore and the myth making of all primitive communities, and classifications derived from non-Palestinian folklore are applied to the Gospel materials without regard for the uncertainty of these classifications and without questioning their applicability to the Gospel materials.¹¹

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is another discipline within the historical critical method, one that has come to the fore within the past twenty years. Closely associated with the Gospels, it grew out of and remains closely related to form criticism. Via says that redaction criticism "presupposes and continues the procedures of the earlier discipline [form criticism] while extending and intensifying certain of them."¹² Perrin states that form criticism and redaction criticism "are in fact the first and second stages of a unified discipline, but their divergence in emphasis is sufficient to justify their being treated separately."¹³ According to the same author, redaction criticism is particularly concerned with

studying the theological motivation of an author as this is revealed in the collection, arrangement, editing, and modification of traditional material, and in the composition of new material or the creation of new forms within the traditions of early Christianity. Although the discipline is called redaction criticism, it could equally be called "composition criticism" because it is concerned with the composition of new material and the arrangements of redacted or freshly created material into new units and patterns, as well as with the redaction of existing material.¹⁴

Via asserts that its goals are

to understand why the items from the tradition [about Jesus] were modified and connected as they were, to identify the theological motifs that were at work in composing a finished Gospel, and to elucidate the theological point of view which is expressed in and through the composition.¹⁵

As might be expected (because of its relation to form criticism) the backgrounds of redaction criticism are traced to men like Reimarus, Strauss, Holtzmann, Wrede, Wellhausen, and then Schmidt, Dibelius, and Bultmann. Since redaction criticism is said to have "developed more directly from the work of Bultmann than from that of Dibelius,"¹⁶ Bultmann is regarded as "the true father of redaction criticism."¹⁷ The full flowering of this discipline came in Germany immediately after the Second World War. Three scholars, laboring independently of one another but in the same direction, produced materials which marked the beginning of redaction criticism. They were Guenther Bornkamm, Hans Conzelmann, and Willi Marxsen, who worked on the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark, respectively. Marxsen gave the new movement its German name, *Redaktionsgeschichte*.

Hans Conzelmann's *Theology of St. Luke*, first published in German in 1954, is perhaps the most important of the works produced by the *Redaktionsgeschichte Schule*. In it Conzelmann endeavored to demonstrate that, whereas Luke has generally been regarded by scholars as the historian of early Christianity, his Gospel can be shown to have been theologically motivated. Perrin comments:

To give but one example, the resurrection appearances in the Lucan writings take place in Jerusalem in contrast to the impression given elsewhere in the New Testament that they take place in Galilee. Conzelmann shows that this geographical reference is not historical reminiscence, a conclusion which raises questions as to the actual locale of these appearances. Luke is in no way motivated by a desire to exercise historical accuracy, but entirely by his theological concept of the role of Jerusalem in the history of salvation.¹⁸

According to Conzelmann, Lucan theology endeavored to answer the problem of the delay of Christ's parousia. Whereas the early church thought that the time between Christ's ascension and his parousia would be of short duration, it was Luke's purpose in the compilation and composition of materials for his Gospel to show that the interim would be an indefinite period.

While all students of the New Testament Gospels recognize that the Synoptics and John have differing emphases and characteristics and that it is helpful for the interpretation of the evangelic material to seek out the distinguishing features of each evangelist's presentation of the life of Christ, objection to the practice of radical redaction criticism must be expressed. Since the latter presupposes

and continues the procedures of form criticism, it is subject to all the strictures directed against form criticism. The redaction critical assumption that the several evangelists themselves composed certain portions of the Gospel accounts which actually have no basis in historical fact is to be rejected.

Content Criticism

Modern practitioners of the historical critical method also make use of the discipline of content criticism, or *Sachkritik*. This is a procedure which allows the critic arrogantly to sit in judgment upon the New Testament Scriptures and flatly to reject as unauthentic or non-normative for the church today those portions of prophetic and apostolic teaching which are not regarded as acceptable for inculcation in this day and age. Underlying the use of content criticism is, no doubt, a view like that expressed by Ernst Kaesemann in an essay entitled *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* and translated as follows:

In the New Testament language we are driven to test the spirits even within Scripture itself. We cannot simply accept a dogma or a system of doctrine but are placed in a situation vis-a-vis Scripture which is, at the same time and inseparably, both responsibility and freedom. Only to such an attitude can the Word of God reveal itself in Scripture; and that Word, as biblical criticism makes plain, has no existence in the realm of the objective—that is, outside of our act of decision.¹⁰

Conservative Biblical scholarship categorically denounces, and wholly avoids, the exercise of content criticism in the study of the New Testament text.

FOOTNOTES

1. P. v of Via's "Editor's Foreword" in *What Is Form Criticism?* by Edgar V. McKnight (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), a volume in Fortress Press' new "Guides to Biblical Scholarship" series, prepared particularly for laymen of the church. — Very recent literary criticism, according to Via (p. vi), has begun additionally to concern itself with such questions as "the relationship of content to form, the significance of structure or form for meaning, and the capacity of language to direct thought and to mould existence itself." Editor Via informs the reader that the "newer aspects" of the discipline will be discussed in a forthcoming volume in the "Guides to Biblical Scholarship" series, to be titled *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*.
2. Cf. K. Grobel, "Biblical Criticism," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), I, 412.
3. McKnight, p. vi.
4. E. Basil Redlich, *Form Criticism, Its Value and Limitations* (London: Duckworth, c.1939), p. 9.
5. Frederick C. Grant, translator, *Form Criticism: Two Essays on New Testament Research by Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Kundsinn*, a volume in the Harper Torchbooks series (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 9.
6. Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 18.
7. The writer used as a source for his paper the Bultmann essay as trans-

lated by Grant and presented in the 1962 Torchbook volume. This essay appeared in Germany in 1925 (Second Edition, 1930) under the title *Die Erforschung der Synoptischen Evangelien*. The essay was translated into English in 1934 by Frederick C. Grant, provided the title "The Study of the Synoptic Gospels," and published—along with a translated essay of Karl Kundsins—by Willett, Clark and Company in a book entitled *Form Criticism*. Grant obtained a renewed copyright of this work in 1962, when it was also re-published as a volume in the Harper Torchbooks series. According to the translator, Bultmann's essay "is a 'popular' exposition of the method elaborated at far greater length, and all but exhaustively, in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*." [Grant, p. 7] It thus can well serve as a guide to our study of form criticism.

All quotations of Bultmann which follow in the present study are taken from consecutive portions of "The Study of the Synoptic Gospels," Grant's translation, pp. 7-76.

8. Robert Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 192.
9. Redlich, p. 37. The following citations from Redlich are found in pp. 38-79 of his *Form Criticism, Its Value and Limitations*. This little work is helpful for any evaluation of the form critical method of New Testament study.
10. Martin Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows: A First Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 217.
11. *Ibid.*—With a few modifications, the main principles and procedures of Bultmann's form criticism are still followed by scholars who employ the historical critical method today. Bultmann's students, the so-called post-Bultmannians (Ernst Kaesemann, Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, and Guenther Bornkamm), have differed with their teacher as to the extent of information which may be validly derived from the Gospels concerning the life and words of Jesus. Believing that "there are still pieces of the Synoptic tradition which the historian has to acknowledge as authentic if he wishes to remain an historian at all," these disciples of Bultmann embarked upon a "new quest" of the historical Jesus. The date for the beginning of the "new quest" is usually set as October 20, 1953, when Ernst Kaesemann delivered a lecture entitled "The Problem of the Historical Jesus" at a reunion of students of Bultmann and expressed a renewed interest in investigating the earthly Jesus. (The quotation above is from Kaesemann's essay and cited in McKnight, p. 59.) Other scholars have joined the post-Bultmannians in the current quest. Additional criteria for distinguishing between authentic and unauthentic materials in the Gospels have been adopted. For some of the newer ideas, see McKnight, pp. 65-67.
12. In Perrin, p. vi.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. vi-vii.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
19. Ernst Kaesemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 58.